

## **Zoroastrian ethics and Culture**

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Ethics, the dictionary defines, “is the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation.” It adds: “ethics has been called the science of the ideal of human character.” The second definition reads: “The principles of conduct governing an individual or group.”

A deeper study takes us to the gigantic tree of philosophy, and there we see it as a branch of normative science as distinguished from the formal sciences. History of thought in the so-called Western civilization begins with Greece. So, the earliest signs of ethics begin in the 5th century BCE. Since then, we have the Greek schools of ethics, early Christian ethics, ethics after the Reformation, ethics since Darwinism, and the recent trend, since Bertrand Russell, is that ethics should mean complete participation in the life of society with the freedom to express one's nature.

As to what is good and what is bad, each school of ethics has its own definition, from cynicism to existentialism. And we have lists of prescriptions and proscriptions, do's and don'ts, prepared by each school. From the Doctrines of Pythagoras to the Bible and Qur'an to the published writings of George Edward Moore, we have books that run several hundred pages each. And it has been these prescriptions and proscriptions of ethics that have shaped and reshaped the culture/s the Western civilization cultivates.

Keeping in mind this process, detailed above, which has taken place over 2500 years, we now turn to Zoroaster, or to pronounce his name in his language, Zarathushtra, to see if he had anything that would fit with the variety in this wide field. He precedes the accepted date which is the start of ethics. He lived 3770 years ago. He is not from the West. He lived his entire life in eastern Iran. What did he say and how much did he say? He lived before the age of writing. Are his sayings retold by his disciples or narrated as a part of his life story by a third party well after him, and then later put in writing?

This brings us to the Indo-Europeans, particularly the Indo-Iranians. They had their own way of preserving their literary compositions: Poetry, a precise practice of preservation. A song becomes popular, is precisely sung in the words and tune of the composer, and lives as long as its singers live and like it. No paraphrasing, adulteration, no third-party narration, only the very words of the poet.

Zoroaster, like his contemporary Rigvedic rishis, composed songs that have survived in his very words to this day. The same holds true about volumes and volumes of Indo-Iranian poetic literature. They are the proof of the capacity of human memory. We had a Professor of Persian Literature in the Tehran University who had over 70,000 couplets in his memory. One thousand to 20,000 couplets are a common thing in the memories of literature teachers in the Indo-Iranian countries.

How many couplets did Zarathushtra compose to preserve his Doctrine? Only 241 stanzas that make 17 songs! They are *Gâthâ*, meaning “Sublime Songs”. Here is the booklet of some 40 pages. Too small to hold a Doctrine! Let us see if our remark is true.

A quick glance shows that it has 93 answering questions,<sup>1</sup> a masterpiece of poetry that makes the questions provide their own answers and moreover, provoke thoughts. The songs define what is good and what is bad, and at the same time speak of the full freedom-of-will required to make the choice. Learning wisdom helps to make the right choice. Ignorance keeps one in dark. Good brings better returns and bad results in bad consequences. Experience makes one grow wiser, a process that helps every individual to ultimately make the right choice. The good choice leads to perfection, and perfection knows no defect, decay, or death. It means eternity. They explain the establishment of a free democratic way of life by the wise and for the wise. And the songs guide one to study his/herself, society, the environment, and the universe to realize, through his/her good mind, the wisdom that creates, regulates, maintains and promotes the Cosmos. That wisdom, a reality, an essence, is the Creator, Maintainer, and Promoter of the Universe. Zarathushtra coins a name for IT. *Mazdâ*, which means Super-wisdom, and, since it is a reality, it is also Ahura, ‘the Essence, the Being’. He uses two words to describe what we call ‘God’: *Mazdâ Ahura* or *Ahura Mazdâ* – The Super-wisdom Essence.

With Mazda Ahura in mind, the songs become simultaneously loving Prayers to God and kindly Guidance to Mankind. Naturally they have no myth, no magic, no miracle, no legend, and no story to tell. Just a prayerful guidance.

Zarathushtra uses some twenty abstract terms to prescribe the way of promoting mental and physical faculties of soul to achieve perfection and immortality. He calls them “the Primal Principles of life”. They are the universal principles of existence, the natural way of living. They, at the same time, make the faculties that have been endowed to mankind.

Of these *asha*, ‘righteousness, the universal law of precision’, is mentioned more than 150 times, and *merzhdika*, ‘compassion’, only once. We shall only briefly define those mentioned most in the Gathas:

Spenta Mainyu, the ‘progressive mentality’, stands for the creative faculty of God. It creates, sustains, and promotes the creation. It leads to perfection and immortality. It makes mankind to be creative, maintainer and promoter of society and the environment.

Vohu manah, the ‘good mind’, is the source of all that is good and wise. It was through his own good mind that Zarathushtra discovered, understood, and reached God. Good mind leads to refined speech, which, in turn, turns into noble actions. Zarathushtra’s doctrine rests on three pillars—*Humata*, *Hûkhta*, *Hvarshata*: ‘Good thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds’. Good mind helps one to discriminate between good and bad. It defines the sources of happiness and sorrow. In fact, it is the bliss some call “heaven”. Two other cognate abstracts are *khratu*, ‘intellect’, and *chisti*, ‘comprehension’, which enhance one’s knowledge for better work.

Asha or arta is the old Indo-Iranian law of ‘truth, precision, righteousness’ that governs the universe—the stars, sun, moon, earth, seasons, and all. It is precision and order in the universe that points to the Creator, Maintainer, and Promoter. It has been enacted to maintain creation. It is the road to perfection. In human society, *asha* is the right thing, done at the right time and right

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<sup>1</sup> That is, rhetorical questions.

place, and with the right means to obtain the right result. This promotes a society to perfection. It ensures justice for all. It safeguards the rights of every member of society. It provides every individual with what he or she has contributed to society. Asha in a society sees that neither the society nor any individual exploits any person. And, above all, asha gives freedom of thought, word, and deed to every individual.

Seraosha is the divine voice one gets in tune with after one is fully conversant with good mind and righteousness. It is the guiding inner self of a person. It is divine inspiration.

Âthra, ‘fire’ in the Gathas is mental light, warmth, and energy, three qualities that help one become as creative as one can. The physical fire, used as the best of altars, represents the mental âthra, a sublime object to observe and mentally to see the light, feel the warmth, and enjoy the energy to translate Good Thoughts into Good Words and Good Deeds.

Ushtâ is ‘enlightenment’ that comes through meditation, the concentration of mental faculties. It is the true happiness that radiates happiness to others without any discrimination, social or otherwise.

Daênâ is ‘clear conception’. It is “conscience” in an individual and “religion” for a fellowship of individuals who actively join to promote the living world in accordance with the Primal Principles of Existence.

Good mind and precision, along with other principles, create perfect order. Zarathushtra calls this *khshathra*. It means ‘settlement, dwelling, domain, dominion, and sovereignty’. It is the “desired”, the “good”, and the “chosen” government of the righteous, yet it belongs to God. It is the “ideal” order on the earth established by human beings who are wise, enlightened, experienced, sincere, and above all devoted to the promotion of the living world. It is mental and material, spiritual and physical democracy.

Frasho-kereti, ‘continuous refreshing, renewing and modernizing’, keeps the good order up-to-date, in fact up-to-minute. Progress, progress, progress! A Zoroastrian pledges to modernize the world in his/her daily prayers.

Âramaiti, ‘serenity’ and ‘tranquility’, thrives under a good, progressive order. A serene order promotes health and happiness. Mind and body grow together to evolve into:

Haurvatât, ‘entirety, perfection’. Evolution to entirety means continuity, and continuity stands for immortality—Ameretât. Perfection and immortality make human beings godlike and make them live in eternal bliss, the ultimate goal of the Zarathushtrian doctrine.

Zarathushtra uses more principles among such abstract qualities that could help mankind make the world an ideal place to live in peace and harmony with every living being and to achieve the divine eternity ordained by God.

It is these Primal Principles that make up his ethics. They make a guiding map for the wise to reach the destination. And a map need not run into hundreds of pages of prescriptions and proscriptions. Forty pocketbook pages of Seventeen Songs suffice to make a good traveler to undertake the journey and reach the destination safe and sound.

The Seventeen Songs are a map that guides the traveler to reflect. The Zoroastrian Doctrine of ethics is reflective, not prescriptive. Its seventeen songs provoke one’s thinking faculty to think,

to ponder, to consider, and to decide on the basis of time, place, and means. Yes, it is reflective, renovative, and inventive. That makes it ever fresh, ever modern. Prescriptions and proscriptions would, and do, fall behind and get outdated.

There arises a question, then. What is good, and what is bad?

## **GOOD AND EVIL**

Because of all the suffering that happens in this seemingly hostile world of natural disasters and human cruelties, the existence of “evil” has all along posed as a most perplexing problem. Intellectuals of all ages and lands have tried to solve it, and most have acknowledged it as a stubborn fact of life.

People’s attitude towards evil ranges from optimism to pessimism, cynicism to skepticism. There are those who do not believe in evil and state that it does not exist; those who argue that just as darkness is nothing but the absence of light, evil darkens where good does not shine. There are those who say that one cannot fight evil and therefore should submit to it; those who want to escape evil and retire from the world, leaving behind all human wishes and desires. Then there are those who acknowledge the shortcomings of life and seek to overcome them by facing them head on. People necessarily do not strictly belong to one of these broad classifications. Many share a little of each theory and have mixed philosophies, or otherwise express different ideas at different times.

People are divided again on the source of evil. There are some who believe in a strict patriarchal, or matriarchal, divinity/divinities and, as such, see suffering as punishments for wrong deeds. Likewise, some think that just as there are good and bad chiefs and kings, there are good and evil entities which dispense of happiness or misery. Moreover, there are those who believe that the gods have created human beings as their toys and enjoy playing around with them. Some also believe in a rebel antagonist, or divinity, who causes all suffering. Similarly, there are who are dualists and maintain that both good and evil are primal and co-existing. Those who see the two as positive and negative poles that meet to create energy and existence. Those who see the world as imperfect or in its infancy, and that its sufferings are the experiences toward perfection. All have their logic, philosophy, stories, legends, or myths to elaborate. Many believe that evil exists in the universe and many confine it, some in vague terms, to the human world.

Zarathushtra observes the universe as a good creation of God and sees no evil in it. It is a cosmos—an orderly harmonious system. However, there are indications that he sees the universe in its infancy, complete in its core but growing to perfection and immortality.

As regards good and evil, he confines both to the human mind, not outside, not in the cosmos. Man thinks and thinks constantly. His thoughts are good or bad, beneficial or harmful. When translated in speech or action, they yield the result—good or bad.

The two represent the duality only in the human mind and only within the human society. The dualism in the Gathas is pure ethical in nature.

The criterion for “better” or “more progressive” thought, word, and deed is the beneficial effect on the human society in particular and the world in general. If not, it is “bad” or “regressive”.

## THE HUMAN SOCIETY

The Gathic dualism lies only in *asha*, “right, precision, righteousness” and *druj*, “harmful, wrong”. The human world is divided into two camps: the ‘righteous’—truthful and progressive—and the ‘wrongful’—regressive and destructive. The Gathas advocate a free, peaceful, prudent, and progressive society, both in spirit and matter. Spirituality makes people realize the divine in creation and conceive the force and order—the wisdom—behind it. It makes them conceive God. It inspires them to commune with God and learn to be godlike. Materiality makes people understand their social environment and the living world. It teaches them the philosophy of living and letting others live, and of living in harmony with nature.

Only responsible men and women make up the Gathic society. Careless and parasitic people have no place in it. A person, be he or she wise, naive, strong, or weak, has his or her responsibilities in society. Zarathushtra stands for freedom of thought, word, and deed, and stands against suppression and exploitation. He condemns all the “wrong done by evil power, deeds, words, conception, and mind.” He repeatedly reminds people that good has a good reward, and bad has a bad consequence. And to be good is to be selflessly good.

In a true Zarathushtrian society, all are free to work for a better world without harming others. Every person receives in reward what one does in renovating human life. Every task is undertaken by fully qualified persons; the better the qualifications, the higher the position. Society is led by the very wise. Men and women are equal, and their superiority lies in their wisdom and righteousness. Race, color, class, and nationalism have no place in it. The smallest unit in the society is the family, then the community, next the country, the fellowship, and last the world. The Zoroastrian society is global.

## HEAVEN AND HELL

Zarathushtra speaks very little about a world from which no one has returned to tell us the tale. He never indulges in speculations. He does not thrive on speculations, but on conclusions from what one discovers and understands. He mentions certain terms, which give one an idea of a higher, more sublime spiritual life. They are the “House of Song”, “House of Good Mind”, and the “Eternal Best Existence of Good Mind”. Only once, he uses the term “future existence”. It is where one lives with God. The language is so that one understands that such a sublime state is both mental and physical in this world, but only mental when the soul attains its perfection and immortality.

But if a person lives a life of “harmfulness, wrong” in a human society, promotes an evil and deceitful government, sows seeds of discord among people, disregards social rules and regulations, and takes pleasure in harming the living world, he or she suffers the consequences of his or her actions and teachings, and remains in the “House of Wrong”. He singles out bad rulers and evil priests as the foremost among such persons. Another term for this is the “House of the Worst Mind”. The soul of a wrongful person returns from the “sorting bridge” back into the world of deceit. This bridge separates the righteous from the wrongful. And so the righteous progress, but the wrongful remain in the world to perfect themselves. Does this mean reincarnation or that the soul lingers on without a physical body until it is perfected? Perhaps, but only a thought-provoking hint without any speculations.

This does not mean that there is no salvation for the wrongful. Their souls suffer the consequences of their words and deeds until they realize the divine truth and choose to turn righteous, to work for their own perfection and immortality. This life is but a refinery in which the souls are refined to perfection. To sum things up, the pristine doctrine of Zarathushtra's "heaven and hell" is more of a mental bliss and torment than the two physical places reserved for ultimate sensual enjoyment or suffering.

The resurrection with all its details of how the dead would rise for the final judgment is again absent in the Gathas. The consequences of people's words and deeds in this world and the progress toward perfection and immortality are a continuous process. There are no pauses, no waiting.

God's creation moves forward and we, souls and bodies, are a part of it.

### **The First Missionary Religion:**

Zarathushtra is the foremost in founding a universal religion. He taught people to learn, consider, and choose his Divine Doctrine first to practice and then teach and preach to others—all with a "sweet tongue" and with logic. He trained the first missionaries. Yet we have no reports at all of force, push, dictation, insistence, persuasion, or temptation. The teaching was free and the listening free. "Hear the best with your ears, ponder over it with your bright mind and then, each of you, man and woman, decide for yourself to choose or not" was the maxim.

Through the history of one thousand years of Zoroastrian supremacy, we have not a single report of any religious war. No religious war with the Roman Empire and no religious war with the Christian Byzantine Empire. Religious wars between nations of different religions are only 1500 years old.

### **THE CULTURE:**

It is with these guiding ethics that the Zoroastrian Doctrine cultivated a culture, a culture that was based on knowledge, order, participation, cooperation, federation, alliance, and devotion. We see it in bloom when Cyrus the Great (550–529 BCE) united the ever-fighting nations of Afro-Eurasia into the first so-called empire. We see the comparatively peaceful occupation of lands with no enslavement and destruction followed. We see the captive nations freed and fully rehabilitated. We see freedom of worship, ownership, settlement, trade, travel, and above all, tolerance. We see transcontinental highways. We see what we know as a postal service, akin to the "Pony Express". And we see monetary coins and standard weights that facilitate commerce.

This spread unprecedented peace and prosperity over a vast area that had been wasted by wars. It brought many nations once distant so close to one another that they began exchanging their knowledge and culture. From "a" the Armenians to "t" the Thracians,<sup>2</sup> all in all 26 nations pooled their skills to promote from "a" of architecture to "z" of zoology. And it was during these days, the Achaemenian era of 220 years, during which we see knowledge advanced with rapid steps. Science boomed, and it bloomed forth. We have the Greek philosophers appear and nearly disappear with the downfall of the empire at the hand of Alexander of Macedonia.

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<sup>2</sup> There is also the 'z' in Zrangiana, the Old Persian name for Drangiana (the Greek name), or Sistan in the modern day.

The Macedonian occupation did not crush or change the situation. It divided the federation into a number of camps. Yet the urge of unity put an end of the division within a century. But the Zoroastrian unity of globalization was not restored. The world split into the Roman Empire in the west and the Parthian in the east. Parthians as Zoroastrians showed tolerance towards all other nations and religions.

The Zoroastrian ethics and Culture should be acknowledged as the jumpstart of the civilization we all enjoy in the East and the West. Let me end by reciting a sentence from our daily prayers:

“And may we be among those  
who make this life fresh!  
You, lords of wisdom,  
who bring happiness through righteousness,  
come, let us be single-minded  
in the realm of inner intellect.”<sup>3</sup>

Let the Zoroastrian ethics and Culture continue to contribute to the harmony among nations and religions!

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<sup>3</sup> Yasna 30.8