

**THE GOOD RELIGION
and
THE INSTITUTIONALIZED ZOROASTRIANISM**

**By
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Foreword

Good Conscience, the religion of Zarathushtra, is, historically, the first and foremost monotheistic religion in the world, but like other religions, it also has continually changed from its pristine purity to the present institutionalized form of *Zoroastrianism*. The Zarathushtrian Assembly has been established by its founding members with the sole aim of restoring the Good Religion of Zarathushtra to its pristine purity and activating its progressive universality. The unique movement has raised a few questions: What is the pristine purity of the Good Religion? How does it differ from the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism practiced by the remnants of a once great world religion? How would a restoration to a remote past place the religion on the path to progress and promotion in a fast-moving modern world?

This booklet provides the answers to these questions and more. It is hoped that it will illuminate the subject and open the way to an increasing study of *mâñthra*, the thought-provoking message of Zarathushtra. They are embodied in the *Gathas*, his ever-fresh divine songs of guidance.

The restoration of the religion to its pristine position provides prudent answers to a world bewildered by what tradition-tied teachings say and what progressive science proves, a world perplexed by the primeval past, the practical present, and the promising future. The Good Religion has all the three times within it. It is timeless. The booklet shows how ultra-modern the Zarathushtrian religion is in its eternal guideline for a good life on this good earth and beyond.

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Introduction

The religion founded by Zarathushtra is known by several names. He himself called it *Daênâ Vañuhi*, meaning the “Good Conscience”, or freely rendered, the “Good Religion”. His disciples chose to add *Zarathushtri*, Zarathushtrian, to show that it was founded by Zarathushtra. To express its true source of inspiration, it is also called *Âhuiri*, belonging to Ahura, divine. A little later, they coined a new befitting term, *Mazda-yasna*, to make it clear that they regarded their only god as *Mazdâ*, the “Supreme Intellect”, a Wise Being quite unique and above the human-conceived, human-natured deities known as *daêvas*, whose cult came to be called *daêva-yasna*.

The name Zarathushtra has been contracted into Zartosht in Persian and Zarathusht or Zarthusht in Gujarati. Daênâ Vañuhi is Dîn-e Behi or Behdîni in Persian. Zoroaster is the Anglicized form of a Greek mispronunciation of the name Zarathushtra. And since the 19th century CE, “the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism” means the final institutionalized version of the Good Religion.

With all the forms in view, a follower of the Good Religion is a Zarathushtrian, Zarathushti, Zartoshti, Zoroastrian, Mazdayasni, or Behdin. The two forms of Zarathushtrian and Zartoshti have been preferred by the Zarathushtrian Assembly.

This book distinguishes between the pristine form of the Good Religion and the evolved, transformed, and transmuted state of the religion. **The Zarathushtrian Religion** is the religion taught and practiced by Zarathushtra and his generating followers for centuries. It is based only on the *Gâthâs*, the very Teachings of the Teacher. The Institutionalized Zoroastrianism is the massing shape it has taken over the last 2,500 years. Some call it the “Traditional” Zoroastrian religion.

The pristine state and the evolving form will be explained under the subtitles of Source Scriptures, History, Zarathushtra, Institutionalization, Doctrine, Rituals, Outside Influence, Present and Future, Changing Attitudes, the Zarathushtrian Assembly, and Conclusion.

Source Scriptures

The Good Religion: Zarathushtra practiced, taught, and preached his Divine Doctrine for a full forty-seven years. Finally, he reduced his teachings in seventeen songs as the all-time guidelines for “all the living beings” to come. Later the songs were called *Gathas*, meaning “sacred songs”. His immediate followers, adhering fast to his teachings, wove more songs and composed several pieces to supplement the Gathas: They are *Haptañhâiti* (Seven-chapters in poetry), *Hadhaokhta* (a short piece advising people to listen to *seraosha*, the inner-voice expounding the divine message of Zarathushtra), *Fshusho-mâñthra* (another short piece on one preparing oneself to serve the progressive cause in thoughts, words, and deeds), *Yeñhe Hâtâm* (a paraphrase of a Gathic verse in veneration of men and women), and *Fravarti* (a section on Initiation in which one renounces one’s superstitious beliefs and cultic practices and chooses the Good Religion). They are all in the same dialect, now termed *Gathic*. The entire collection of a

total of 312 stanzas or approximately 7,600 words, is called *Staota Yesnya*, reverential praises, by Zarathushtra's followers. It is also known by its Pahlavized form of *Stot Yasn*. It is homogeneous in doctrine and very inspiring and stimulating.

The Institutionalized Zoroastrianism was quite rich in scriptures. In addition to the *Staota Yesnya* texts, it had compositions going back to pre-Zarathushtrian eras and writings ending as late as 1773 CE in three languages of Avesta, Pahlavi, and Persian over a span of more than 4,000 years. It was rich in subjects also: theology, myth, legends, history, geography, agriculture, animal care, medicine, pollution and purity laws, prayer preparations, elaborate rituals, potent spells, and commentaries of the Gathas, all en masse, of course, around the *Staota Yesnya*. The canonized collection, duly selected and collated by the priestly authorities of the Sassanian order, was completed in about 550 CE; It consisted of 21 volumes¹. Only one volume, called *Stot Yasn*, contained the Gathas and its supplements. The remaining volumes were commentaries, interpretations, later liturgies, religious epics, administrative and social laws, or miscellaneous subjects of day-to-day life of the Sassanian theocracy.

The Arab conquest and the subsequent conversions dealt a heavy blow to the 21-volume collection. Most of the collection was lost and less than one third of the volumes was salvaged and re-arranged into six volumes: the *Yasna* containing the *Staota Yesnya* and later liturgical compositions; the *Vispered* on the *Gâhânbâr* seasonal festivals; the *Yasht*, praises in honor of Ahura Mazda and his "assisting" deities; the *Vendidâd*, mainly concerning pollution and purification laws; the *Khordeh Avesta*, a handy popularized late collection of mostly non-Gathic daily prayers in Avesta and Middle Persian; and lastly, the collection of Avestan and Pahlavi fragments of various lengths on various subjects. Fresh compositions appeared in Pahlavi during the 9th century in order to make some good of the loss. Avesta was a dead language long before and Pahlavi died a consequent death to produce modern Persian. Persian writings, written in Arabic script, began from the 15th century and lasted until the close of the 18th century. Further writings, in Persian, Sanskrit, Gujarati, and English, have been solely based on this comparatively vast literature.

Only a comprehensive study of this literature could project the full form of the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism. This booklet is, therefore, confined to the main points of the subject. A better presentation is made in the author's *The Zarathushtrian Religion, a chronological perspective*.

History

Zarathushtra was born, according to a conventional reckoning, 3,757 years ago. His family raised cattle and horses. They belonged to an Indo-European people who called themselves *Aryans*, meaning "noble". They were polytheists and believed in superstitions and magic. The greedy priests put on a good show of bloody sacrifices, instant intoxicants, and loud

¹ Dēnkard book 8 gives a detailed summary of the 21 Nasks (books) of the Sassanid Avesta. Book 9 gives an in-depth summary of three books from the Gathic section. Shorter summaries can be found in the Persian Rivayats. – Caleb Goodfellow

chants to please the gods and repel magic and exploit the simple laity. The people were also exploited by their ruling princes.

Zarathushtra, an inquisitive person, looked at the Aryan cult with doubt at the tender age of seven. His doubts increased when the priests could not satisfy him with their dubious answers. They, in their frustration, boycotted him. He left them to discover the truth by himself. His questioning search into the contrast between social disorder and natural order led him to a discovery: the Being whose supreme wisdom created the order which prevails throughout the universe. His discovery of, and communion with the “Being of Supreme Intellect”, *Ahura Mazda*, gave him a message he conveyed to others. Zarathushtra founded a religion based on the “Primal Principles of Life” he had divinely discovered. He publicly proclaimed his divine message at the age of thirty with the sole aim of leading the entire human society to an ever-fresh spiritual and material existence.

The priests and princes, realized the threat to their vested interests, vehemently opposed him, and forced him and his few friends to leave home. Zarathushtra left home, only to go to the court of Vishtaspa, the leading ruler in the region. They had a two-year long discussion, and Zarathushtra converted Vishtaspa and his sagacious companions of men and women. They became fervent peaceful preachers of the new religion, and it spread fast, far, and wide.

A thousand years passed, and the Good Religion was accepted by all the Aryan and Aryanized people on the Iranian Plateau through the peaceful but zealous propagation of its devotees. About 2,500 years ago, Cyrus the Persian founded the first world empire, known as the *Achaemenian empire*, based on the Zarathushtrian doctrine of freedom, benevolence, tolerance, and progress. It extended from Libya to the Pamirs and the Indus. It lasted 220 years (550–330 BCE). After a short rule by alien Macedonians and Greeks, the Zoroastrian Parthians took over and ruled a shrunk empire, mostly confined to the Iranian Plateau, for 478 years (254 BCE–224 CE) with the same spirit of benevolence and tolerance. It was taken over by the Sassanians who turned the empire into a tight theocratic state of one sect. Other Zoroastrian sects were condemned as heretics.

Theocracy means total dependence of religion’s sustenance on the ruling power, consequently causing the religion to weaken much. It turns it into a parasite which depends more on the theocratic government than on its own potentiality, and therefore, the fall of government proves disastrous for the religion.

Meanwhile, Christianity, the religion of the Byzantine Empire west of the Sassanians, posed as a rival. The two empires fought several wars over a period of several centuries. Both were badly weakened and were not able to stop the rise of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. Zealous Muslim warriors defeated both, completely overthrew the Sassanian dynasty, and overran the vast Iranian empire within a short span of twenty years—532 to 652 CE.

With the empire gone, Zoroastrian survival has been at stake. Conversion to Islam through force, persecution, propagation, and concession has drastically reduced the number of Zoroastrians in Iran. Outside Iran, only one group of Iranian emigrants has survived. They are

the *Parsis* of the Indian sub-continent. All other pockets, Iranian or not, have disappeared without leaving any noticeable trace².

Zarathushtra

In **the Good Religion** Zarathushtra is a human being who, in his persistent search for truth, discovered and realized the Supreme Entity; called it *Ahura Mazda*, the Wise God; renounced and discarded the old cultic beliefs and practices; communed with his God; was inspired to convey the Divine Message he had realized, to all men and women of all climes and times; and founded an entirely new universal religion. He is the foremost *Ahu* (Lord), *Ratu* (Leader), and *Mâñthran* (Thought-provoker), in fact, the primal mental and material, spiritual and physical Guide of a righteous life for every person and for ever.

In **the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism**, Zarathushtra is more of a reformer than a founder of an ancient Iranian religion which had deviated from its path. He cleansed the religion of its *daevas* worship and superstitions but perpetuated all the “good” old beliefs and rituals. He is the “Prophet” of an ethnic community, at present represented by Iranis and Parsis. Yet some Zoroastrians consider him a Divine Being of supernatural knowledge and power.

Zarathushtra was to be followed by three saviors, known as *Saoshyants*, meaning “benefactors”, who were to be miraculously born of virgin mothers, each a thousand years after the other, to renovate the deteriorating world. Although approximately three thousand years have passed since Zarathushtra passed away, so far, the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism has recognized no one as a Saoshyant. Many Zoroastrians are now eagerly awaiting the appearance of *Bahrâm Varjâvand*. This person is not mentioned, even casually, in the Avesta or Pahlavi writings. He appears more in Persian and oral tradition. Some historian scholars say that he could be Bahram Chobin, a defiant Sassanian chief who left Iran for India and China to form an army and return to expel the invading Arabs. He was never heard of, but people, looking for a savior, waited for his return. The waiting has grown into the Bahram Varjavand legend.

Institutionalization

The Good Religion: Zarathushtra founded an altogether new religion on the basis of his divine realization. He eliminated every rite and ritual that was performed to appease false gods, enrich priests, and exploit people. He cleansed minds of superstitions. He taught a very sublime and strong doctrine.

His meaningful prayers make the soul divinely soar high, but his simple rituals hardly distract one’s mind to ceremonial performances. His doctrine is based on the “Primal Principles

² After the Muslim invasion, many pockets of Zoroastrians could be found outside Greater Iran. Besides India, many sought refuge in China and Japan. (Zoroastrianism in the Far East [Ch 9] in Wiley Blackwell companion – CG)

of Life” on this good Earth but does not set up dos and don’ts to govern one’s every mental thought and physical movement. His highly philosophical teachings are not commandments to govern minute details of everyday life. It is a progressive doctrine that wants its adherents to wisely progress with time and adjust their lives accordingly. The motto is: Continuous renovation and refreshing of life.

Zarathushtra is *ahu*, an improving lord and a *ratu*, a true guide “chosen” by the people for his righteous actions. He is a *manthran*, a thought-provoker. He has put his entire doctrine in seventeen songs of a total 241 stanzas or less than 6,000 words—the **Gathas**—enough to guide humanity of all ages to wholeness, immortality, and God without depriving them of their mental and physical freedom and choice.

The Institutionalized Zoroastrianism: But the Aryan cult was a well-formalized establishment with an orthodox hierarchy, colorful rituals, and a detailed way of life. When the leaders of the cult joined the spreading religion, many of them wanted to save and perpetuate their leading profession. They very cleverly reintroduced many old beliefs and rituals and reinstated many gods and animated more from Gathic conceptions and thus created a large pantheon of deities under the godhead of Ahura Mazda.

First the elaborate Haoma ritual was introduced. However, the original intoxicant drink was substituted by an ephedraic drink. The ritual was blended in with the Staota Yesnya recitation. It was followed by personifying some of the Gathic abstractions under the term of amesha spenta, conventionally rendered as “Incremental Immortals” and yazata, adorables. Seraosha, the inner-voice, was turned into a warrior deity, and then some of the prominent “heroically helping” gods and goddesses of the pre-Zarathushtrian era such as Mithra, god of tribal contract; Verethraghna, god of war and victory; Tishtrya, god of rain; Anâhitâ, goddess of waters; Vayu, god of wind; Drvaspa, goddess of animal health, and many more—were reintroduced as yazatas. Bloody sacrifices accompanied the heroic gods. Still later the Sun, Moon, stars, Earth, and other objects had their presiding deities. And still later, the Gathic personifications, called amesha spentas, lost much of their Gathic concepts and were given the task of guarding over cattle, fire, metal, earth, trees, and waters without infringing upon the authority of pre-Zarathushtrian deities presiding over the same elements.

The priestly hierarchy, now firmly established, was at the head of two or occasionally three lower classes of warriors, professional producers, and artisans. At present, Zoroastrians are divided into two classes only—The Priests known either as *Mobeds* or *Athornâns* (misreading of Avestan/Pahlavi *âthravan/âsravan* or *âsron*) and the Laity called *Behdins* (meaning [of] the Good Religion”).

Doctrine

The Good Religion: Zarathushtra presents a progressive monotheism. Ahura Mazda, literally “the Being [of] Supreme Intellect, “is the “continuous” creator, sustainer, and promoter of the universe. Ahura Mazda is the “most progressive”. He is also transcendental and

impersonal, and therefore without any pantheon at all. Yet he is so close that one can easily commune with him without any mediation.

Ahura Mazda has created and creates the universe by his progressive mentality (*spenta mainyu*). It is a good creation. Among his creations, he has fashioned the “joy-bringing” living world of ours on the earth. It is guided by the “Primal Principles of Life”. The Gathas present them in a beautifully intertwined, inseparable pattern to provide one with a well-blended, progressive way of life. Here they are given separately with the sole view of giving a glimpse of the most important of them:

- *Vohu Manah*, good mind, good thinking. It stands for the discerning wisdom and thorough thinking required for leading a useful life.
- *Asha* stands for “truth, order, righteousness”. It is the universal law of righteous precision. It may best be explained by stating that it means “to do the right thing, at the right time, in the right place, and with the right means in order to attain the right result”. It should result in constructive and loving good not only for oneself but also for one’s fellow creatures and for God. It is the positive, beneficial and unselfish precision par excellence.
- *Khshathra* denotes the “power” to settle in peace. Used with the adjective of *vohu* ‘good’ or *vairyā* ‘to be chosen’ it stands for benevolent power, good rule, and the chosen order. It is chosen by free and wise people as their ideal order in spirit and matter. It is the divine dominion.
- *Âramaiti*, means “tranquility, stability and serenity”. It is peace and prosperity. When used with the adjective *spenta*, it means the “ever-increasing serene peace” achieved by adhering to the Primal Principles of Life.
- *Seraoša* means “listening” to the divine voice within us to guide us on the right path. It means inspiration, divine enlightenment, communion with God.
- *Daênâ* is a person’s inner perception, the conscience. It also stands for one’s chosen religion. Zarathushtra named the religion he founded as the “Good Conscience”.
- All the above and more Primal Principles of Life given in the Gathas, when followed precisely, lead to:
- *Haurvatât*, wholeness and completion. It is the perfecting process and final completion of our material and spiritual evolution.
- *Ameretât* means “deathlessness” and “immortality”. Together with *Haurvatât*, it is the ultimate goal and represents the completion of our evolutionary development and the final achievement of our life on the earth.

In short, the Primal Principles lead one and all to become “godlike” and to live with God in an eternal bliss. The blissful state is called *garo demâna*, the abode of songs, or one may as well call it “the house of music”.

The Gathas speak about *urvan*, soul, and its final destiny to “live where the Wise God lives”. but there exists no fanciful eschatology. All it says is that the soul of a wrongful person “returns” to stay in the “house of wrong” or “house of the worst mind” until it realizes the truth to progress to wholeness and immortality. Yet, this “return” does not feed one with the elaborate doctrine of

“reincarnation” and “transmigration of soul” as is found in other religions and beliefs. It is a fair deduction that a soul must evolve to become righteous to continue to live in bliss.

Ahura Mazda has endowed mankind with a powerful mentality—one which can discriminate between good and evil. Human beings are free to choose between a better or more progressive mentality (*vahya* or *spanya mainyu*) and an evil or retarding mentality (*aka* or *angra mainyu*). The reward for the choice of the better mentality is eternal bliss, and the consequence of choosing the evil mentality is a long suffering by the soul until it is refined to achieve wholeness and immortality. Every person receives the reward for every righteous act or suffers the bad consequence for every wrong deed one does. The dualism of the Good Conscience is purely ethical and confined to human behavior only.

Everything in nature, the entire environment, is a good creation and should be looked upon as such. Light and darkness, day and night, water and plants, in fact, the very world alive with life, should be promoted according to *asha*, the universal law of nature. Mankind is not on the earth to interfere in its evolution to perfection but to be creative and “godlike”; he or she should increase its pace to progress. The Gathic doctrine is a progressively ecological order. Zarathushtra stands high in protecting and promoting the environment in a happy scientific way.

Man and woman enjoy equal status. The religion of Zarathushtra is a universal religion which knows no sex, race, color, or national barriers. It is historically the first missionary movement, a moderate movement.

The Institutionalized Zoroastrianism has a well-balanced pantheon of deities and demons. Ahura Mazda has created the six *amesha spentas* (Vohu Manah, Asha, Khshathra, Aramaiti, Haurvatat, and Ameretat), numerous *yazatas* (adorables consisting of Gathic concepts and pre-Zarathushtrian deities), innumerable *fravashis* (conventionally rendered as Guardian Spirits), and righteous human beings to assist Him in the continuous cosmic fight with His Adversary, *Añhra Mainyu* (the Evil Spirit), the horde of *daevas* (demons) created by him, and evil human beings who follow him.

In contrast to the ethical dualism of the Gathas, **the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism** is a cosmical dualistic religion in which all that is “termed” as good has been created by Ahura Mazda, and every “bad” event and object, from natural disasters, disease, and death to the so-called “noxious” creatures, are the creations of the Evil Spirit. Life on this earth and the cosmos is a continuous fight against Anghra Mainyu, the so-called Evil Spirit.

The Gathic doctrine of harmony with nature was partially maintained. Air, water, plants, earth, and minerals were, and are, held in high regard, but ecology was not as protected as it should have been according to the Gathic doctrine. Good animals and plants were promoted and improved. “Noxious” animals, particularly ants and frogs, and “evil” plants were meritoriously destroyed. The destruction of the “evil creation” is at present much reduced because of the prevailing circumstances, but the belief in fighting it in mind and matter continues.

The fight has made the scriptural doctrine to cover every walk of life from birth to death. The Evil Spirit has created the all-spreading pollution, and rites of purification are elaborate and

complex. Life in the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism means a constant watch against devilish moves. It is patterned upon the directives given in the holy scriptures. They include, among a multiple of old and new subjects: priestly duties, kingship, judiciary, religious festivals, ownership, inheritance, agriculture, pastures, animal care, animal slaughter, medicine, prophecy, apostasy, charity, begging, initiation, marriage, polygamy, adultery, slavery, relations with non-Zoroastrians, religious conversion, warfare, retribution, punishment, fine, ransom, compensation, theft, murder, assault, witchcraft, sin, crime, death penalty, carrion, menstruation, and other “dos and don’ts” to fight the evil and lead a righteous life. The canonized text was, and its salvage part is, in the Avestan language, the translations and added commentaries were, and what remains of them are, in Pahlavi or Middle Persian.

Many of the directives given in the scriptures are difficult and some of them are impossible to follow in a modern world of intercommunicating and intermingling society. The result is that only a dwindling number of priests try to follow as many of the directives as are possible within the prevailing conditions. The laity have silently abandoned many and are gradually abandoning more.

The eschatology is elaborate and picturesque. The soul remains for three days and nights beside the dead body on the earth and ascends on the fourth morning to reach the “Bridge of Separation”, originally a Gathic allegory, now turned into a concrete construction. There, it is judged by three yazatas—Mithra, Sraosha, and Rashnu. Here one is not judged separately for each of his or her deeds, but the total of good acts are placed in one pan and all the evil actions in another pan of the balance. Those whose good deeds outweigh their evil actions, are declared righteous and go, according to merits, to one of the four categories of the Heaven and live a life of bliss, and those whose evil deeds are heavier than their good actions are wrongful and likewise go to one of the four Hells. There they are grotesquely tortured, ironically, by the Evil Spirit and his horde of demons. For those who have equal weights of good and evil, there is the purgatory (Avesta *Misvâna Gâtu*, “mixing place” or Pahlavi *Hammistagân*, “place of equal mixing”) to eventually purge them of their evil. Here the souls are not tortured but made to suffer only from cold and heat. In spite of these assignments, there is also the bodily resurrection when the dead will arise. Then souls and bodies will again be judged and sentenced to bliss or a temporary punishment. All will eventually be united in the blissful existence. The Evil Spirit and his creation will be doomed for ever.

The Institutionalized Zoroastrianism has transformed the Gathic conception of the mental state of enjoying good and suffering evil and the subsequent achievement of wholeness, immortality, and the eternal divine bliss into an elaborate eschatology of death, judgement, heaven, hell, purgatory, bodily resurrection, and salvation, an eschatology which has greatly influenced other religions, including, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Man and woman continue to enjoy equal status. Yet woman is considered more prone to pollution because of her monthly menstruation and periodical childbirth. She has to undergo elaborate and lengthy purification rites to regain her purity. Many modern Zoroastrians have, as already said, given up most of the purification rites. During the Sassanian times, while man could marry more than once and yet keep his status, woman had several standards. Among them, she was a “royal wife” if married as maiden with the consent of her parents, a “self-willed” if she

married without her parents' consent, and a “serving wife” if remarrying as a widow. The husband had an upper hand in divorcing his spouse. At present, modified laws promulgated by Zoroastrian associations in Iran and India have restored the equality to a great extent.

Nevertheless, marriage outside the community, generally places the woman outside the society among orthodox Parsis. Parsi women married to non-Zoroastrians are fighting for full rights. They are supported by many of their co-religionists. Iranian women are not faced with such social problems.

Rituals

The Good Religion: The Gathas are divine praises and guidance at the same time. They contain barely any rituals. One only finds some outlines of simple ceremonies in the *Staota Yesnya* texts concerning the Initiation of a person choosing the Good Religion, meditation for enlightenment, individual prayers, congregational prayers, marriage, and honoring the living and the dead for their good services—outlines that give one the virtuous freedom to keep in good tune with the changing times and climes. The Gathas do not interfere in one’s traditional good “living”. Yet they advocate a happy life of radiating happiness to others whosoever they may be.

Early non-Gathic Avestan texts show that the Gathas were sung, chanted and recited by people whenever they were in a mood and urge to do so. They also gathered around a hearth or fire altar to recite the Gathas and their supplements in a congregation. Pure priestly “profession” is absent in the Gathic texts. If required, persons of more knowledge led the prayers. Later texts show that people celebrated their age-old seasonal changes in their pastoral and agricultural life. They are the six *Gahanbars* celebrated at the end of each change in activity. *Staota Yesnya* was recited and explained to an inquisitive gathering. It was followed by enjoying a feast collectively prepared by all the participants. One’s life, mentally and spiritually enriched by the Gathic doctrine, continued to progress with a higher, sublimer purpose.

The Gathic age did not have priests, professional or otherwise. The prayers were not led by any particular individual. Persons with greater knowledge of the doctrine officiated at simple ceremonies and congregational rituals and in their spare time, taught and preached the religion. In fact, every person was, in his or her own capacity, a practicing, preaching Zarathushtrian.

The Institutionalized Zoroastrianism, on the other hand, has an established hereditary priestly class with intricate rituals. It has its fire-temples of different grades. While in Iran non-Zoroastrians are allowed to enter a fire-temple, fire-temples in India and Pakistan bar any person who is not a “born” Zoroastrian. Zoroastrians in Europe, North America and Australia do not, to this date, have a “consecrated” temple³. Fire altars in prayer sanctuaries fulfill the job. A few are gas-fired. With the passage of time, congregational prayers, which once comprised only of the Gathas and their supplements in the Gathic texts, have given way to ceremonies in which the Gathas do not constitute the body of the prayer text but are, in certain longer rituals, a part of a

³ The OZCF (Ontario Zoroastrian Community Foundation) is currently building an Atash Adaran (Second grade of fire temple) set to be completed by the end of 2024 which would be the first consecrated fire temple in the west.

much longer whole. While seasonal festivals of Gahanbars gradually have been turned into a feast without Staota Yesnya recitation, the reformed calendar, based on days and months named after deities, have given more festivals. Whenever the name of the day and the name of the month of the same deity coincides, a festival (Pahlavi *yazishn*, Persian *jashn*, and Gujarati *jashan*, [ritual] veneration) is celebrated in honor of the deity. The total of such deity-festivals comes to fifteen in a year. Birth, initiation, marriage, death, disposal of the dead, and memorial ceremonies each have their preparations and performances. Pollution and purification rituals are elaborate and difficult to perform. Certain laid conditions make some of the rituals almost impossible to be performed “overseas” on American continents, Australia, and other island regions outside the Eurasian mainland.

Prayers are recited in Avesta and in a later form of Middle Persian basically learned by rote. Both the languages lie beyond the comprehension of the reciting priests and the listening laypersons. Only a small number of Zoroastrian scholars know what the prayers mean. No standard translation of the holy texts exists in English, Persian, or Gujarati. Most of the available translations, especially of the Gathas, are by non-Zoroastrian scholars in a scholarly language that rob the “scriptural” texts of their beauty. The sublime songs of Zarathushtra lie too philologically analyzed to inspire and deliver the divine message. The laity has only one book to be spiritually contented with: **Khordeh Avesta**, usually in Persian, Gujarati, or English script and without a translation. Moreover, neither the priests nor the laity know the relevance or irrelevance of the ritual to the texts recited during the performance.

The elaborate ceremonies, some running for hours have done one thing—eclipsed the Gathas so much so that they are only recited either along with the entire Yasna text or on the occasion of the last five memorial days, the *Muktâd* or *Panjeh*. The *Ahunavaiti Gatha*, the first seven songs, are recited during a funeral ceremony. And it is the officiating priests who do the recitations, not the laity. It is just a generation that a movement has been generated to turn to the Gathas.

Metaphysical interpretations of the Avestan texts presented by certain circles satisfy those in search of mysticism, but the common men and women, who are coming in ever-growing contact with science and other religions whose scriptures are in intelligible renderings, are looking and asking for good, understandable renderings.

Calendar

The Good Religion, founded approximately 4,000 years ago, did not prescribe a calendar that would have become outdated. The Gathas and certain earlier parts of the Avesta show that the Gathic people continued to adhere to their ancestral luni-solar calendar with a precise intercalation of 11 days to keep the Gahanbar festivals in line with the agricultural life. There is no clue as to what the names of the months were. One can only look at the Gahanbar names and the Vedic months to presume that they might have been names after seasonal changes and agricultural phases. The early Achaemenians, more Gathic in practice than the following dynasties, had a solar calendar of their own with specific names of the months. The days of the

month were numbered the way one does in modern times. That shows that they found themselves free to change the calendar to suit their times.

The **Institutionalized Zoroastrianism** too changed later to a purely solar calendar. It, however, had its months named, in a non-orderly sequence, after the amesha spentas and yazatas. It also named the thirty days of the month, here in a more or less, orderly sequence, after the amesha spentas and yazatas. The last five days were dedicated to the five Gathas to provide a 365 day year. Intercalations of one day every four years or one month every 120 years kept the calendar in its place.

But the downfall of the Sassanians deprived the community of a single calendrical authority. The Indian pocket was cut off from the Iranian community. Leap years were observed only for a few centuries and then were given up for good. As a result, until recently, there were two calendars, the *Qadimi* (Old) followed by the Iranian Zoroastrians and the *Shâhanshâhi* (Royal) by the Parsis, both drifting months from the vernal equinox. At present, the Qadimi year begins in July and the Shahanshahi begins one full month later. A few decades ago, some rose to reform it into a solar year of 365 days with its leap year. It begins with the vernal equinox and is called *Fasli* (seasonal) by many.

Meanwhile, Iran and Afghanistan have changed to the precise solar year of 365.2422 days. It has the first six months of 31 days each, the following five months of 30 days each, and the last month either of 29 or 30 days. It is the most correct current calendar. It is very practical. The Iranian months carry Zoroastrian names, and the Afghan months have Zodiacal terms. The days have their numbers 1 to 31.

Outside Influences

The Good Religion stands pure and pristine and is based upon the Gathic guidelines with no alien religious influence. Zarathushtra “renounced” the old cult after he discovered the truth and was divinely enlightened. He did not have any contacts with any of the then existing cults and religions. Furthermore, the Good Religion is firmly based on the Primal Principles of Life and that is sufficient to lead a wise, righteous, and practical life of usefulness to the living world. As already stated, the Gathas did not, and do not, interfere in one’s good mode of living. They guide and inspire one to lead a better life.

Orthodox Christianity came into close contact with the **Institutionalized Zoroastrianism** during the Sassanian period. Its confession of sins has been instrumental in creating numerous *Patets*, penitence pieces in late Middle Persian, in which all the possible sins are listed, and repentance is expressed for each of them in daily prayers faithfully recited by many. Even children, who definitely lie outside the scope of adult “sins”, are made to recite them on certain occasions.

Islamic influence on the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism in Iran may be seen in the number of Zoroastrian shrines and the unconscious ascribing of every event, good or bad, to God. While

the later Avesta would begin an act with *Khshnaothra Ahurahe Mazdâo* (for the pleasure of Ahura Mazda), post-Sassanian prayers in Zoroastrian Persian begin with *be nâm-e Îzad bakshâyande-ye bakhshâyeshgar-e mehrabân* (In the name of God, the compassionate, merciful, and kind), an echo of *Bismillâhi al-Rahmân al-Rahîm*. The same holds true about *Peimân-e Dîn* or *Dîn-no Kalmo*. It follows the Islamic profession of faith *Shahâdah*, also known as *Kalema-e Dîn* among Indo-Iranian Muslims. In fact, *Dîn-no Kalmo* is a mere Gujarati rendering of *Kalema-e Din*. One may also see a response to 99 names of Allah in the much popularized 101 names of “Hormazd”. These names have, with a few exceptions, no roots in the Avesta and Pahlavi writings. They even lie outside the *Hormazd Yasht*, a late Avestan composition in which God enumerates His names and speaks about their potentials. Furthermore, the Muslim dominance has, for the past 1,400 years, made the Iranian Zoroastrians behave very protectively.

Hindu influence on the Zoroastrians of the Indian sub-continent may be found in the growing number of persons attracted to Hindu saints, gurus, sâiñs, bâbâs, mâtâs, and shrines and other pilgrimage centers. Turning the community into a closed, caste-like society, prostration before the fire altar, tinting the forehead with ashes, and many social customs are perhaps among older influences. Once very strong, the attraction of the Theosophical order is on the decline.

Finally, the Good Religion is a universal, progressive, and modernizing religion meant for humanity at large. The Institutionalized Zoroastrianism, in its present traditional form, is an ethnical, static, and closed religion of a specific community. The two stand apart in their outlook.

Present and Future

The present, with the drastic changes in social orders, the discoveries by science and the rapid progress of technology, challenges every religion, old and new. Many of the religious rules and regulations appear to many a modern person as outdated, obsolete, and impractical. It is mostly the simple or blind faith, strengthened by interpretations, some of them esoteric, which is keeping many religious dogmas in place.

Meanwhile, Zoroastrians are no more confined to certain specific cities within their enclosed residential areas in Iran, India, and Pakistan. They are fanning out of their old strongholds and thinning into far-flung cities in which they can find a better and safer place to live. Estimates put the present number of Zoroastrians in North American cities at 10,000 persons. The number is increasing.

But the story in India and Pakistan is different. There the number is fast decreasing because of more deaths and less births. “Exodus” emigration and excommunication of persons marrying outside the community are also eroding the numbers. Experts on demography are warning of the day, not far, when the community will disappear. The faithful adherents of ethnical the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism express their confidence that it will never be so. Zealous inbreeding, they confidently predict, will keep the community alive and expanding.

Some are awaiting the appearance of *Bahram Varjavand* to see the balance totally tilted in their favor.

While many are alarmed at the dwindling number of “born” Zoroastrians, non-Zoroastrian Iranians are showing ever-greater interest in their ancestral religion. A jump of 60,000 persons in the recent census of Zoroastrians in Iran has surprised many. The number of persons approaching Zoroastrians and Zoroastrian associations in North America and Europe to seek knowledge with a view to join the community is increasing. Enjoying the relative freedom, some educated Tajiks, people of Iranian stock in the Soviet Central Asia, are also anxious to join the fold. Even some Armenians have made inquiries. Moreover, as more and more Americans and Europeans are getting acquainted with the name of Zarathushtra and his teachings, the number of inquiries is showing a steady rise. A few have declared themselves Zarathushtrians and others have expressed a desire to do so.

Zoroastrians today see other religious orders in their neighborhood. They establish friendship with their adherents. They stand fully exposed to non-Zoroastrian environments. Mixed-marriages between Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians have become a common feature, and the figures of mixed-marriages are showing a steady rise at the loss of inter-community weddings.

So far excommunication of persons marrying outside the community has been the usual reaction by the self-styled “traditionalists” and “orthodox” who consider themselves as the ultimate authority. But the action does not seem to be working in face of new challenges thrown by the fast-changing circumstances wherever the Zoroastrians live, in good old India and Pakistan, or in new permanent residential countries of Europe, America, and Australia. All these challenges cannot be brushed aside or taken lightly. Conditions show that threats, intimidation, condemnation, boycott, excommunication, refusal to recognize a so-called convert as Zarathushtrian, blasphemy and abusive language do not work. On the contrary, they turn many to become increasingly curious to know the truth. The matter warrants serious consideration, both for the traditionalists and the liberals.

Changing Attitudes

Attitudes are undergoing a change since Western scholars began taking an increasing interest in the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism almost 200 years ago. They have, with their translations and interpretations, brought the mute Avestan and Pahlavi texts to speak for themselves. The Gathas, once outranked by daily Avesta/Pazend recitation, are the subject of much discussion now.

The reformist movement started by those trained in Western schools has gained much strength during the last century. It has made, and continues to make, even the staunch traditionalists reform without acknowledging the change. Gathic studies have helped some to believe that if the Good Religion is restored to its pristine purity, it can well meet the challenge of social changes, scientific progress and technological advances. It can also live in friendly relations with other religions.

One of the subjects brought up by the movement has been conversion/acceptance. It has been vehemently opposed by the traditionalists and condemned by their high priests in India. Nevertheless, the process of accepting spouses is gaining favor. First, many began supporting the idea that the children of a mixed-marriage in which the father is Zoroastrian should be initiated into the religion. Now, those who stand for equality of the sexes are pressing for the admittance of the children of a Zoroastrian wife. This opinion is strong in Europe and North America and it appears that Zoroastrians of these two continents will eventually admit both. Initiations of children of Zoroastrian wives and non-Zoroastrian fathers are more common than occasional.

The number of Zoroastrians who believe in accepting converts is also increasing. The Iranian Mobeds Councils in Iran and North America have given a green light to acceptance but are not, for obvious reasons, making any special efforts to propagate and win converts. If a “qualified” candidate, generally one marrying into a Zoroastrian family, comes forward, he or she is quietly initiated into the religion. There are several associations in North America who hold the same opinion and occasionally follow the same policy. Against this, the traditionalists in America are already protesting against the move and are quite vociferous in their protest. The number of those in favor of acceptance in India and Pakistan is considerable but so far no one has dared to come in open except a few. It means prompt condemnation by the orthodox who wield the power in the society. A bold step by a few in future may change the silent supporters of acceptance and consequently change the balance.

Among the Zoroastrians in North America and Europe, differences of opinion have divided the immigrants and their children into two main camps: the orthodox and liberals. Although met with stiff opposition, echoed louder in remote India than in North America and Europe, so far the odds have been in favor of the liberals. They have been successful in most of the unorthodox actions they have dared to take. The orthodox, although never admitting, are yielding but very, very slowly. The question now is: how far the orthodox are going to stretch themselves to meet the changes brought in by the liberals, especially by their own children who are growing in a typically open western society?

The fear of a split, expressed mostly by the orthodox, may come true because of the stand taken by the orthodox themselves. It is they who alienate others by their condemnations, excommunications, and boycotts. Once alienated, a person cannot join a traditional association, attend a ritual performed by a traditional priest, enter a fire-temple in the Indian sub-continent, or receive a Zoroastrian funerary end. Such persons have two alternatives: go and get lost, as has been the case so far, and as a result, further aggravate the present decline in population, or form their own establishment. The alienated and excommunicated persons, each feeling isolated and rejected, have never made an effort to come together to find a solution to their isolation. However, there are faint signs that some are thinking about the need for a united action to solve the problem in open.

The Zarathushtrian Assembly

But apart from the divided community, a number of prominent Zartoshtis, each in his or her city, have seriously been thinking of establishing a well-organized body in North America and Europe to promote the religion of Zarathushtra. They have been consulting each other, but so far, no concrete steps have been taken to form groups and start it. Only one group has felt encouraged to come forward and establish an independent organization. The Zarathushtrian Assembly is a non-profit, non-political religious corporation established in 1990 in Los Angeles. It declared its existence while celebrating Nowruz and Zarathushtra's Birthday on 22 March 1991. It is the first of its kind. It is unique. Contrary to what happens in reformatory movements, the establishment of the Assembly is not a protestant, sectarian, or denominational one, a separatist move to split apart from an existing body. It has been formed as an outside organization, an organization which does not identify itself with the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism as an ethnic entity or with any of its associations, institutions, and other sacerdotal, sanctified, social, financial, charitable, singular or federated establishments. It lies outside the closed communal religious fold of traditionalist and orthodox Zoroastrians. It does not seek any recognition by any authority/authorities of the traditional Zoroastrian community. In fact, it is not interested at all in any of the traditional/orthodox activities of keeping their identity, maintaining their rituals and ceremonies, safeguarding their culture, opposing conversion/acceptance, excommunicating persons of mixed marriages, and inbreeding to increase their number.

Nevertheless, the Zarathushtrian Assembly is a Zarathushtrian organization. It has, in theory and practice, restored the religion of Good Conscience to its Gathic purity and Zarathushtrian universality. It reserves the right to call itself and its members by the name "Zarathushtrian" and any of its variants—Zarathushti, Zartoshti, Zoroastrian, Mazdayasni, and Behdin. Based on the Gathic Doctrine, it considers itself the Authority to follow its course. Membership of the Zarathushtrian Assembly is open to all those who, of their own individual accord and after full consideration and conviction, choose the Good Religion and wish to belong to its World Fellowship. The Zarathushtrian Assembly belongs to the knowledgeable persons who are sincerely committed to the good, Gathic religion of the *Manthran*, the thought-provoker, Righteous Zarathushtra. The Gathas are the only guide in life for the members of the Assembly. Other Gathic texts are of explanatory importance. Its ceremonies are based on the Gathic texts. All other parts of the Avesta and Pahlavi have only their moral, historical, geographical, and anthropological values and therefore there is a placid place for them outside the doctrinal scripture—the *Staota Yesnya*.

The Assembly teaches, preaches, and practices the religion of Good Conscience. It does not convert people simply because the Good Religion is a religion of personal choice and does not indulge in persuaded, pursued, and pushed conversion. It is opposed to such conversions. Any person who is a Zarathushtrian, either by free choice or by birth and upbringing, and has knowledgeably performed his or her initiation (*navjote/sadreh-pûshi*), can apply for the membership of the Zarathushtrian Assembly, and upon the approval of the application become a member and enjoy all the rights provided by the Constitution and Bylaws of The Assembly.

Those who are interested in the Good Religion, and those who, for certain reasons, are not in a position to get themselves initiated, may associate themselves with The Assembly by becoming "friends". Friends can participate in all Assembly activities with the exception of elections and

being elected to administrative positions. Assembly activities are open to all. Even administrative meetings may be attended by any person brought in by a member or with a prior request.

Conclusion

A common problem faced by followers of the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Islam and Sikhism, all of them comparatively recent immigrants, in Europe and North America, is adaptation to an entirely new environment. Western culture and social orders are very different in these countries. While the first generation of immigrants wants to preserve intact the ways of life as they were in the old world, an impossible task in the long run, the new generation looks at America and Europe as its homeland and its culture as its own.

Meanwhile, the spiritual world is witnessing increased religious activities. Inter-faith movements are working to bring most of the existing religions closer in reciprocally respectful meetings. It is gaining popularity. Parallel to this movement, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Mormons, Baha'is, and even Jews are preaching and are out to win people to their respective religions by peaceful means. Conversion is the order of the day.

The Institutionalized Zoroastrianism has its own stand: Safeguard and continue the identity and culture it has acquired through the ages of its existence, no matter what the conditions prevail in the homeland or the acquired homes. It has, however, a growing group of its members who are concerned. They favor a reform, some fast and fundamental, others slow and surface. Only time, now moving fast, will prove as to who is right and who is erring.

As far as **the Good Religion** of Zarathushtra is concerned, the restoration has given it a new impetus. With the eternal “Primal Principles of Life” taught by Zarathushtra approximately 4,000 years ago as its motive and goal, it stands modern and progressive. It has entered the peaceful competition and is determined to spread the Zarathushtrian Message far and wide. After all, every Zartoshti, orthodox or liberal, understanding or just chanting, has been wishing in his or her daily prayers: “May the religion of Good Conscience spread all over the seven regions of the earth”. Their prayers, clear signs show, have been answered.

*Atha jamyât yatha afrinâmahi.*⁴

Books Recommended for Further Information

⁴ Just as it may be, so do we wish. – CG

The Gathas:

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2. S. Insler, *The Gathas of Zarathustra*, Leiden, 1975.
3. Ali A. Jafarey, *The Gathas, Our Guide*, Cypress, California, 1989.

Later Avesta, Pahlavi and Persian:

1. *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Maxmuller, volumes IV, XXIII, and XXXI for Avesta texts and volumes V, XVIII, XXIV, and XXXVI for Pahlavi texts, Oxford, 1895, reprinted by Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1970.
2. *The Persian Rivayats of Hormezdyar Framarz and others*, Ervad B.N. Dhabar, Bombay, 1932.

History and Doctrine:

1. Dastur Maneckji Nusservanji Dhalla, *History of Zoroastrianism*, New York, 1938. (The best and most comprehensive book to read on the chronological development of the Good Religion and the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism.)
2. Rustom Masani, *The Religion of the Good Life*, London, 1954
3. Dastur Hormazyar K. Mirza, *Outlines of Parsi History*, Bombay, 1974.
4. Prof. Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, three volumes, Leiden, 1975-91.
5., *Zoroastrians, Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London, 1979.
6. Erach J.S. Taraporewala, *The Religion of Zarathushtra*, Bombay, 1980.
7. Homi B. Minocher Homji, *O Wither Parsis? Placate and Perish or Reform and Flourish*, Karachi, 1978.
8., *Zoroastrianism, contemporary perception of ancient wisdom, a search for the true meaning and scope of zarathushtra's gathas*, Toronto, 1989.
9. Cyrus R. Pangborn, *Zoroastrianism, A Beleaguered Faith*, 1982.
10. Ali A. Jafarey, *The Zarathushtrian Religion, a chronological perspective*, 1992.

Rituals:

1. Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees*, Bombay, reprint 1986.

2. Mobed Ardeshir Azargoshasb, *Marasem-e Mazhabi va Adab-e Zarthoshtian* (Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Zoroastrians) (Persian), Tehran, 2nd ed. 1979.

3. Ali A. Jafarey, *Fravarane, I choose for myself the Zoroastrian Religion, a guide for the initiation ceremony*, Westminster, California, 1988.

4., *Zarathushtrian Ceremonies based on the Gathas*, Cypress, California, 1992.

Note: The author has, in his research essays in English and Persian, discussed at length many of the points which are but briefly mentioned in this book. If requested, copies of the original essays will be provided at the cost price.

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