

Religion and Tradition

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Belief and Behavior

Religion, as defined by Webster's Dictionary, is, among other things, "any specific system of belief, worship, conduct, etc., often involving a code of ethics and a philosophy; an institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices" and also "a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held with ardor and faith". It is derived from the Latin *religio*, meaning 'reverence', which in turn is derived from *religare*, 'to bind back'. It is, in fact, a bond. Tradition is defined as "the delivery of opinions, doctrines, practices, rites, and customs from generation to generation by oral communication. It is an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (as a religious practice or a social custom)." It is in theology, an unwritten saying, action or a code of laws attributed to the founder and the earlier promoters of a religion. It is derived from the Latin *traditio*, meaning 'action of handing over', from *tradere*, 'to deliver'.

The difference between a religious practice and a social custom is rather a new concept. In ancient times—times, during which most of the existing religions were founded—every social custom was, sooner or later, accepted as a religious practice. Therefore, Religion and Tradition are almost taken to belong to each other, so much so that some would take the two as synonyms. That explains why the zealous are so zealous to maintain traditions as a religious obligation. To them, every tradition is but a religious tenet.

Good Conscience

Turning to the Zarathushtrian religion, the conscientious term, most probably coined and used first by the founder, Zarathushtra, is *Daênâ*. It is derived from the Avestan root *di-* or *dai-* (Sanskrit *dhyai*), meaning to 'see, view, perceive, contemplate, ponder, meditate', with a participle suffix *-nâ-*. *Daênâ* means 'conscience, discernment, insight', and of course, 'religion' with the meaning that it "knowledgeably and consciously" binds in a universal and democratic "mental and material" Fellowship. It is according to Zarathushtra, one's discerning insight that forms one's religion, in fact, rational belief. The Indian term *dhyâna*, focusing of thoughts to comprehend a fact, meditation, is a cognate.¹

But while the Indian *dhyâna* helps an individual to concentrate to promote his or her own individual mental faculty, the Zarathushtrian *Daênâ* unites all those who think, discern, and choose alike in one great fellowship—the religion of Good Conscience, **DAÊNÂ VANGUHI**—founded, preached, and promoted by Zarathushtra. Zarathushtra uses the term *Daênâ* for a total of 26 times in his sublime songs, the Divine Gathas.

The gist of what it stands for in the Gathas: *Daênâ* is thinking and awakening. It goes with one's intellect. It is wisdom and enlightenment. It is proper knowledge. It promotes precision and righteousness. It encourages one to turn to work to make a better life. It grants true happiness. It gives peace and stability. It purifies one's mind; so much so that one engaged in

¹ The Gathic word was probably /dayanâ/ based on metrical considerations, see Beekes' Grammar of Gatha Avestan pg. 1, '8'. – CG

good thoughts, words, and deeds, becomes godlike—creative, maintainer, and promoter of the world one lives in. Zarathushtra says: ‘That religion (Daênâ) is the best for the living, which promotes the world through righteousness, and polishes words and actions in serenity’ (Song 9.10²). Daênâ, or religion, to Zarathushtra is the straight path of truth that takes coordinating people ever forward to improvement in their mental and physical, spiritual and material life until they reach their ultimate goal of Ahura Mazda, God Wise. Daênâ is a conscious forward march to perfection. It is the march of a perfecting life to eternity and divinity.

Inherited Practice

Tradition, on the other hand, is an inherited religious practice or a social custom, which was, in the near or far past, introduced first by certain circumstances and then perpetuated by following generations. An urgent need to meet an exceptional event may linger long, a human experience over a length of time may turn into a custom, a social behavior in face of a particular event may continue, and a practice, born of a belief in an abnormal occurrence or an extraordinary experience, may turn into a tradition with the passage of time. Foreign invasion, conquest, occupation, captivity, slavery, forced labor, forced marriage, and socialization as well inter-religious rivalry also help to introduce, innovate, change, transform, hinder, stop, erase, or kill a tradition. It has many a cause to fall into a firm form. Created, adopted, borrowed, or imposed, once it becomes a tradition, people practicing it develop a kind of attachment to it. That makes them bound to it so much so that sometimes it becomes hard to introduce a change in it, let alone abandon it. In the ancient past, this attachment generally gave the tradition a religious hue, a hue that made it a part and parcel of religion.

Once a part and parcel of religion, the origin of the tradition is, often with a touch of miracle and marvel, attributed to a popular religious celebrity. It is here that all practices concerning various phases of life, from birth through initiation into the society, marriage, parentage, and death take a religious form. Even eating, clothing, waking, walking, working, washing, running, resting, sleeping, and socializing have their religious ways of performing them. Tradition, religious or not, is present in every movement one makes, private, personal or otherwise. It becomes the *prescription* for life. The terms religion and tradition are, as earlier stated, used not only as cognates but also as synonyms.

Widening Gap

A tradition, when originally born, could have been fully justified and useful. But the passing time brings changes into a society. Furthermore, a tradition, however simple in origin, is generally elaborated, supplemented, and even complicated by the following generations practicing it. With the social changes on the one hand and the elaborations on the other, the gap between the practical social life and the complicated, often mute, religious practices widen. In other words, every tradition does not go hand in hand with the changes in society.

There arises a conflict in adhering to the tradition or keeping pace with the changes. The conflict hinders the smooth running of the social order. And if the conflict takes a sad turn, those hotly involved in it hardly think that it is the gap of time between the tradition and the progress made by the society that started the conflict. The conflict divides the society between those in favor of maintaining the tradition and those in favor of a change.

Names are labeled: Orthodox, traditionalist, fundamentalist, puritan, protestant, liberal, reformist, progressive, etc. Some are used in a sarcastic, derogatory, or on the contrary, in a

² Y 44.10

dignified, respectful, or complimentary way. Even disrespectful words and abusive language is used. Those attached to a tradition, which appears to have outdated itself, try their best to justify its continuance. They generally turn to interpretations, which turn an ordinary old custom into a highly symbolized, rather mystified rite. Some go to extremes to show that the practices introduced by ancient “sages” are much more advanced than the present practical changes and therefore are incomprehensible to modern minds. Occult definitions may not confound every intellectual, but they do make many a layman feel too simple to comprehend the transcendental interpretations. Interpretations, particularly by vociferous zealots, work—sometimes with miraculous effects—among the laity.

Preservative Reservation

The zeal shown by the traditionalists is quite understandable. It is religious ardor, rooted religiosity. But what is surprising is that nowadays one comes across persons outside a religious order who favor not only the adherence of traditions by its followers but advocate strict observations of traditional rites even under unfavorable and unpractical circumstances. Scholars of religion, although themselves professing another religion or following their own schools of thought, write treatises and give lectures on the importance of keeping the customs they feel are in danger of extinction. The smaller a community and the older the customs, the more the emphasis on turning the “endangered” community into a closed-door “reservation” in order to help the faithful to preserve and practice their traditional rites.

These scholars would go to great lengths in explaining the highly “symbolic” values of the practices, which they see as being abandoned by younger generations because the youth, rightly or not, consider them outdated and therefore, unwanted. It is odd enough to witness a person, who personally does not believe at all in a doctrine, take quite an interest in indoctrinating the believers in preserving the doctrine. An unconscious faith, a latent belief, a hidden love, an elderly advice, a scholarly sympathy, an anthropological interest, a disparaging intention, a mischievous motive?

Zarathushtra and Tradition

However, this does not mean in the least that every custom or practice outdates itself and therefore, becomes unwanted. Those attached to humanity appear eternal. Worship, festivity, initiation, matrimony, fellowship, hospitality, and other occasions warrant traditional customs. They have their places in a society. And they have their true values.

Zarathushtra uses *Daêna* 26 times but does not mention tradition even once. The reason: That divine foreseer knew well that while *Daêna* is a living truth, tradition is but a custom, always subject to changes under changing circumstances. It is obvious that he wanted the religion to last. Binding it with the customs and practices of his days would have numbered the days of the religion too. He had to choose between the two for the survival of his message. And quite naturally and of course dutifully, he chose to perpetuate his message. This does not mean that he did not favor maintaining useful traditions. His guiding Gathas, alongside other texts in the Gathic dialect composed by his companions and immediate successors as well as other parts of the later Avesta, provide us with good hints on traditions.

Worship to Work

The discovery of igniting and maintaining fire was the prime cause that separated man from other animals and firmly put man on the express road to progress. Fire was, but naturally,

worshipped as a deity by many peoples, including the Aryans. As an altar for worship, many religious orders and cults offered their sacrifices to it. Solid and liquid foods were fed to the fire so as to turn them into smoke and send them upwards for the “beings on high”.

Zarathushtra purified it of all its smoking and seething elements—meat, fat, butter, grain, fruit, and other edible sacrifices. He turned it into a bright blaze (Song 4.19, 15.9)³ so as to face and concentrate his thoughts on Mazda. (The story of him carrying a smokeless fire vase to King Vishtâspa need not be a legend). For him, fire, much more mental than physical, symbolized light, warmth, and energy for a good guidance to steer clear through difficulties to peace and progress in soul and body. (Song 4.4, 7.4, 8.4 9, 11.7, 12.6).⁴

His companions had an open fire enclosure, much as the later Achaemenians did, for congregational prayers where they worshipped only Mazdâ Ahura (Yasna 36). Still later, in an older part of *Âtash Nyâyesh*, we learn that all that the “hearth fire” (called divine) expected as an offering was words of praise, greeting, and triumph—no fuming food. In the Gathas, Zarathushtra prays with his head bowed in homage and hands raised in request to God. He composes fresh songs to adore God and pour his love for Him. He has the brightly burning and warming fire on the altar; sun, moon, and stars in the sky; and water and any other inspiring objects in the beautiful nature around him to face and break into devotional songs to perform his prayers. The Haptanghaiti and other sections of Yasna and the Vispered show, as already said, that congregational prayers were held in communal enclosures and the Gathas of Zarathushtra and the supplement songs composed by his companions were sung in solemn company.

The Iranian Plateau, situated between 25 and 55 latitudes north of the equator, had and still has all four seasons. As farmers and cattle raisers, the Iranians had their agricultural seasons—six to be exact. They celebrated the end of each season. The Vispered shows that the early Zarathushtrians—most probably since the days of Zarathushtra—turned the six festivals into thanksgiving occasions. They are, what we call, the *Gâhânbârs*, each lasting for five days. The thanksgiving ceremony was performed by singing the five Gathas, and studying and explaining them, most probably one Gatha per day. A feast, collectively arranged and prepared, followed to every one’s delight. Worship and work, work and worship, the two went well together.

Serence Ceremonies

Initiation or *Navjote* is another tradition kept alive and lively by Zarathushtra. He speaks about it as the great event of decision (Song 3.2)⁵, and mentions the initiations of King Vishtâspa, Ferashaushtra, Jamâspa, and his own cousin Maidyoi-maha. (Song 11.14 15, 14.9, 16.16-19).⁶ His companions have an initiation ceremony in their fire enclosure and call it the greatest event (Yasna 36). The Fravarti (Yasna 11.17 to 12.9) provides a vivid description of early initiation of adults into the Good Religion. The Nirangistân supplies us with more information on Navjote, koshti, and sadreh (Book III, Chapters 1 6). The Initiation ceremony’s “Choice of Religion” formula—*Mazdayasno ahmi...* and other pieces in the Gathic dialect—supply the core of the koshti prayers.

The marriage of Pouruchista, Zarathushtra’s youngest daughter, forms a touching scene and a future marriage guide in the Gatha *Vahishta Ishti*. The tradition of having marriages

³ Y 31.19, 51.9

⁴ Y 31.3, 34.4, 43.4 9, 46.7, 47.6

⁵ Y 30.2

⁶ Y 46.14 15, 49.9, 51.16 19

solemnized in the language spoken by the bride and the bridegroom (as long as Persian remained the common language of the population in Iranian and Indian regions), shows that it beautifully changed its languages from the Gathic dialect of 3700 years ago to Neo Persian almost 200 years ago. Today it is again because of tradition that marriages are performed in an archaic, unintelligible language, although some do augment it with a translation in the language the marrying couple and the audience understands.

The birth of a child is hailed in the Avesta, but no rite is mentioned. However, the Farvardin Yasht shows that Zarathushtra's birth anniversary was eulogized for celebration (stanzas 93–94). Greek historian Herodotus speaks of Persians celebrating their birthdays at a time when other nations are not reported to do so, a sign that birthday celebration is an Iranian innovation and a contribution to world festivity. The names given to early new Zarathushtrians-by-Choice and their children—Paourutkaesha and Nabânazdishta—in the Farvardin Yasht have none of the old deities, not even those who later emerged as Yazatas, attached to them. This significant point reveals that good care was taken to rename newcomers and name children in the spirit of the dynamic message of Zarathushtra void of older traditions. At the same time, it shows that there was a birth and naming ceremony.

Zarathushtra introduced the practice of eulogizing people during their lifetime and after their death. He venerates them by mentioning their names and by “lovingly encircling them” (Song 16.22).⁷ The remembrance of the good is echoed in the *Yenghe Hatam* prayer in which respects are paid to men and women for their righteous services. The Farvardin Yasht is an outstanding tribute to the memory of those who chose and served the Good Religion in its initial stages, from Zarathushtra and companions to three or more generations after. The Gathas and supplements do not mention any funeral rites but pay full respects to the memory of the departed. It is the memorial service that they *emphasize* and not the method of disposal of the dead body.

All these and yet we do not see the Gathas prescribe: “What to eat and what to reject. What to wear and what to tear. What to build and what to burn. What pollutes and what cleans. How to wash and how to dry. When to work and when to retire. When to celebrate and when to mourn. What is the disease and what the cure. What the dead and what the corpse...”

Was Zarathushtra unconcerned with the daily life? No, never! Could he not prescribe in detail all walks of life? Could he not put taboos? Of course, he could. But he lived a physical life of his age—almost 4,000 years ago. He divinely knew well the changing world. Any prescription on daily living would grow old and out-of-date, and if it became a tradition to be adhered to, it would prove an obstruction. Zarathushtra believed in a continuous and constant renovation of life. He says: “May we be among those who make this life fresh! You lords of wisdom, and you, who bring happiness through righteousness, come let us be single-minded in the realm of inner intellect” (Song 3.9).⁸ He has left the job to the “lords of wisdom” of every age to unite in mind through righteousness and inner intelligence and continue refreshing and renovating the life on earth. Time does not stop, why should “social life” stop and stagnate.

Gaining to Last

Thus we see that all the good traditions were kept by the earliest of Zarathushtrians. Some were simplified, some streamlined, and some changed to suit the new spirit. It was only the magical, superstitious, superficial, superfluous, intoxicating, and bloody rituals performed in

⁷ Y 51.22

⁸ Y 30.9

the names of gods and goddesses, which were totally renounced and discarded (Yasna 12). Later, as always has been the case, all the ceremonies, performed by the early generations and many more introduced by following generations, were elaborated. Institutionalization of a practice constitutes a part of the process of a tradition. In fact, traditions are maintained by their institutionalized forms.

Nevertheless, Daênâ as religion has its own place in the Gathas. It is the guiding insight to a progressing life. While the sublime songs mention worship with a bowed head and raised hands, and a blazing fire, and allude to initiation, marriage, and memorial ceremonies, other Avestan texts describe various rituals maintained as tradition in the forms given to them by the Good Religion during the early Avestan period. The difference between the eternal principles of Daênâ and the temporal customs of tradition are evident. In no place in the Avesta, rituals and other practices have been termed as the “principles” of the religion. **Traditions live and leave, practices veer and vary, and rituals wax and wane, but Daênâ, the religion of insight, the rational belief, lasts and lasts—“ever gaining, ever winning”.**
