

The Nature of Zarathushti Commitment^[1]

By Sam Kerr

[I was invited to contribute to the FEZANA Journal my impressions and opinions on this rather personal and contentious subject matter of the very mode of one's religiosity. Professor Kaikhosrov D. Irani was the Guest Editor. Limiting myself to my own life experiences in a rather strict Zarathushti upbringing, I have tried to project my views hoping they may appear impartial, unbiased and, perhaps, also objective to the reader. I have abstained from quoting chapter and verse. Here it is, courtesy of the Editor of the Journal.]

When trying to discuss the **nature** of a commitment to the Faith (an acceptance, which requires no proof, evidence or, some may say, even justification), we are really talking of the very **mode of religiosity** experienced and lived by the Zarathushti Faithful. This being **an important influence in life and an intensely personal matter (an Individual Consciousness)** it is certainly not easily amenable, as a subject matter, to argument and, perhaps, even to open discussion. However, since I have committed myself to write on the subject I am obliged to take the liberty of airing briefly my impressions. But I would prefer to abstain from quoting chapter and verse.

During my work and in my travels I have not met two Zarathushtis recognizing (or, at least, apparently showing) an identical mode of religious Consciousness in their life experiences. There appear to remain some inherent differences, sometimes, even in members of the same household. Why may this be so? Let us try to identify briefly the reasons for the differences.

In ancient times there was no separation between what we, now, recognize to be different disciplines. There existed knowledge, which was disseminated by word of mouth and incorporated the wisdom and techniques of the times. The distinctions emerged when several disciplines were formulated and identified.

Trusting Acceptance

The nature of the **acceptance of the Faith** by the Faithful remains essentially abstract in its very core. It is, often, a fusion of a **'described' view of life, as it should be seen** (imbibed from early life in the household and community) and a **'prescribed' way of life, as it ought to be led** (influenced mainly by experiences in early life in the household and community).

The **'described' view of life** comes as naturally to the trusting

infant as the 'mother tongue' through the subtle input of the ten senses. The innocent trust may become somewhat questionable as the child experiences extraneous influences in school and in the company of peers. It may become further abraded as the inquiring mind begins to think for itself and to exert its discriminatory individuality.

The intrinsic core values of a '**prescribed**' way of life (expected of the Faithful by the near and dear ones, the peers and the community) are influenced to a major extent by moral principles, too. They may, at times, represent ethical rules of propriety for guidance, requiring or rejecting certain types of thoughts, words or actions as being morally correct or incorrect.

Need for Justification

The attempt at the justification of either the **fusion of the described view and the prescribed way of life within the Faith** or of a **careful inquiry and reasoning** into the Prophet's teaching is a matter for each individual mind. As we have noted before, where there is Faith some may argue that, since no proof or evidence is needed, there should be no reason for justification either. Let us, now, look at the question of **careful inquiry and reasoning**. In other words let us think individually, each one of us separately, without showing bias to either line of thought.

Evolutionary disuse

A **religious belief (and its practice)** exists in the **Individual Consciousness** of the Faithful, who may develop a frame of mind / an attitude about its 'correctness' or otherwise. There is enough evidence to show that certain deeply emotional (sometimes, traumatic and intense) life experiences do govern the nature of the commitment. The display of a fundamental stubbornness of one's adherence to such 'correct' beliefs (orthodoxy) and to such 'correct' practices (orthopraxy) is often taken as being the quality of a deeply devout person - perhaps, rightly so in most circumstances.

A **tradition (with its social interaction)**, on the other hand, carries a definite legitimacy. One becomes obliged to respect it individually as well as during social interaction, which makes it essentially an integral part of the **Communal Consciousness**. There was, obviously, a historical period in time when the tradition, in the course of Communal existence, commenced. Its initial purpose, that of evoking a feeling of devotion and of establishing social continuity and solidarity within the community was, at that point in time, very crucial. During another historical period in the vastness of

evolutionary time its initial purpose, somehow, did not appear just as crucial and relevant. It, then, appeared as if it had outgrown its usefulness. Indeed, it gradually faded away, not by refutation but by disuse over the long periods of time, as the generations passed by.

Examples

There are many glaring examples: - The widespread use of the **Zarathushti 'topi' or 'mathubanu' or similar appropriate headdresses in daily life**, without which one would have been labelled a non-Zarathushti only a generation ago (particularly in the rural towns), is hardly worn in modern daily life. When worn, the headdress is generally discarded as soon as the ceremonial prayers are over. During the 5-6 day period of the last World Congress in Houston (among the 2200 Zarathushti ladies and gentlemen, barring the respected Mobeds) I can remember seeing only a few delegates with an appropriate Zarathushti head dress outside the time of the prayer ceremonies. Another valid example is the use of **copper wires instead of the Barsom Twigs** (Avestan: Baresman) during the prayer rituals. The reason given is an apparent 'helplessness' from the non-availability of the Barsom Plant, although there has been no particular plant clearly identified in the religious texts as a Barsom Plant.

There are many more examples of evolutionary disuse: - 1. **'The repeated taking of the Baj'**, commencing with every new task or event in daily life. 2. **The gradual extinction of the Pahlavi language** and script in favour of the Gujarati and Modern Persian languages and scripts. 3. The slow change to and **adoption of some customs and way of life of the host populations.** 4. **The (heated exchanges we are going through regarding the) replacement of the traditional household living flame or fire by incandescent light, etc.** I do maintain a 'divo' (an oil-lamp) but will my siblings continue the practice? The discarding of such extremely pious practices has occurred, not because they are not 'correct' practices any more but because they have gradually ceased to be 'justifiably acceptable' in daily life during the slow and persuasive process of evolutionary time.

The dilemma

Remembering that the fusion of a described view and a prescribed way of life attempts to justify human existence and to bring an iota of significance to the Faithful, let us delve further into this topic. The **nature of a belief** does not always lie in a statement of facts (as in other disciplines - say history, science ...) but in the **inner**,

sometimes, unquenchable quest of the believer's mind, which may be faced with the obligation of a commitment to accept the belief, perhaps by taking a view of life from a different plane.

When viewed from such a plane each **Individual Consciousness** becomes truly worthy of tranquil thought rather than of mere factual acceptance. Religious texts are replete with a special set of literal facts admixed with commentaries and even literal interpretation. A strict adherence to facts without a clear direction can only lead to persistent discord, promoting confusion in inquiring human minds and an **inconsistent Communal Consciousness**.

Somewhere in this maze, the communal purpose of generating devotion or evoking a feeling of social continuity and solidarity in the community is lost. It is not possible to enforce uniformity, idealism and idealistic perfection in a spiritual sense. **Until the end of time, each human heart will be born to remain vigorously individualistic and deeply personal, only to yield subconsciously to the rigors of time itself.** Those, in power, who have tried to impose legislation and to implement it by force, have realized this does not work. Ideals and blue prints aimed at a utopia can never bring about a change of heart. The new thinking of reformists always appears distrustful because the old thinking has taken deep root in the mind and, therefore, appears safe. Still, the inevitable force of a slow and persuasive evolutionary change added to the natural human striving to redress and equalize the imbalance will continue. Human history has shown that those who lack the motivation to adjust and progress through mutual respect have, ultimately, managed to reform through cooperation enforced through fear, interference as well as imposition.

A reality

In other Faiths (which, incidentally have followers in the tumultuous millions) such occurrences have led to a break-up of the followers, who have separated from the mainstream and formed their own new denominations, which, then, have been quickly absorbed within the millions. With only a few thousand left on this good earth we, the Faithful, the guardians of the most ancient of all Faiths on earth, would hardly be able to sustain any further break-up.

References

- 1) Irani K. D., "Religious justification and contemporary

knowledge,” pp. 56-73, *Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute*, Bombay, No. 53, 1986.

2) Kerr, S., “The Philosophical concept of Consciousness in Zarathushtra’s teachings.” Paper (by invitation) for the Third International Conference at the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, Bombay, on “Indo-Persian Cultures: Their character and impact on Civilisations”, Jan. 6-9, 2000; pp. 354-369 of the *Proceedings*, Mumbai, May 2001.

3) Kerr, S., “The Universality of his Thoughts: a Philosophical overview.” Paper (by invitation) read - The 2nd World Zoroastrian Youth Congress, July 1997. *FEZANA Journal*, pp. 30-32, Vol. XI, No. 1, 1998.

[\[1\]](#) Article appeared in the Fall 2001 issue of the *FEZANA Journal* under the guest editorship of professor Kaikhosrow D. Irani.