

Humanitarianism as the Cornerstone of Zoroastrianism

by Kersey H. Antia, Ph.D Zoroastrian Association of Chicago

According to the Gathas, which are the divine hymns of Prophet Zoroaster preserved in his own words for about four millennia, Zoroaster was chosen as a savior of mankind by the Lord Ahura Mazda in response to the soul of the world crying out loud to Him about the sorry state of affairs on the earth due to man's inhumanity to man, and to God's creations. (Yasna 29.1). Naturally, therefore, he saw as his mission the need to exhort man to stop exploiting their fellow men and other creations of God. "Happiness comes to those" he declared "who bestows happiness upon others." (Yasna 43.1). Zoroaster exhorted his followers to carefully choose between good and evil by exercising their freedom of choice through the use of Good Mind (Vohu Mana), thereby attaining the Cosmic truth (Asha) through Lord's benevolence (Spenta Armaiti) in order to establish the Kingdom of God (Vohu Kshathra) on this earth.

He exhorted man to align themselves with God in every way they can and be his co-worker (*Hamkar*) in this world: "By whatever action, word, and worship, O wise one, Thou didst attain truth, immortality, good rule, and completeness, let these very things be given by us to Thee, O Lord, in the very greatest number." (Yasna 34.1) The best way for men to thank or worship God, said Zoroaster, is to emulate Him and help Him establish His kingdom on earth, (Yasna 28.3, 30.7, and 47.1). Moreover, he emphasized that "These truths are equally applicant to men as well as to women." (Yasna 53.6)

Zoroaster not only emphasized one's duty to care for his fellow man, but also for all the creations of Ahura Mazda such as animals, energy sources (such as fire), sky (environment), earth, trees, and waters. As Dr. Mary Boyce, one of the most notable exponents of Zoroastrianism, points out: "But it was naturally with humanity itself that Zoroaster's moral theology was most profoundly concerned. Caring for the other six creations and bringing their *Mainyus* (mentality) into his own self was part of the duty of the *ashavant* (righteous) and he should also strive earnestly to be fit for Mazda's Holy Spirit to dwell with him, caring thus for his own moral and spiritual being. Zoroastrian ethics are in many respects like those of other great ethical religions and philosophies, but they have their special emphasis and particularities. Great importance is also attached to self-reliance, to responsibility for one's own thoughts, words, and acts: but there is emphasis also on caring for one's fellow men, who are likewise Mazda's creatures. Linked with this is the value put on honest work and the honest acquisition thereby of possessions: for a poor man tends to be less able to help himself or others than a rich one." (*Zoroastrianism: Its Antiquity and Constant Vigor*,

Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, California, p. 95-6).

Even Herodotus did not fail to notice that for the Zoroastrian “to pray for himself alone is not lawful, rather he prays that it may be well with the king and all Persians, for he reckons himself among them.” This accords well with the Zoroastrian practice to this day, for a Zoroastrian never prays for one’s own self alone, but also for the whole community, “for the obligations to care for Ahura Mazda’s special creation, man,” as Dr. Boyce well explains, “means that an individual should always be concerned for his fellows and never simply self-regarding.” (op. cit., pp 127-126.)

Such an emphasis on God-realization through caring for others is bound to lead to over-abundance of various charitable works among its followers throughout the ages. Such indeed was the case even as late as in the Sassanian dynasty (which was the last Zoroastrian dynasty, nearly 2000 years after the time of Zoroaster) when, as documented by Dr. Boyce, “charitable foundations of all kinds characteristically designated as *Pad Rawan* (for the sake of the soul) were abundantly endowed at this period to such an extent that a ministry, the *Dewan i Kardegan*, Office for (Religious) acts was established to register and look after them, the command to serve Ohrmazda (God) through his creation, man (thus) leading to a generous Philanthropy, (op. cit., p. 144), a practise that continues faithfully to this day. This insistence on survivalism even lead to a fundamental change in the prophet’s original doctrine which declared that sinners will perish body and soul, in the river of the molten metal on the day of the last Judgment. In the Sassanian times it came to be believed that the sinners will suffer excruciating pain while going through the river of molten metal, which will enable them however to shed their evil nature, thereby qualifying them for entering the Kingdom of Heaven along with the righteous. When we consider the fact that few direct changes were made in the prophet’s teachings, this significant change may well represent the ultimate importance of survivalism in Zoroastrianism. Ever the post-Sassanian traditions such as the *Dinkard* maintain that “The law of the Creator is the love of (one’s fellow man as well as respecting and caring for all the creations of Ahura Mazda. Even the *Rivayats*, which were written much later, beseeches Zoroastrians to “keep the water, the earth, and the trees and plants pure and clean” for no one can serve one’s fellow men if one endangers any of God’s creations on whom man depends for survival (*Rivayat*, Unwala I 291.)

It is therefore not surprising to find that almost everyone coming into contact with the Zoroastrians through out the ages have made ready observations about their humanistic traits, the Old Testament perhaps being the first such testament, “as seen later.” Thus, we find in 1774 a Dutch traveller, J. S. Stavorinus (*Voyages to the East indies*, Vol. 1) noting that the Zoroastrians in Surat, India assist the poor, and are very ready to provide for the sustenance and comfort of such as want it. Their universal kindness, either in employing such as are needy and able to work, or bestowing a seasonable bounteous

charity to such as are infirm and miserable, leave no man destitute of relief, nor suffer a beggar in their tribe.” (p. 219).

Another traveler, K. Niebuhr, a German, who spent 14 months in India from 1762 to 1764, comments that the Zoroastrians “live in great harmony among themselves, make common contribution for the aid of their poor, and suffer none of their number to ask alms from people of a different religion (*Travels Through Arabia*, Volume 2., p.429). Similarly, J. B. Tavernier in his collection of *Travels Through Turkey into Persia* Volume I notes that the Zoroastrian priests in Persia advised their followers “to give alms and other good works, to gain pardon of their sins” and that the Zoroastrians “bestowed large alms” on their New Years Day (p. 166). Numerous such observations about Parsi philanthropy have also been published by Dr. John Hinnells of Manchester University, England in the Journals of K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, Bombay, India.

What influence did this faith exert on its followers? Even though only about 20,000 Zoroastrians survive in their native country and only 70,000 survive in India after taking refuge there, their impact on their societies is well beyond their numbers. In India, for example, Zoroastrians (who are known as Parsis, meaning Persians) have been a main force in starting the industrial revolution and the process of modernization as well as the struggle for independence in the nineteenth century.

The Parsi House of Tata has been the largest industrial conglomerate in India since the 19th century. The founding Tata was really a patriot, of the same mold as D. Naoroji, the Grandfather of the Indian Nation, whom he cherished as a brother, but shuddered at the thought of India becoming independent without a strong industrial base.

Other Parsis had started cotton mills, press, banks, railroads, etc., but he found such an industrial base inadequate without steel mills, electricity, and a national institute of science for training future scientists. Although respected by the British even though he had turned down their offer of baronetcy, he could not tolerate their objections to his starting a steel mill as well as a national institute of science, as they would lessen India’s dependence on England.

After many futile attempts to find any European collaborator for his ventures, he came to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the 19th century and built a giant steel complex in India with American help. A review of the Tata Industries in the *Reader’s Digest* (April, 1963) called it “the most remarkable house of Asia” for donating almost all its proceeds in forms of various trusts and foundations and for providing such benefits to its workers as pensions, fair wages, bonus, housing, day care., industrial medicine, conducive work environment, and fair labor practices before they became mandatory even in England or U.S.A.

The Wall Street Journal also noted Tata's philanthropy in its front page article (June 14, 1982). Thanks to the Tata's Institute of Science, India today has third largest group of scientists in the world and is well advanced in nuclear and other technologies. It was also in one of the philanthropic Parsi complexes, the House of Godrej, that my friend and protege Ms. Lillian Carter worked as a Peace Corps nurse, and found that the Godrej did much more for their workers and their families than what she saw being done then in the United States by various industries.

As noted by Dr. Kulke: "Hardly any of the immensely rich Parsee financial and industrial magnates evaded this social Obligation. – The most important Parsee Maecenas, who made generosity become a byword in India through the hospitals, schools, libraries and university buildings they had endowed, were --- (three Parsi baronets), who were raised to the hereditary rank of nobility by the British. The Parsi baronets were ranked hierarchically at the same level as second level Indian princes. It is not, however, only the donations that characterize the "charitable Parsee" but rather an incalculable number of charitable works of the kind seen, for example , when C.N. Cama offered a prize during a smallpox epidemic in 1851 for the best essay on the use and advantage of vaccinations and then had the prize winning article printed and distributed in the entire Bombay Residency at his own cost." (*The Parsees in India – A minority as agent of social change*, 1974, p. 74.)

Dr. Kulke adds: "Parsee patronage was not, however, in any way limited to their own community. If a collection was being made in Bombay for poor Hindus in Gujrat, or for needy textile workers in Lancashire (in England), Parsees always led the donor's list. Examples of cosmopolitan Parsee generosity --- have become well known far beyond India --- (and) find universal application whether for earthquake victims in Japan or people suffering from cancer in England --- or fund for research on blood diseases, which led to research projects in Copenhagen, New York and Paris." (op. Cit.) and ultimately to the establishment of the first cancer hospital in India which attracts patients from all over Asia because of its pioneering work.

How well Zoroaster's doctrine shaped the conduct of his followers and how they in turn shaped the course of history, is, however, most evident in the conduct of the most powerful emperors Persia has ever produced, namely Cyrus and Darius. It was King Cyrus who freed the Jews from the Babylonian captivity. He made no attempt to impose his Zoroastrian religion on his subjects but his inscriptions bear live testimony to the fact that he encouraged each of his subjects to live a good life according to their own tenets. He allowed the Jews to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. Dr. Mary Boyce observes in this regard: "This was only one of many liberal acts recorded of Cyrus, but it was of particular moment for the religious history of mankind; for the Jews entertained warm feelings thereafter for the Persians, and this made them more respective to Zoroastrian influence" (*Zoroastrians: Their Religious*

Beliefs and Practices,” p. 51, 1979).

The Jews regarded Cyrus as a Messiah, and therefore one who acted in Yahweh’s name and authority. In the Old Testament, Second Chronicles 36:22 and 23 reads: “In the first year of Cyrus, King of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus, King of Persia, to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing. This is what Cyrus, King of Persia, says: “The Lord, the God of Heaven, --- has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem.”

Again in the Old Testament, the first verses in Ezra repeat this theme and add that King Cyrus returned to the Jews 5400 articles of gold and silver which the Babylonians had taken away from their temple in Jerusalem.

“Behold my servant whom I uphold,” Yahweh himself is represented as saying, “Cyrus will bring forth justice to the nations. --- He will not fail --- till he has established justice in the earth.” (Isaiah 42:1, 4).

The Zoroastrians are the only people that the Jews ever found kindly disposed to them. When we add to them a long list of the nations Cyrus befriended even as he captured them, it does not fail to provide us an unmistakable evidence of the significant place for humanitarianism in Zoroastrianism.