

Interaction of the religion of Zarathushtra with other religions

Ali A Jafarey

Permit me to repeat and add to, in a small nutshell, what my colleague, Dr. Ardeshir Anoshiravani, presented. (1) Monotheism: One God as the Creator, Maintainer, and Promoter of the Universe. (2) The Universe, including human society, operates on a number of Fundamental Principles of Life. They are the Universal Law of Right and Precision, Good Mind, Conscience, Perception, Intuition, Free Choice of a Good Order, and Progressive Peace to settle in a free, industrious society and to think good, speak good, and work good towards perfection, immortality, and becoming godlike.

And a point to remember is that of all the founders of religions, Zarathushtra is the only person whose very words have reached us as his compact, complete, melodious Message in 241 stanzas of 17 songs. No dictation, no narration, no interpretation, and no adulteration of the original statement.

Let us now keep the following points in mind and begin our subject:

1. Interaction Traffic: There is no “One-way Traffic” in human relations. The interaction takes place under all circumstances—migration, trade, customs, beliefs, peace, war, invasion, asylum, domination, and subordination. Of these, tolerant domination and intimate subordination work better.
2. Serial Order: To this day, the world has seen five dominating multinational religions. They are:
 - a. Chronological order: Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Baha’ism.
 - b. Geographical order of the birthplace from east to west: Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Baha’ism, Christianity, and Islam.
 - c. Expansion order: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Baha’ism.
 - d. Root order: Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism share an Indo-Iranian base. Christianity, Islam, and Baha’ism have descended from Judaism, more or less, an ethnic religion of a Semitic origin.
3. Position: Of the ancient religions, Zoroastrianism enjoyed a central position. It had Hinduism and Buddhism in the east, and among other beliefs, Judaism and Christianity in the west. On its northwestern border, it had the Greeks and the Romans. It was in direct touch with all of them. It enjoyed another privilege: It was the religion of a superpower, tolerant in nature, which dominated, sometimes most of the lands and sometimes parts of the lands, of all the religions in the east and the west for over one thousand years.

Of the above, two points are of greater importance in interaction: Chronology and domination. Chronologically, Hinduism stands first. But Hinduism is not a religion founded by a single person. It is a synchronized evolution of the ideas of the older natives of the land and the Aryan immigrants through ages. In that case, although it does harbor old beliefs and practices, it is the product of many ideas by many persons in many ages and stages, some conflicting and

opposed to one another. In its contact with its western neighbors, it has never dominated any part of their lands. Its expansion has been mainly towards its southeast up to Indonesia.

Next stands the Zarathushtrian Religion. It is the oldest and outnumbered and dominated many other religions for over 1,300 years—from 700 BCE to 652 CE.¹

Judaism, the parent of Christianity and Islam, is one of the religions with which Zoroastrianism has interacted. Jews have been living in the region of Greater Iran—from Mesopotamia to the Chinese borders—for the last 2,500 years, and these Jews had a good say in collating and canonizing the Old Testament and the Talmud.

It is the Zoroastrian-Jewish interaction that has been inherited by Christianity, Islam, and now to an extent, by Baha'ism. In addition, Christianity had continuous contact with Zoroastrianism since its inception, standing face to face with it from the establishment of the Byzantine Empire in 330 CE to the rise of Islam in the first half of the 7th Century.

Islam received what the earlier two had taken. In 652 CE, a relatively small and ill-equipped army of Arab Muslims overthrew the Sassanian Empire, which had an estimated population of 15 million people. Since then, Islam has dominated and converted the vast majority of them and their descendants throughout the following 1,500 years. In other words, the majority of the present people of the Iranian stock are descendants of Zoroastrians. Although Hinduism and Buddhism have evolved mostly outside the direct sphere of Zoroastrianism, they did have good neighborly contacts, and those contacts have had their result.

Religious interactions generally take place in theology, eschatology, and rituals.

Theology shows that human belief in divinity has evolved from polytheism to henotheism to monotheism. A question arises as to which people reached monotheism first. My own opinion, formed after a comparative study, is that monotheism, in its broad sense, was reached by several persons/peoples, in several places, prior to an interaction with others. We know of King Amenhotep IV (1350–1334 BCE), also known as Ikhnaton (Akhenaton). His is a violent example of monotheism in ancient Egypt. Further east, in southern Mesopotamia, we find Semitic henotheism slowly evolving towards monotheism.

Very far from these two sites, and a number of centuries earlier, in northeastern Iran (today's Central Asia), Zarathushtra rose to declare that there is only one Ahura 'Being, Essence' who is the Creator, Maintainer, and Promoter of the Universe. He called his "mentally realized" god Mazdâ, meaning 'Super-Intellect'. He rejected all other gods as the creation of wrong imagination.

These three do not appear to have any connection. Direct contact was established in 539 BCE when Cyrus the Great (559–530 BCE) peacefully entered Babylon, and, contrary to the prevailing custom among Elamites, Hittites, Assyrians, and Babylonians, freed all the captive peoples and helped them rehabilitate themselves. He gave them, including the Jews, full freedom plus funds to return home and rebuild their temples (Ezra 6:8).

I need not go into details of revolution brought in by the Zoroastrian Achaemenians during their 220 years of rule. They, for the first time, founded a primitive type of federation of some 30

¹ Although, it originated in 1700 (Dr Jafarey's estimation) or ~1300 BC (contemporary with the earliest parts of the RgVeda). – CG

nations from India to Libya and from Siberia to the Indian Ocean. They introduced political, social, administrative, and economic reforms. They ordered the codification of local laws and their enforcement. It gave the local people the earliest freedom of managing their own affairs. All in the benevolent spirit of Zoroastrianism.

Keeping in view the newly codified laws, let us turn to the Jews. The construction of the temple that was begun in the time of King Cyrus was completed during the reign of Darius the Great (522–486 BCE). The episode of Esther and Mordecai occurred during the days of Xerxes (486–465 BCE). The commissioning of Ezra the Scribe to administer the codified Jewish law, and the appointment of Nehemiah, the royal cupbearer, as the Governor of Judah was done by Artaxerxes I (464–424 BCE). Nehemiah rebuilt the Jerusalem wall. The enforcement of laws meant a detailed prescription for “do’s and don’ts”. These actions helped the Jews to administer themselves under a unified order promoted by the patronage of the Persians for another 100 years.

The Old Testament is a collection of the books concerning the Jewish people only. Yet we find, for the first and the last time, an alien people praised in them. Cyrus the Great is mentioned as the “shepherd of Lord” and his “anointed (Messiah or Christ)” (Isaiah 44:28, 45:1). The name of Cyrus occurs 23 times, Darius 25 times, Xerxes 30 times, Artaxerxes 15 times, Medes and Media 21 times, Persians and Persian 37 times, and Parthians once. Several sections of the Old Testament are dated to the reigns of the Achaemenian kings.

We see a split in the Jewish community following the Achaemenian period: The Sadducees and Pharisees. The Sadducees of priestly descent regarded the five books of the Torah as the only sacred scriptures. They rejected the oral law. The Pharisees were the educated laymen who often acted as teachers of the Jewish Law and as scribes. They acknowledged both the written law of the five books of the Torah and the oral law later written down as the Mishnah. They believed in the resurrection of the dead, heaven and hell, angels, demons, and the future coming of the Messiah. It is, more or less, the Pharisee phase of Judaism that has survived as the Orthodox Judaism.

In the post-exilic Judaism, God is more universal than being mostly a deity of covenant. The snake, which was cursed to go on its belly, eat dust, bruise humans, and have its head bruised by them, evolved into devils and demons. There is a clearer notion of eschatology and the idea of going to heaven or hell according to one’s good or bad deeds.

All these things were already there in the then evolving and formalizing Zoroastrianism. Ahura Mazda, God of the universe, Anghra Mainyu, his evil adversary, the Amesha Spentas and the yazatas which would translate into Archangels and angels, resurrection, last judgement, heaven, and hell.

Christianity was founded during the Roman era when the Zoroastrian Parthians ruled in Iran, next-door. It later saw the fully formalized version of Zoroastrianism instituted by the Sassanian theocracy for over six centuries. Christianity is more specific about God, the rebel Devil or Satan, the archangels, angels, and eschatology with its paradise, hell and purgatory. For the first time, a date of birth is recorded and celebrated. It is the birth of Christ. Scriptural records show that Zarathushtra is the first human being whose birthday was hailed, and Herodotus writes that the Achaemenians celebrated their birthdays. The birthday celebration is a Zoroastrian tradition. Christ’s birth also reminds one of the Wise Men, the Magi being led by astronomy to pay their

respects to the newborn mothered by a virgin. Virgin birth of the promised savior is a prophecy made in later Zoroastrianism. The presence of three Zoroastrian priests, instead of Jewish sages or Roman elders, is an important sign of the interaction.

Islam was founded when the theocratic Sassanians ruled, and they had their hold around the Arabian Peninsula from the Persian Gulf up to Yemen. Islam is still more elaborate about Godhead, angelology, and eschatology. It has its five-times-a-day prayers patterned on Zoroastrianism. Muslim heads of the theocratic state turned, right after the fourth Caliph, to hereditary succession on the Sassanian pattern. The number of Zoroastrians converted by the Arabs well exceeded their own numbers as well as those of the non-Iranians in the Middle East. Priests and judges appeared the way the Sassanians had their priests and judges. Books on jurisprudence and other religious prescriptions were written, mostly by Iranians. The Quran had, for the first time, its translation and commentary in Persian the way the Zoroastrians had their Avesta with Pahlavi translation and commentary.²

Baha'ism, less than 150 years old, followed Islam, particularly the esoteric Shi'ite school, in a fast-moving, modern world of globalization. Its early Zoroastrian converts have their part played and being played in the interaction.

Let us turn to Hinduism and Buddhism. The two share a common origin in the Indo-Iranian lore. Zarathushtra rose during the Vedic period. He declared his belief in one God and rejected all others recognized by the Indo-Iranian as gods and goddesses. He talked of freedom of choice. He taught clear thinking with an awakened mind which would translate into good thoughts, words and deeds. He introduced a novel way of asking questions that automatically supply the answers. His "answering questions" covered self-realization, social recognition, the living world around us, the universe, and the creating, maintaining, and promoting Master Mind behind all of them.

It is after Zarathushtra's successful mission that there began a growth in independent thinking in the later Vedic period and the following Vedanta age. Allusions were made to the notion that there lay a single source of energetic creation. Popular gods and goddesses gave way to a trinity, the Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva in one deity. Questions and doubts were expressed in open. Differing ideas and views were tolerated. The process of free thinking received a boost.

Still later, a man, Siddhartha Gautama, rose against the ancient lore. He too spoke about mind, its thinking power, and the subsequent awakening—to become a Buddha. He seriously desired, through his Three Jewels of *buddha* ('enlightenment'), *ariya dhamma* ('noble path'), and *ariya sangha* ('noble community') to infuse wisdom, remove misery, and work toward progress—all for the ultimate freedom from physical fetters. This echoes Zarathushtra's *baodha* ('enlightenment'), the Primal Principles of Life, and *airyaman* ('noble fellowship'). Periodically appearing Bodhisattvas, the enlightened, who serve to enlighten others, reminds one of the Gathic Saoshyants ('Benefactors') who appear to lend a leading hand in progress. And finally, Buddhists are awaiting Maitrya just as the traditionalist Zoroastrians have been doing for the last 2,700 years for the coming of Ukhshya-ereta, the first Renovator and Savior.

² The Sassanid Avesta had 235-260 chapters of law codes (roughly 250,000 Avestan words). This was expanded upon by a large number of legal commentators as reflected in the *Shayest ne Shayest* and the *Mādayān ī Hazār Dādestān*. The full size of Sassanid legal material must have been massive. – CG

In return we see the effects of the Semitic religions on Zoroastrianism. (1) Zarathushtra, who searched and realized God and the Divine Principles of Life through his mental search, is made into a “Prophet” sent by God. (2) Early Zoroastrianism celebrated its festivals in combination with earlier festivals based on the agricultural and economic living of the Iranians. They were the six seasonal festival of Gâhânârs. Later, the calendar underwent a change. Its months and days were named after certain divinities in the Egyptian fashion. Fifteen festivals are celebrated on the days when the names of the months and the days coincide. (3) The canonization of the Bible by the Christian authority in the west had the Sassanian priesthood to screen, collate, and canonize the collected writings. (4) Many matters borrowed by other religions are borrowed back with their added colors. These include the incarnated Godhead, angels and demons, and comforts of heaven, tortures in hell, certain pollution and purification rules, spells, and prophecy. (5) Zoroastrians prayed at home or in open enclosures. They learned to build temples for themselves from their western neighbors whom they had helped to rebuild their temples. This stabilized the priestly class in the temple tradition, a centralizing and rewarding tradition.

The interaction has worked well. It has enriched all the participants. It has brought them closer. It should bring them closer still to create a united world fellowship desired by all, particularly the Zarathushtrians.

Based on a speech given “The Festival of Fire, Introduction to the Religion of Zarathushtra” at the Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California on Thursday, February 25, 1999.