

An Interview with Dr. Khosro Khazai Founder of the "European Center for Zoroastrian Studies"



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Greetings Dr. Khazai! On behalf of California Zoroastrian Center's Chehrenama publication, I thank you for accepting this interview.

Thank you for having this interview with me.

Please tell us about your personal background and when you learned about Zarathushtra's message.

I first learned about Zarathushtra's message during my university years. I studied archaeology, history of civilizations and linguistics. After receiving my PhD in 1978 from Brussels and Ghent universities in Belgium, I started to work at Pahlavi University in Shiraz (Iran) as an assistant professor when Dr. Farhang Mehr was the president of the university. At that time everything I used to teach about Zoroastrian religion and existential philosophy strictly conformed to the traditional academic methodology. I taught what I had learned in the European universities, that means, a historical approach about ancient times. After the Islamic revolution in 1979 which took place only a few months after I had joined the university, I resigned and returned to Europe continuing my teaching and research career in the European universities. Normally Zoroastrianism is taught in the linguistics and history of religions departments. Moreover, it is taught as an antiquated and old tradition rather than a living and current religion. After a while, I naturally started to think that Zoroastrianism, with all of its inherent wisdom and great power, should not remain in the old times and we must bring it out of the "prison of the past" into the present times. We should learn about its existing and living force and apply it in our daily lives. Therefore I started to do more research which took over two years. During

these years, that means from 1989 to 1992, I wrote two books about my experience which were quite different from the other six books that I had previously written using academic approach.

One of these two books written in Persian is titled "*The Book of Existence (Hasti Nameh); A trip into the Zoroastrian Existential Philosophy for Self-Knowledge, Self-Liberation and Self-Creation*" published in 1989 in Paris. The other book written in French, is called "*The Wayfarers of Arta; Zarathustra and I*", published in 1991 in Brussels. The first editions of both of these books, despite their large number of printed copies, were soon sold out and quickly became out of print. Following the publication of these two books I received, unexpectedly, about one thousand five hundred letters! Both from the Iranian and the French readers. Among these letters there was one, particularly attractive, from a French lady containing 220 pages! That means it had as much pages as the book of "*The Wayfarers of Arta*"! The author of this letter was born a Christian, but not satisfied with her religion, she explains through her long letter and in detail, her rout of many years through other existential philosophies such as Buddhism, Taoism and Atheism. Not yet satisfied she writes in her letter. "*And now, I am convinced that the Zarathustra's Thought and Ideas, in short the system he set up and through which he saw and interpret the world and existence, are absolutely the only one that can lead to happiness in life and spread peace in the world...*" And she goes on "*to keep this doctrine in dark and not make it known to other people and not spread it to the whole world is a an unforgivable betrayal towards the humanity...*"

"*The Wayfarers of Arta*" or in French, "*Les Voyageurs d'Arta*" [asha], written in a very poetic style, is about a philosophy professor who experiences a tragic personal event and finds out that to him his life has no meaning anymore. He also realizes that all the philosophy lessons that he had learned and taught others were of no help to him. So he decides to take off for two years in search of a remedy for his problem. During these years, he experiences many things but does not find a cure for his pain. He travels from one country to another, from one sage to another, from one temple to another but without result. One day at a library and under great despair while he was flipping through various books, he comes across a very old book with yellow pages which was written by someone who had lived thousands of years ago. The author of this book was Zarathushtra. He realizes that the author of the book, thousands of years ago, had asked himself questions similar to those that he was asking himself in the end of twentieth century. In other words, Zarathushtra's questions were still fresh with no dust of history on them. The only difference was that Zarathushtra had found precise answers to his questions. After months of disbelief, he finally decided to try Zarathushtra's philosophy on himself and to live it. He felt that Zarathushtra's teachings had a power that is not just applicable to the past, present or future but to all times. In 200

pages of this book, I explain as it goes along, the various evolutionary steps and experiences that this man goes through until he, step by step, finds a new view point on his life with a new interpretation of the events that happened to him. Thus he sees himself as a new person with a new perspective, in other words he had re-created himself anew.

The story of the book is close to my own personal experience in my knowledge of Zarathushtra. This book written in the first person compares two schools of thought: The first one is the current western culture in which people are like pawns living involuntarily under a powerful and abstract system and can not live without anti-depression drugs. The other one is the culture developed out of Zarathushtra's thoughts which is based on righteousness, serenity, peace, love and respect for life and all the components of this earth and universe in its entirety. Every one can experience them directly and see the result by her or himself. This book was one of the factors that the University of Sydney in Australia offered me in 1995 a teaching position in "Zoroastrian Studies". When I started to work there I began to teach Zoroastrianism not according to the popular typical dry, bookish and conventional academic format, generally designed for the end of the year exams, but based on a living experience with a dynamic methodology.

When did the European Center for Zoroastrian Studies start its work and what are its objectives? What publications does it have?

The Center was founded twenty seven years ago but its formal activity started after we obtained a building to house the center. Today the Center is located at the heart of Brussels and one of the best touristy areas of the city. Every year over six million people pass by the Center and see the golden Fravahar, our poster and list of our programs at the entrance door.

The purpose of this center is to familiarize Iranians and Europeans to Zarathushtra's existential philosophy and doctrine. Officially we are defined as "*Cultural, Secular and Free-Thinking Organization*". In order to achieve our aim, we have various lectures, seminars and discussion meetings and organize the Zoroastrian festivities. In November 2004, our center organized "the 7th International Congress of Zoroastrianism and Persian Culture" in which 67 speakers from 23 countries attended. The full report of this important congress that lasted a week can be found on our website

www.gatha.org. This site has information in English, French and particularly in Persian, containing our articles about Zoroastrianism and has a lot of visitors from Iran. Our other website is, www.Iranian.be, which is managed by one of our valuable friends, Mr. Azad Aghvami, contains news and political events and is visited over 16,000 times a day.

We also have a monthly publication called "Letter of the Month" (Nameh-e Mah in Persian). Every month we mail 650 copies to our subscribers and 300 copies, free of charge, to our friends in Belgium who visit us at the Center. We spend every month over \$1000 on postage stamps. The Center also attempts to find, translate and publish non-publicized articles

such as. the important lecture of the great bishop of Austria, Franz Konig, who discussed in 1974 the influences of Zarathushtra's global vision on Christianity and the world. It was the very first time that such a high personality in Christian world spoke with great knowledge and especially courage on the influence of Zarathushtra on Christianity.

On the other hand the Center published in July 2006 the new version of "The Gathas; the Sublime Book of Zarathushtra" (in Persian), researched and translated by me. It took me about five years of research and translation to finish this book. Five months later it was translated from Persian into English. I am grateful to *Dr. Parviz Koupai, the vice president of "Zoroastrian Assembly, to Mrs. Havovi Patel and to Mrs. Sheila Sylvester* for working on this translation.

To what extent are Iranians and Europeans interested in Zarathushtra's message?

We currently have 537 members called "Hamvand" who have obtained special identification card from the Center. About 60% of them are Iranian and 40% European. The Center's Iranian members are mostly young and 20-45 years old. The European members are 40 years and older and therefore the average age is much higher than that of the Iranian members. The European members reserve seats for all of our lectures and seminars, held every 3-4 months well in advance and show a lot of interest and participation. The Iranian members also attend these gatherings. However, they are less disciplined than the European members. The Iranians do all the various tasks at the Center and help us a lot.

How many Iranians contact your office, on a monthly basis, to learn about Zarathushtra's message?

We have 500-600 letters from Iran alone every month. Every day an Iranian or European calls the Center to get information about Zarathushtra's message or details and date of their "Sedreh pooshi". Participation of all of our members in our seminars held every 3-4 months and each time for 2-3 hours, is mandatory. If our members miss two consecutive seminars without an acceptable excuse, they lose their membership status.

In your opinion, why do Iranians show so much interest in the message of Zarathushtra? Is this due to political reasons?

As far as our center is concerned and to the extent that I am aware of, after the Islamic revolution tens of thousands of Iranians came to the small country of Belgium in three waves. Only in the year 2000, close to 40,000 Iranians took refugee status in Belgium. The reason they chose Belgium was that the larger neighboring countries such as France, Germany and England refused to let them into their countries. Iranians had learned that the Belgian government not only accepted

refugees but also would provide them financial help and permission to work.

Iranians soon learned that the Europeans opinion about the Muslim nations are very negative. They had learned about our center in Brussels. At first they joined us and performed various duties and tasks only to demonstrate their identity and show to the world that they are not so dependent on the religion they are identified with. Perhaps at first, having a new identity and being respected was the most important factor, but as they continued to participate in the meetings and lectures and were not afraid of things they used to be since their childhood, most of them became interested and wanted to become a *hamvand* (member) and a large number of them went through Sedreh Pooshi as well.

I believe, to the Iranians, this move has more to do with establishing an identity rather than a political reaction. Iranians want to go back to their own traditions, to those of their ancestors. Because this change increased just after the Islamic revolution, it may be interpreted as being political in nature. It is because of this reason that the Islamic Republic of Iran is far more sensitive to the Iranians interest to Zoroastrianism than their attraction to any political ideology. However, as far as we have observed, the Iranians interest in Zoroastrianism does not appear to be the result of a political reaction. We have always said that this is something of purely cultural nature and has nothing to do with politics. I should mention that the flag of our center is red, yellow and purple symbolizing Derafsh-e Kaviani, symbolic of the true Iranian identity and the Persian flag until the end of Sassanian era. We always use this flag in various ceremonies at the Center.

How many of those who become knowledgeable of Zoroastrian tradition would become and possibly stay Zoroastrian?

Those who have joined Zoroastrianism and gone through Sedreh Pooshi have all kept it and I do not know of anyone of them who wants to get out of the religion. This is because they chose it at their own free will and find in it all they expect from a progressive and mind-based religion. These people make a lot of effort to go through Sedreh Pooshi on their own. Some of them drive over 1500 miles, from far away borders of the North of Germany, or the Netherlands or France for only a 30 minute ceremony and go back to their homes immediately after that.

How well are the Europeans and Christians familiar with Zoroastrianism?

Most Europeans are familiar with the name Zarathushtra since it is intertwined for the last 2500 years with their cultures. Last year, two great opera performances were shown in France, Belgium and Switzerland in various cities like Paris, Brussels, Geneva and Lausanne. Even though tickets to the shows were 80 Euros (about 100 USD), all shows were sold out over three months in advance. The first opera had a ballet group 65

dancers and demonstrated a great work by the famous choreographer, Bejart and truly showed a picture of Zarathushtra that was really universal. When they showed Zarathushtra worshipping in the fire temple and in the background a beautiful music in the homayoon dastgah (one of the traditional Iranian music systems), everyone was truly touched. Thousands of people watched this show. The second show was on screen several months ago and therefore since all the tickets been sold out soon, I did not get a chance to see it but I had heard that it was also really good. A third one entitled “Zoroaster” was staged in Stockholm in Sweden, also last year, after the famous opera created by the great French composer of the 19th century Jean-Philippe Rameau. I saw it on television. It was fantastic.

This familiarity and bond between Europe and Zarathushtra dates back not only to the recent times but to that of Pythagoras until today. During the time of the European Renaissance, everyone was talking about Zarathushtra. All of the European writers who ever wrote about him spoke only highly of him. The only movement against Zarathushtra was from Christianity, since it saw Zoroastrianism as its most significant rival. Since the European Renaissance until the twentieth century, most of those who wanted to separate Christianity from the government used the name of Zarathushtra as a means to achieve their own objectives. Therefore Zarathushtra appears not only in the school text books but also frequently in European literature. The big names such as Voltaire, Grimm Didérot, Goethe, Von Kleist, Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Nietzsche and many others spread Zarathushtra’s name among European intellectuals in a very positive way. The great musicians also such as Rameau who created his opera named “Zoroastre”, Mozart in his “Magic Flute” and Richard Strauss in his symphony “Thus Spake Zarathustra” had their important share in the Zarathushtra’s fame in modern Europe. However, general public do not view Zarathushtra in the same way we do. They are forced to learn about Zarathushtra through books written only by European specialists, mostly linguists, knowing nothing or almost about Zoroastrian spirituality nor message.. Unfortunately some of these books provide even misinformation, confusing Zarathushtra’s message in the Gathas with some parts of the younger Avesta that have nothing to do with the teaching of this Great Instructor. Even the Gathas that has been translated is translated very poorly. Unfortunately we, the Iranians, due to the lack of confidence in ourselves, seem to think these are good translations which is not true. The purpose of the translations by the European writers as I said has been mainly for the sake of linguistics and their desire to learn about the roots of various words or origins of their philosophy. They were not interested in understanding Zarathushtra’s message the way it really is. Europeans view of Zarathushtra stems from these types of books and to them he is only the subject of conversation among the intellectuals around a table. In our center we try to give the information that are based on the Gathas, or the parts of the Avesta that are

in tune with the Sublime Songs. As they gain more and better understanding about him these days, they seem to become more attracted to Zoroastrianism. That is why we strongly need to have easy-to-read and simple-to-understand translations of the book of Gathas accessible to Europeans. We should no longer imprison ourselves in complex and difficult words. Our primary goal should be to promote this tradition among people in a simple form and language.

What is the most attractive aspect of Zoroastrianism to Europeans?

Europeans interest in Zoroastrianism lies in the fact that this tradition is very progressive and mind-oriented. The basic rights of humans such as freedom of choice, equality of men and women, righteousness, friendship and pursuit of individual happiness are highly respected.

What are the recent events about Zoroastrianism in Europe?

We have had two movements. One of them was political and the other academic. There are some Europeans who know Zarathushtra well and believe that he is European and not Iranian. They claim, through their writings, that Zarathushtra came from Aryan tribes and during migration of these tribes by Siberia and the Black Sea, Zarathushtra died before reaching Iran. This is a political move in which Europeans want to portray him as one of their own people.

Another movement has developed in Europe (led by the great French specialist of Zarathustra late Paul du Breuil) which says that the foundation of Christianity lies in Zoroastrianism and if we want to make any adjustments to Christianity, we must go back to Zoroastrianism to understand what it is and how it has influenced Christianity. This movement is popular mostly among the academicians and it is called "Sacra Europa" (The sacred Europe). Several university professors have teamed up and written a major book about this and say that they should return to the origin of Christianity which is Zoroastrianism.

Do most of the people who become Zoroastrian do so after gaining full understanding of Zarathustra's Message?

It is hard to say if they have read all of the Gathas and understand and appreciate them all. But they do know that the tradition and religion of Zoroastrianism is based on good use of mind and is free from unnecessary rules and restrictions that normally exist in other major organized religions. They also know that the goals of Zoroastrianism are achieving happiness and prosperity for all people through righteousness, and taking part in the betterment and evolution of this world.

Are Belgians and their neighbors aware of the significant role of the ancient Iran in today's civilization or do they still believe in the old Greek anti-Persian propaganda?

In the universities, subjects like philosophy and history are in fact taught very subjectively reflecting often Greece as the starting point of civilization. All the other cultures that fed and pre-dated Greece are ignored. But Europeans consider Iran as the birthplace of the first established empire in the world that issued the first declaration of human rights.

There was an exhibit in London recently called "The Forgotten Empire" which was about the Achamedian Empire. It is said that within three months, close to one million people visited the exhibit and then it moved to Barcelona in Spain. What we have to do today is to show the Europeans and the rest of the world that Zoroastrianism is a living ideology with a solid and dynamic philosophical system with a timeless aim and purpose. Its capacity of renewal in terms of forms is outstanding, which allows it easily to be adapted to the changing times. Every year the number of its followers is increasing and it is transforming forward from its ancient form.

What do the non-born Zoroastrians who are in touch with you expect from the born Zoroastrians? What are their expectations from one another?

At our center, no born Zoroastrian has become a member yet. I do not know why. The born Zoroastrians are generally very kind and sincere to us and participate in our ceremonies. A group of the born Zoroastrians in Iran has become defensive against what we say. For example, when we say the Gathas, the sublime book of Zarathushtra, has come from the Iranian culture, they say "What is Avesta then? Avesta is very dear to us. But during these times of clash of cultures, we should present only those things to the people that are acceptable to them. We should win this cultural struggle and we will do, no doubt about it! The book of Gathas is based on the Supreme Wisdom and contains the spoken words of Zarathushtra. The Iranians who study them say "Alas that we have had this book and not been aware of it." But, in general, the born Zoroastrians throughout the world do cooperate with us.

Most of the financial contributions to our center come from the born Zoroastrians. Our achievements and completed projects are made possible with their full cooperation and we do not see ourselves separate from them. Our goals are the same. Maybe our approaches are different due to the historical events which we are all familiar with.

We receive 500 to 600 letters a month from those who want to become Zoroastrian. They, at first, go to the centers in Tehran, Yazd and Kerman but are normally not accepted there and are not even allowed to enter the centers. They say that the born Zoroastrians do not help them to become Zoroastrian.

This is understandable because of the current Iranian government policies. The government in Iran, fearful of the increasing number of the Iranian people adopting the tradition of their ancestors, has put a lot of pressure on the Zoroastrian centers not to allow Iranians become Zoroastrian.

In Europe, the number of the born Zoroastrians is far less than those in the U.S. At our Center, our members are non-born Zoroastrians. Born Zoroastrians send us books and financial contributions.

As far as you are aware, how spiritually satisfied are the non-born Zoroastrians with their new choice of religion?

We have not seen any of them who are unhappy about becoming Zoroastrian. They come to the Center and help us anyway they can.

In your opinion, what was the greatest gift that Zarathushtra gave to the world?

The greatest gift he gave to the world was teaching us the important aspects of wisdom and right thinking. Zarathushtra taught us that through the good use of our wisdom (*khratu*) and all it contains, such as intellect, logic, reason, right thinking, all based on righteousness, we should be able to prosper and achieve true happiness in our lives. Zarathushtra asked people to make choices based on their own wisdom and never follow anyone blindly. Another great gift that Zarathushtra gave to this world is to make us understand that this happiness should be shared, not only with the human beings, but also with animals and plants. Every living being and even non-living being in this world should be respected. Because our attitude towards every single element of this world will be reflected to us like a mirror.

How different are Zarathushtra and Ahura Mazda from the prophets and Gods of other religions?

Ahura Mazda represents a unique, boundless, creative and progressive force. Ahura Mazda is the source of all life and wisdom and values supreme mind over all other factors in the make-up of his creations. He never oppresses his creation under any circumstances.

Zarathushtra's God is the friend and companion of all humans. The world of Ahura Mazda is continuously changing and evolving and Zarathushtra is aware of this. The fifth Amshaspand is Haurvatat (Khordad) which represents development and completion and therefore this symbolizes the fact that the world must go forward toward completion. The purpose of the creation of mankind is for them to cooperate with Ahura Mazda to facilitate progress of the universe to completion. It is appropriate for people to do their best in moving the universe towards completion. The Gods of other religions are creators of a non-changing world (they have created the whole universe in 6 days) and have many requirements from humans on what to do or not to do and also interferes with people's private daily lives. If a human does not follow the instructions of those Gods, he would face the worst consequence in hell. But Zarathushtra's God, Ahura Mazda, is a progressive, progressing, ever-creative god. He/She is a god that constantly, through evolution, tends

toward perfection. Therefore, when one says that the Gods of all religions are the same is a complete false affirmation.

In your opinion, is Ahura Mazda a creator separated from his own creation?

No. Ahura Mazda is not separate from its creation. Ahura Mazda is present in everything he/she has created. How can he be separate? When we have the characteristics of Ahura Mazda such as Righteousness (*asha*), Self-Dominance (*Vohukhashatra*) and Good Thought (*Vohuman*). Ahura Mazda is a progressive and creative force throughout the universe. If Ahura Mazda did not exist in every single particle of the world, this world could not exist nor be able to progress.

What is the "soul of creation" as it is referred to in the Gathas.

Zarathushtra asked Ahura Mazda to help him use *Vohuman* (good thinking) and *asha* (truth) to satisfy the "soul of creation" or "ge-osh arvaan". For Zarathushtra, this world is a living world with spirit and emotions. Zarathushtra wishes happiness and prosperity for all humans as well as for animals, plants and all other beings and even objects that appear to be lifeless to us. In Zoroastrianism and according to Gathas, we should respect all existing beings of the world.

What do you think is the most important thing that Zoroastrians must consider today?

The most important thing is to achieve full cooperation and unity among all Zoroastrian centers, Zoroastrians and their friends and supporters. Today, with further growth of Zoroastrianism, new centers need to be created in every countries and cities in the world. Happily, in Europe these centers are created at a fast pace. To prevent any conflicting messages and statements, a strong global center must be formed to develop a direction for this mission and put it in such a framework that it would prevent any confusions that may develop for those who want to join Zoroastrianism. Perhaps the California Zoroastrian Center (CZC) is one of the largest centers outside Iran, but it still has not gained a global coverage. Our current efforts are directed toward creating a respected global center that not only has spiritual influence, but also would have influence on decision makers in various countries. An example is the global council for the Jews. Our dream is to form such a global organization. We are still talking about it and no decisions have been made yet. But we hope that soon with everyone's buy-in and agreement, we can finalize the path forward.

How has acceptance of Zarathushtra's ideology affected your own personal life?

It has given me a goal and a direction that energizes me to the extend that 16 hours a day I spend to inform people, by all the means at my disposal such as speech, lecture, writings, interviews about Zarathustra's doctrine and message. Every night of the week until 1:30 AM I am at my computer replying to people's letters received mainly from Iran. Nothing else could have ever given me so much energy. I never thought that at this age I would have such capacity of work and stamina. The words of the French lady that I mentioned previously are often echoing in my ears "... *to keep this sublime doctrine in dark is a betrayal toward the humanity...*"

Perhaps my share in this world has been to make a contribution, even though modest, in expanding Zarathustra's message and, in this way, play a role in development of a new identity for all other Iranians.

Could you please comment on cooperation of your center with other Zoroastrian organizations and especially the newly formed Zoroastrian center in Paris?

Our center has contacts with most of the other centers. Our relation with the Zoroastrian center in London, primarily run by Parsees, has room to improve. However, they have invited me several times to give lectures. I am currently one of the members of the newly formed center in Paris. This center is located in one of the best areas in Paris and has been purchased for close to seven million dollars. It will be opened in a few months and has been founded by Dr. Sasanfar.

We are still discussing about the World Center for Zoroastrians. In September 2007, we will have a conference in Paris in which the active members of CZC will be present and we will hear the quarterly progress report by those who attended the previous conference.

Dr. Khazai, thank you for your time and the opportunity to have this interview.

I wish for our long lasting cooperation.