

## **The Good Religion**

### **Indo-Iranian Zarathushtis and Westernization**

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Indo-Iranians or, to define them more specifically, the Afghans, Indians, Iranians, Pakistanis, and Tajiks have been more or less familiar with Western culture for generations. The West is not a new phenomenon. Among these, the Zoroastrians of India, Iran, and Pakistan have been in the forefront. They are much more familiar, even to the level of being said to be westernized.

During the last two decades, many Iranian Zoroastrians and Parsis have come to settle in Western countries, particularly North America and Great Britain. People in smaller numbers have settled in France, Germany, Sweden, along with a few other West European countries in the Northern Hemisphere, and in Australia and New Zealand in the Southern Hemisphere. Some of them have come to improve their economic and social conditions. Others have been forced out of the homeland because of unfavorable political situations.

Those who have settled in large European and North American cities have gathered together and established Zoroastrian associations, and more still, because of philanthropic assistance, have their own places of worship and gatherings. They regularly perform their religious ceremonies and celebrate their festivals.

Their general conditions in establishing themselves in private business and good employment have been more than satisfactory. Iranians are fairly accustomed to cold and freezing weather, but for Parsis the sub-zeros temperatures of the northern parts of North America and Europe were tough to bear in the beginning. However, both Iranians and Parsis have now acclimatized. In general, they are all doing well. Although they are far away from their homelands, they are leading happy, productive, and good lives.

Yet there seems to be something lacking, something wanting, something missing in many families. Is it because they cannot meet each other the easy way they used to in their hometowns? Is it because sprawling cities make it difficult to closely communicate with one another? Is it because some do not have their relatives in the same towns in the way they had at home? Are they missing their old friends, many of whom have also migrated but settled in different cities? Are they feeling homesick and isolated? Yes, to all these questions, but these factors are not so acute as to make a person feel the way many Zoroastrian immigrants do.

Then what is the reason? The answer is simple: Western culture. Although westernized in their talks and walks in India and Iran, culturally Parsis are Indians and Iranian Zoroastrians are deeply Iranians. This, to their surprise, they have discovered here in the midst of Western culture. Their westernization at home was voluntary mixing, but here it almost amounts to an immersion in it. At home they were westernized Iranians and Indians who were somewhat “above” their common compatriots. Here, whether they like it or not, they are Asians and not fully incorporated by the host nations. Above all, Western culture has changed their family life.

The close-knit family in which the elders had a special say and play is disintegrating. Parents are “losing” their dear ones.

Children brought up and born here are “Westerners”. They go to Western culture schools. They enjoy the freedoms Western society provides—freedoms which are taboos in Iran, India, and Pakistan. They live their lives more with their non-Indo-Iranian friends than their parents and other family members. They watch Western TV. They prefer fast food. They talk in English or the European language in the country they reside. They hardly know Persian and Gujarati. And they hardly sit and talk with their elders. The family stands split over Indo-Iranian culture versus Western culture.

The clear majority of the friends of Zoroastrian children are non-Zoroastrians. These could be, and often are, their boyfriends and girlfriends. This brings them to know more about non-Zoroastrian religions, particularly Christianity which happens to be a very active and attractive missionary religion. With the sparse amount of knowledge the children have about Zoroastrianism, this could prove dangerous. Friendship with non-Zoroastrians could also result in intermarriages. Traditionalist Zoroastrians, almost all the Parsis or those Iranians brought up in a Parsi environment, condemn intermarriage. Some even excommunicate the children marrying outside. Iranians show more leniency and adaptability. Yet many Iranians are not quite happy if their child marries outside.

There is one more reason. The apathy towards religion is growing almost in an epidemic proportion among the youth in general all over the world, particularly in Western countries. Among other factors, modern science versus ancient religion is a major reason. Legends, stories, history, social taboos, outdated customs, and forcing obligations are some of the causes. This again has distanced the youth from their “religiosity” expressed and practiced by the parents.

Should we go through the above statement again and think clearly without any prejudice, we will see that the core of the unrest is family breakup between the elders and their children, and the indifference shown by the children towards religious beliefs and practices of their elders. What is the solution? Experience has shown that force, deprivation, disinheritance, and excommunication do not work. It either ends up in losing the child or compromising and reconciling after some time. The real losers are the elders. For them the problem remains unsolved. If this is the case for the first-generation immigrants, what will be the condition two or more generations later? More alienation from the Religion and ancestral culture.

Can the Good Religion solve the problem? Let us see: Zarathushtra founded his divine doctrine based on practical Primal Principles of Life. A perusal of the Gathas, the only words of Zarathushtra, will make it clear that the Good Religion is for all times and all climes. It is universal in every aspect of its doctrine.

The Good Religion is for all times because the Gathas guide one to an ever-renovating progressive life that promotes human society and the natural environment to increasing happiness and prosperity in mind and body through up-to-date knowledge, freedom of choice, right discretion, well-thought words, and constructive actions. Progress of science is proving the

Gathic Principles of Life. The Gathas are not outdated. They are all along the present and surely the future.

The Good Religion is for all climes because the Gathas are inspiring words aimed at converting all the living people, even the wicked (Song 1.5, Song 7.3).<sup>1</sup> The later Avesta confirms this. The Farvardin Yasht speaks of spreading the Good Religion all over the seven continents (13.94). The Yasna quotes Zarathushtra saying: "Indeed I, who am Zarathushtra, shall cause the heads of the houses, settlements, districts, and countries to follow this religion, which is Divine and Zarathushtrian, in their thoughts, words, and deeds" (Yasna 8.7). The Vendidad relates that "Zarathushtra asked Ahura Mazda . . . Should I guide righteous men, should I guide righteous women, should I guide the irreligious evil-worshipping sinners among people . . . ?" Ahura Mazda said, "You should guide, O Righteous Zarathushtra" (Vendidad 19.26).

Even the late Persian prayers, mostly recited by Parsis, tell us the same. A piece attached to the Khorshid and other Niyayesh states: "The knowledge, extent, and fame of the rules of the Good Religion be widespread in the seven continents of the earth! So may it be!" Din-no-Kalmo states that: "Zarathushtra brought this Good Religion, the just, the upright, which Lord God sent for the creation (all mankind)." Urvan-no-Kalmo, another prayer, wishes: "May the immaculate glory of the Mazdayasna Good Religion be widespread across the seven continents. May this wish be especially fulfilled."

This means that the Good Religion can and must thrive in the Western world. Yet the Zoroastrian immigrants have not been able to adjust themselves to certain customs here. Novruz, the Gahanbars, other monthly festivals such as Farvardegan, Ardibeheshtegan, Initiation (Sadreh-pooshi/Navjote), wedding, memorials, and funerals ceremonies are regularly held. Dar-e-Mehrs are open for individual and private prayers. But the indifferent children, especially those in high schools, colleges, and universities do not show the interest their elders want them to take. In Iran, the youth are very much involved in religious and social activities. Sazman-e Farvahar, the Zartoshti Youth Organization in Tehran, is more active than the local anjoman or the Mobeds Council.

There may be more than one reason for the indifference. The child who spends most of his/her time in close contact with Western culture is not used to ceremonies in which he/she would silently sit and respectfully listen for an hour or more to prayers recited in a language he/she does not understand at all. His/her non-Zoroastrian friends might have said that their services are held in English. He/she wishes that his/her rituals were also understandable and enjoyable like theirs. Christmas, Halloween, and Easter give a young person more fun. He/she likes, even loves it but the parents do not. The trouble lies here, and it should be solved, otherwise the gap would continue to widen. The next two generations could be quite strangers to the ancestral culture, and the religion.

With universality and modernity of the Good Religion of Zarathushtra in mind, and with the value and importance of the religious and social traditions in view, there should be a way for the parents to coolly understand the environment they and their children are living. This could be

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<sup>1</sup> Yasna 28.5, 31.3

better understood through a friendly, compromising dialogue between the parents and the children. It would be even better for the parents and children in an association or neighboring associations to meet together and discuss the whole issue with an open mind. It should include religious education, keeping alive the cultural heritage, helping non-Zoroastrian Western friends to understand what Zoroastrianism means and what it has contributed to the world civilization, intermarriage and the integration of spouses within the Zoroastrian fold, conversion/acceptance, and other outstanding problems. Involving the younger generation, brought up here, in increasing religio-social activities would contribute to the cause. Educational books and videos for the children and the young should both be authentic and attractive. Modifying ceremonies without the loss of essentials to make them fully intelligible to the younger generation will prove fruitful. Shelving the outstanding unsolved problems just because of the fear of an uproar by some is not the answer. Uproar may silence many but not for long. And uproar which repeats itself over and again loses in effect. And it alienates the youth.

This brings us to uproars in meetings, in the press, and on the Internet. The uproars in meetings are confined to the relevant circles, mostly among the elders who have the helms of Zoroastrian organizations in hand. The uproar in the press is again confined to the Parsis in India. The Parsi press has a very limited circulation in the West. Both do not involve the youth.

The uproar on the Internet is what the youth gets. All of us are realizing more than ever that the Internet is rapidly becoming a part of life for the young generation. It can be a highly effective medium of religious education. But it has been observed that anything which goes against the traditionalist views, is vigorously attacked. The attacks are not sober in tone. They are generally insulting and personal. This type of aggressive policy would not attract the youth. And the Internet offers thousands of alternatives to a person who is put off by one or two, and this includes his/her religion/religiosity.

Lastly let us bear in mind that Western culture is a continuation of the culture promoted and spread throughout the then civilized world by Zoroastrian Achaemenians. It does have its flaws, some serious ones. Whatever the case, with modern media of communications, it is spreading all over the world. There is no escape. It will catch up sooner or a little later.

There are some Zoroastrian organizations in the West, which have begun with educational classes for the young. The youth too have their activities in some places. A good step, but not enough. What about other outstanding problems?

Therefore, why not be brave enough to face the problems and at the same time, be friendly enough to work together to solve them. We can then relax to see the youth carry the future with confidence. We have nothing to fear. We have the Gathas as our Guide. Let us help our youth to contribute to Western culture all that is good in the Indo-Iranian culture. It may remove many of its flaws and have it enriched.

With these few words said both in English and Persian, I hope I have provoked some thoughts—Good Thoughts that would translate into Good Words and Good Deeds needed to promote and perpetuate the Good Religion of Zarathushtra in the West, which is but a part of the

seven continents. May the Good Religion thrive here and everywhere! May the Indo-Iranian culture enrich Western culture as it has done in the past!

*Idha apam vijasaiti vanghvi daena mazdayasnish vispaish avi karshvan yaish hapta*

‘Henceforth the Good Mazdayasni Religion will spread all over the seven continents!’

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