

Acculturation of Zoroastrian ritual heritage¹

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The Zoroastrian priesthood is older than the dawn of civilization and is more ancient than the times of Prophet Zarathushtra himself. There are no priestly traditions in the entire world which are older than ours. It is not surprising therefore if some of our priestly practices may suggest pagan inheritance running counter to the teachings of Lord Zoroaster. It is thus a miracle that we are able to maintain these prehistoric traditions so far. And yet it seems it will take a miracle to continue our identity unless we make meaningful, often drastic changes in our priestly functions and expectations in order to bring them in line with the needs of our future generations. And I emphasize this point because never ever in our entire history has such an urgent need for our priestly functions arisen as when about 10% of our total population have so suddenly shifted to the North American continent, not in pursuit of preserving our religion and traditions as in the past, but primarily in the search of better life and opportunity.

In the past even a very small group of Zoroastrians did not migrate anywhere without having a priest in their midst, a tradition that led to the formation of fire temples in far off places like Zanzibar and Aden and of course all over India as well as Yazd and Kerman. If we have priests in our midst today, it is because they, like me, came here for better opportunities and are willing to serve without much or any remuneration. In such a situation how can we expect to continue the most ancient tradition whereby only the sons of priests qualify as priests, a tradition that comes down from Zarathushtra himself, who was an Athraivan, a priest. Indeed there is some evidence that our priesthood was not so rigidly hereditary in the beginning till, as Dr. Cyrus Pangborn, a contemporary American scholar observes, the Magis of the Medes who had rigid hereditary caste for priests assumed the leadership of the religion after Zoroaster's time. According to Dr. Pangborn and other scholars, these Magis (that is Mobeds) “emphasized precisely what Zoroaster had not – the accurate repetition of the texts addressing God, and the archaic objective of drawing His power down to earth”, which seems quite alien to Lord Zoroaster’s teachings. What is the sense for the priests to try to draw down divine power on earth when this world is God’s own creation and His power

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and goodness are ALREADY there? What Prophet Zoroaster conceived a priest to be is summed up well by Dastur Manushchih Goshnjaman in a Pahlavi text when he says, a priest should be: “of pure disposition, of innate wisdom ... meditator of God, of spiritual vision, of pure thoughts, of truthful utterances, of righteous actions, pure of body (and) of sweet tongue” and, I may add, be married. But these virtues did not win over the exaggerated importance given to mastering the liturgy and rituals. As Dr. Pangborn rightfully observes, knowing the liturgy was akin to having the right instrument and right number for making a long-distance call. If one does not have them, the call does not go through. If this is our understanding of what our great visionary Prophet taught, then we don't need to change our priestly traditions. But if it was the Magis of Media "who gave much of the shape to the priestly vocation that is still associated with it today”, and if “they emphasized precisely that Zoroaster had not” as Dr. Pangborn has observed, among others, then we need to revert to the true teachings of our Prophet as expounded in the Gathas. (See Cyrus Pangborn, “The Theory, Function, and Future of the Zoroastrian Priesthood”, *Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute*, 1976, No. 46, 107-120).

Even those of us who would prefer to have a hereditary priesthood will have to accept the fact that the very pattern of our migration negates our hope and chances that we will have enough stock of Athornans to depend upon for our future needs. Since priests are hard to find today, even in India and Iran, our future generations will find it even more difficult to get priests from there. And their need of course would be so different then that they may not see any sense in doing so either. Thus they will be forced to allow the laity to function as priests after appropriate training and examination. In ancient times when only the priests engaged in learning and education, it made sense that others could not become priests, but in modern times when learning is not an exclusive', privilege of the priestly class but is open to one and all, it makes sense to allow or even actively encourage anyone eager to learn and practice the priestly function to be a priest. However, it will be so helpful to our future generations if the standards of such priestly training and examination are laid down now by those knowledgeable and foreseeing amongst us in this regard. For instance, the future priest need not spend valuable time and energy in memorizing the Avesta, a tradition that had meaning and relevance when it started in the prehistoric times when the art of writing was not yet discovered. Instead, the future priest can better spend their time in learning the meaning and significance of our prayers and rituals.. The seclusion that a priest has to go through before becoming a Navar or Martab, may be better utilized for meditation, contemplation and higher level thinking and functioning which seem to have been the original purpose for such seclusions. We may have to coin new terminology for our priests that do not go through the traditional Navar and Martab ceremonies in order to avoid any conflict with Zoroastrians elsewhere. What we know as Yozdathregiri, that is, the ability to practice Baj,

Yajashne, Vendidad, Nirangdin, etc., as a priest has absolutely no relevance to the North American scene as there are no proper fire temples to perform these ceremonies and as there will practically be no demand for them. And yet the future priest will have to understand their meaning and philosophy and explain it to the laity in a language they can understand. For this reason, he may have to go to India or Europe to study under some Avestan scholars, but simply going through the notions of Navar or Martab ceremonies won't be enough or even relevant. Again, as Prof. Pangborn observes, "The emphasis on the physical rubrics the number of times each essential action is repeated, the need to avoid mistakes that would vitiate the rite and require starting all over, make one wonder if there is really a place for reflecting upon ideal states of character and mind. Consider also the obscurity of purpose in such acts as touching the dog (thirteen times during the rite of purification known as Barashnoom).

Even the usually agile mind of J.J. Modi could only guess at the reasons for it. May it not be that if impure thoughts and the like are avoided, it is really because there is not time for thinking of anything except the mechanical correctness of one's performance? If so, then such rites have become in effect ORDEALS rather than germane methods of achieving ideal states of being." (op. cit. p.112).

The symbolism of our rituals originated in prehistoric, pre-scientific, ancient times. The culture and historical patterns have so drastically changed for most of us, but the symbolism of our rituals have to this day remained unchanged, except in one respect: the laity as well as the priests no longer know what these symbols stand for. So inadvertently we have drifted exactly to the same paganistic practices and beliefs that Prophet Zoroaster renounced, namely, a set of magical, mystical manthras and formulae for invoking the deities' help down to this earth for fulfilling various desires of man.

Much more knowledge and understanding of the religion will be expected of our future priests than it has ever been expected since the time our priests lost track of the real message of Prophet Zoroaster and turned so ritualistic. With the present advances in the audio-visual techniques, it is possible even today to present the meaning of our prayers on a screen during Jashan, Navjote, Weddings, etc. The future priest might use such techniques more to educate the laity about our ancient faith in various ways. Whether we like it or not, future generations may most likely opt for condensing and shortening our prayers and ceremonies, as well as praying in English even during various rituals. Some of these needs have been anticipated hundreds of years ago by such Pahlavi books as *Shayast La Shayast* meaning "What is Possible and what is Not Possible" (in future). This book predicted that a day will come when, if a Zoroastrian cared to pray only one *Ashem Vohu*, it will be tantamount to praying the whole Avesta in the ancient times when man lived entirely for religion. Our religion is thus so flexible, liberal and understanding.

A lot will depend on what we do now to ensure that our future generations will continue to be Zoroastrians. In the past, this required so little an effort on our part that I wonder whether we have given enough consideration to this matter. Our great grand-children will not feel obligated to continue to be Zoroastrians if their religious needs are either not fulfilled by that or are fulfilled better elsewhere, or if they fall prey to a propaganda from other faiths or they simply get indifferent to religion. Despite the size and prosperity of our population on this continent, we do not maintain a single full time priest anywhere. What foundations can we lay for the religious guidance of our great grand-children if we do not have at least one full time, well- qualified well paid priest, may be a high priest, to guide us now as well as lay the foundations for the future? This may perhaps mean only a dollar or two per month per earning member of our faith. We often spend, rather waste, that amount so easily on useless things but not on ensuring our continuity on this new Continent. So may I request those who would willingly contribute a dollar or two per month for this essential cause to pledge it to their association right now. I am really curious how many will really respond to this cause. No less a person than the present President of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat repeatedly laments that our grand-children will lose their identity in the melting pot of the North American Continent. How can we prove him wrong when we have not built a single religious or community center on our own without the help from our great benefactor, late Arbab Rustam Guiv? We make sure our children will inherit our wealth, but what are we doing to ensure that they will inherit our religious inheritance as well? For, if we fail in this, it is merely academic or even downright hypocritical, to talk about future priestly functions.

It is time we start a headquarters with a learned high priest to lay the foundations for the changes we need in the priestly functions in order to meet the needs of our own children first. We need to inspire our children to volunteer for priestly duties – full time or part time, full scale or limited scale. We need to welcome all adults who want to assist in various priestly duties as Daham Mobeds on the model of Daham Mobeds in Iran or Kavis of the Kyanian times. We need to open more doors to our womenfolk, who eagerly seek more participation in church duties in general and in singing hymns, choirs and devotional songs in particular. We need a central, well equipped library open to all Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians alike in order to supply us with appropriate information and guidance for future reforms. We need a uniform translation, interpretation as well as observance of our prayers and rituals. We may even need to simplify, modify or modernize the proper attire for priests as well as laymen, so that it could be made locally. We need to simplify and standardize all rituals and observance for Navjote, Wedding, and Funeral. Our future priests need to be well versed in the principle and teachings of Zoroastrianism and be able to teach them to others.

As we cannot reasonably rule out more mixed marriages among our future

generations, the priest will have to be well-versed in comparative religion and be able to convince others about the eternal and universal principles of our ancient faith and be willing to convert them to our faith, if necessary.

Our future generations will be desperately looking to priests for psychological help for various reasons such as the stress of modern life and identity crisis. Our future priests will thus need to realize the significance of Vohu Mana, the Good Mind and study psychology to understand and help his congregation. Our future priests will need to inspire his folks to strive constantly for *Humata*, *Hukhta*, and *Havarasta* – good thoughts, good words, and good deeds to avoid a feeling of tedium and boredom so typical of modern life. And, above all, we need to rediscover the real message of our Prophet Zoroaster as expounded in the Gathas, because it relates well to the need of our times. The message of our revered Prophet is so liberal and eternal that we do not have to worry if we make meaningful changes in the priestly functions, for the Zoroastrian priest cannot act as an intermediary between God and us, or save us from our fate after death by performing rituals, because that is governed by the Law of Asha. What is essentially expected of our priests is to be a Dastoor, which means a helper, like the present day social worker or psychologist. There will be plenty of that role to play for our priests in times to come and let us all get geared to that new role of the Zoroastrian priest and get closer to the real teachings of our great Prophet. Amen!

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