

Fundamentals of Zoroastrianism

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I first selected this topic for my valedictorian-like sermon I delivered at the annual function of my school, M. F. Cama Athornan Institute, Bombay, on March 22, 1953. After 61 years when I chose to speak and subsequently write on the same theme in 2014, I am able to present it in an integrated and organic manner rather than presenting each salient feature of Zoroastrianism separately and individually as I now came to see them all as elements of an organic whole.

Zarathushtra emerged from an Indo-Iranian background and culture, so eminently evident from his Gathic dialect, which is quite akin to the pre-Rigvedic Sanskrit. Indeed the only way scholars were able to decipher and unravel the meaning and grammar of the Avesta in the eighteenth or nineteenth century was by comparing it with the Sanskrit language and grammar. But, what is so unique about Zarathushtra is that he conceived of a theology that not only sets him quite apart from his own Indo-Iranian heritage but also makes him the unquestioned pioneer of what had later come to be known as the Abrahmanic tradition. Indeed, the late, lamented Professor William Oxtoby told me he strongly believed it to be the case. He also told me he was going to place Zoroastrianism first under the section of Abrahmanic tradition in the book on religions he was then writing, which he has indeed done. Zarathushtra is the first one in human history to reveal to mankind not only monotheistic notions based on his vision of God but also on the concepts of ethical dualism, Free Will inessential for making the ethical choice by men as well as by women, universalism (though it got arrested by adverse historical events later on), gender equality, consequences for not exercising Free Will for one's spiritual fulfillment, individual judgment after death leading to paradise (which is actually an Avestan word), hell or purgatory, messiahs to come, resurrection, and life eternal. Zarathushtra thus laid the foundation for Judeo-Christian tradition by first adumbrating these concepts in prehistoric times. All these concepts stem from Zarathushtra's rejection of all previous beliefs and gods, by his revelation that the entire universe is governed by one primal force, whom he called Ahuramazda, meaning all-knowing Lord, who alone is worthy of our worship. It is a belief that will have few challengers today but in his prehistoric times, Zarathushtra did not find a single follower for 12 years. His seven-fold vision of God was more complex but also more realistic than any other world has ever witnessed. In an age when polytheistic and even worse beliefs were so rife, Zarathushtra envisioned Ahuramazda as having, Himself including, seven attributes — good mind, best righteousness, good dominion, benevolent spirit,

perfection or wholeness, and immortality. Zarathushtra makes it very clear that whichever way Ahuramazda attained these qualities is actually a call to human beings, nay, a duty, to attain these divine qualities in themselves and “in full measure” (Yasna 34.1). To achieve this goal Zarathushtra laid down the principle of Free Will, which requires humans to make wise choices that will enable them to attain godhood, just like the Bible later exhorted: “Be ye perfect as thy father in heaven is perfect.” Making the right choice is demanded of everyone, man or woman, rich or poor, so that we can establish Vohu Khshathra (Kingdom of God) on earth. Zarathushtra sees us as Hamkaars (collaborators or co-workers) of God and God is All Good. No evil and no negative quality can ever emanate from Him. So, we have to strive to be godlike by always making good choices and always trying hard to make the world and all the beings and elements in it perfect. This leads to attaining heaven and the failure to do so can trigger hell or purgatory right after death during the individual judgment on Chaharoom and to everlasting life and union with God on Frashgird or Rastakhaez-Renovation, Resurrection. Thus, all the elements in Zarathushtra’s theology are logically intertwined with one another, making it an integrated whole. This is rather a very succinct synopsis of Zarathushtra’s theology, but it has colored the Judeo-Christian tradition in many significant ways despite having many differences with it. For example, the Book of Isaiah firmly declares that Yahweh creates both good as well as evil, whereas Ahuramazda creates only good and has nothing to do with evil. (As I have written extensively on all the topics referred to in this brief essay, I do not see the need to touch them at length here, as my main objective here is to depict all of them as emanating from Zarathushtra’s beautiful vision of one God – Ahuramazda, and men and women’s need to be godlike and ways to attain it.) No evil could emanate from Ahuramazda. Evil is assigned only to the evil spirit, Ahreman and his minions. The latter is true for Christianity too, but in Zarathushtra’s theology, it is not possible to redeem ourselves except by good deeds. Albeit, until Christ, there was no concept of redemption, that is, being saved from our sins by believing in a redeemer, or in a Jesus.

Another respect in which Zoroastrianism differs from the Abrahmanic tradition is that it is not a scriptural faith. The Zoroastrian sacred texts were transmitted orally until the Avestan script was devised by the Sasanians in the fourth century A.D. or so. Scriptural faiths regard the facts stated in their texts as absolute and exclusive but non-scriptural faiths tend to be “inclusive.” In this way, Zarathushtra remained faithful to his Indo-Iranian roots as well as to his universalist, catholic ideology, which led Mary Boyce to note that when they passed over to the Judeo-Christian tradition, they lost much of their logical coherence, which is so unique about Zarathushtra, and which inspired and guided me all through my life, that is, from the time I was nine years old, when I was exposed to it day and night, to live by its mighty and lofty principles. This is the gist of Zarathushtra’s teaching in the Avesta. I sincerely

hope it is brief but inspiring enough to convince our youth of the uniqueness of Zarathushtra's vision. Amen!