

Zoroastrianism: A Universal Religion.

Part I.

By

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Zoroastrianism is a universal religion, open to anyone who may wish to become a Zoroastrian. This conclusion is compelled by Zarathushtra's own words in the Gathas, by later texts and prayers written over a period of time that spanned more than 1,000 years after Zarathushtra, by formal opinions given by ancient (and some modern) religious authorities, and also by ancient traditions and customs.

In Part I of this article, we will consider the evidence of Zarathushtra's own words, and some later texts and prayers. In Part II, we will consider the evidence of formal opinions and ancient traditions and customs.

There are those who say that we must accept non-Zoroastrians into the religion, if we wish to survive. With due respect I do not agree. Our Ashem Vohu prayer teaches us that we should do what is right because it is the right thing to do. In my view, we should accept any sincere person who wishes to become a Zoroastrian, -- not to "survive", and not because our ancient texts tell us to do so, but because it is the right thing to do. On the other hand, it pleases me that our ancient texts wholeheartedly support acceptance as the right thing to do.

Prohibiting the admission of non-Zoroastrians is a custom which arose long after the fall of the Sasanian Empire as a survival mechanism, to survive persecution in Iran, and to enable Zoroastrian refugees in India to live there without being a threat to the social and religious institutions of their adopted land. In short, such exclusionary practices are a social invention, not a religious mandate.

Let us consider the evidence.¹

Zarathushtra's Teachings: the Gathas.

There are many verses in the Gathas which support the principle that Zarathushtra considered his religion to be a universal one, and hoped that all the living would come to believe in it. Here are a few examples. There are many more. In Y31.3 Zarathushtra says:

"... that commandment which is for Thy adherents -- speak, Wise One, in order for us to know (all) that by means of which I might convert all the living." Y31.3 (Insler translation).²

This verse makes it clear that Zarathushtra considered Mazda's "adherents" to include "all the living". Some Zoroastrians who advocate exclusion, and oppose acceptance, argue that this translation is incorrect. But a review of translations by major scholars, both "eastern" and "western", consistently shows that in this verse, Zarathushtra expressed the wish to convert all the living to the belief system which came to his mind from Mazda. For example (alphabetically arranged):

Azargoshasb: "...so that I may convert all the people into the right path."³

Bartholomae: “.....that I may convert all living men.”⁴

Bode & Nanavutty: “.....so that I may lead all the living to believe in the true faith.”⁵

Humbach: “...so that therewith I might receive all the living.”⁶

Ichaporia: “.....so that I may ever convert all the living (mortals).”⁷

Irani: “...Give it in Thy own inspired word that I may thereby bring its realization to all.”⁸

Jafarey: “...It will help me guide all the living to choose aright.”⁹

Kanga: “.....so that I cause all men to put faith in the Religion.”¹⁰

Mills: “.....(that...) I may make all the living believers!”¹¹

Mills states: “...So also the general indication of the Pahlavi translator. Observe that the religious system contemplated universal proselytism.”¹²

Moulton: “.....that I may convert all living men.”¹³

Nanavutty: “.....Thus I will convince all the living (regarding the true faith).”¹⁴

Neryosangh's Sanskrit Translation: “... which wisdom is enlightening or awaking all the living.”¹⁵

Pahlavi translation: “...declare it, that we teach all living the Faith.”¹⁶

Sethna: “...that I may convince all the living to believe in the true path.”¹⁷

Sidhwa: “.....To convert all mortals to become Thine alone.”¹⁸

Taraporewala: “.....so-that I-may-ever-convert all the living (into the Right Path).”¹⁹

There are those who argue that Y31.3 should be interpreted as pertaining to the choice between good and evil, and that there is nothing in the Gathas about choosing the religion. But the evidence of the Gathas is to the contrary. Zarathushtra describes Mazda's message as “... that word which is to be heard as the best for men...” Y45.5 -- not as the best for any particular tribe or clan, but as the best for mankind. And he himself made the choice.

“... I choose (only) Thy teachings, Lord.” Y46.3.

Zarathushtra makes no mention of restricting his teachings to those whose parents were Zoroastrian, for the simple reason that before Zarathushtra, no one's parents were “Zoroastrian”²⁰. He makes no mention of reserving his teachings only for the people of any particular community, clan, tribe or race. His notion of a person of “good lineage” is one who is connected with asha, and with the best way of being. He says: “...Any such person of [aramaiti] is of the (same) good lineage with truth [asha] and all those (other forces) existing under Thy rule, Lord.” Y49.5; “The priest who is just, in harmony with truth [asha] is the offspring from the best spirit [mainyeush...vahishtat]” Y33.6. In other words, the

only “lineage” that Zarathushtra cares about is the state of being generated by truth, and its implementation in thought, word and action, -- which is the concept of aramaiti, and is generated by a benevolent way of being (spenta mainyu).

No one knows today whether Zarathushtra's original homeland was in the north, south, east or west of what later came to be called Iran. There is much informed speculation on this subject, but no direct evidence. We do know, from his own words, that he was persecuted and ostracized for speaking out against the tyranny of priests and rulers, and had to flee from the region in which he was born: “To what land to flee? Where shall I go to flee? They exclude me from my family and from my clan.” Ushtavaiti Gatha, Y46.1.

Zarathushtra fled to the kingdom of King Vishtaspa, and was successful in converting the royal family and the people of that land to his vision of religion.

The Later Texts and Prayers:

Yasna 42 is a supplement to the Haptanghaiti. We know from its linguistics that it is not as old as the Gathas, and not as late as some of the other Yasnas.²¹ By the time Yasna 42 was composed, the religion had become institutionalized, and had established priests and rituals. Verse 6 of this Yasna speaks of reverencing the athravans (fire-priests) who returned after spreading the religion in far off places.²²

The Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo prayer)²³ is in Gathic Avestan, and in the same meter as the Ahunavaiti Gatha. Many scholars believe that it was composed by Zarathushtra himself. In my view, it contains the core of Zarathushtra's teachings in a nutshell -- showing us a worship that is a way of life. This prayer was commented on in Yasna 19.6, a text composed several centuries after the Gathas, which has Ahura Mazda making the following promise -- not just to any particular tribe or clan, but to everyone in the entire world: "And whoever in this world of mine which is corporeal shall mentally recall...a portion of the Ahuna-vairya, and shall then utter it aloud, shall worship thus...I will bring his soul over the Bridge of Kinvat, I who am Ahura Mazda,....." ²⁴

There are many later texts and prayers which echo Gathic verses regarding the universality of the religion. For example, in the Gathas Zarathushtra expresses the wish to spread Mazda's teachings across the earth. "Lord, let wisdom come in the company of truth [asha] across the earth!..." Y50.5. The Farvardin Yasht ²⁵ echoes this thought with conviction: "...and there will the good Law of the worshippers of Mazda come and spread through all the seven Karshvares of the earth." Yasht 13.94. ²⁶ .

This wish in the form of a prayer is found in many of the Khordeh Avesta prayers, which were composed during Sasanian times, several centuries after Zarathushtra. For example: the Meher Niyaaesh says: "May the knowledge, extent and fame of the commandments of the most excellent Mazda worshipping religion ever increase over the world, over all the seven regions, so may it be." ²⁷ Almost identical words are also found in the Khorshed Niyaaesh, the Mah Bakhtar Niyaaesh, the Ardvi Sur Niyaaesh, the Atash Niyaaesh, the Nirang-e Hormazd Yasht, the Ardibehesht Yasht, the Sarosh Yasht Hadokht, and the Sraosh Yasht Wadi. ²⁸

The Doa Nam Setayeshne (another prayer composed in Sasanian times) says: "Homage to the all knowing tolerator, who sent through Zarathushtra Spitman . . . teachings of religion for the people of

the world so that they may have friendship, inculcate faith and inner wisdom and knowledge gained from hearing. For the information and guidance of all men who are, who were, and who will be hereafter..."²⁹

The Din-no-Kalmo (Pazand) speaks of "...The good, righteous and complete religion which God has sent for the world..."³⁰

The Doa Tandarosti (Pazand) prays "... May the religion of Zarathushtra be a source of glory unto all mortals..."³¹

The Zoroastrian religion is famed for its commitment to truth and honesty. One cannot help but wonder how anyone can truthfully and sincerely say these prayers daily, or weekly, or perhaps just on good occasions, and yet insist that the religion prohibits the admission of non-Zoroastrians. It passes comprehension.

In the Gathas, Zarathushtra implies that the Divine is immanent (present) in all things. A later Avestan text, Yasna 17.11, expresses this beautiful thought by speaking of the fire in all things, the fire within³², as does the Bundahishn (a post-Sasanian, Pahlavi text).³³ The Farvardin Yasht also expresses this thought by reverencing the fravashi in all things. The fravashi is the divine within. As applied to different human races, verse 143 of this Yasht reverences the fravashis of good men and women in various enumerated countries -- Turanian, Sairimyan (which a footnote explains is Europe and Western Asia), Saini (which a footnote explains is China), and the verse concludes with reverence for the fravashis of good men and women "... in all countries....."³⁴

If our religion teaches that the Divine is immanent (present) in all men and women, of what relevance is ethnicity to religion? Can we reject any person without rejecting the Divine which is immanent within such a person?

Those who favor exclusion contend that this rule is not a question of rejecting anyone. Rather, it is a question of obeying God's will. I do not know how they square this argument with Zarathushtra's teaching that we must think for ourselves, after reflecting with a clear mind ("[...Reflect with a clear mind -- man by man for himself](#)" Y30.2). They argue that it is God's will that each person should remain in the religion of his birth, and that to change one's birth religion is an act of defiance against God's will.

Well, God caused us to be born naked. Is it His will that we not wear clothes? He caused us to be born ignorant. Is it an act of defiance against God to get an education? Some babies are born sick, or with birth defects. Is it His will that such babies not be given medical treatment to save their lives? What if one's parents are atheists? Is it an act of defiance against God to want to believe in Him? What if one's parents are religious fanatics? Is it God's will that the child of such parents must also be a religious fanatic, and must massacre and torture people as his parents do? The argument is a non-starter (to say nothing of a no-brainer).

If Mazda is the God of the Universe, how can anyone shrink His relevance to only 100,000 Zoroastrians on this planet of several billion people (to say nothing of extra-terrestrial life, if any)? How did we sink from the high nobility of Zarathushtra's thought to such a narrow view?

This article will be continued in Part II where we will consider the evidence of modern and ancient religious Opinions, as well as traditions and customs.

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- ¹ The evidence in this article is not exhaustive. There is much, much more. See the following excellent articles: K.D.Irani and F.J. Vajifdar, *Conversion in Zoroastrianism, The Truth Behind the Trumpery*, as it appears in *Humata*, (Journal of the Center for Ancient Iranian Studies, Winter 1998 -- 1999 issue) p 8; A. J. Davar, *Zoroastrianism: A Universal Faith that Remained Regional?* published in several parts in various issues of *Humata*, *ibid.* C. P. Mehta, *The Religion of Zarathushtra is for All Mankind*. This work appears on www.efn.org/ropal/acceptz.html a website created and maintained by Steven Williamson, a convert to Zoroastrianism, at which site he has collected many good articles on conversion. Dr. Kersey Antia, the courageous and much admired high priest of the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago, Dr. Kersey Antia, has also written a thorough and knowledgeable article on conversion which I read some years ago. I regret that I do not have a copy of it.
- ² All quotations from the Gathas, in this paper, are to the translation by Professor Insler of Yale University, as it appears in *The Gathas of Zarathushtra*, (Brill 1975), unless otherwise indicated. Round parentheses () in a quotation indicate an insertion into the text by Prof. Insler. Square brackets [] in a quotation indicate an insertion by me, sometimes by way of explanation, and sometimes to show you the applicable Gathic words, but for convenience, usually without their grammatical variations. I leave 'aramaiti' untranslated, so it consistently appears in square brackets.
- ³ Firouz Azargoshasb, *The Translation of Gathas, the Holy Songs of Zarathushtra*, (March 1988), published with the assistance of CIMNA (the Council of Iranian Mobeds of North America). The author, before he departed this life, was the head of the Council of Mobeds of Tehran, the highest religious body for Zoroastrians in Iran.
- ⁴ As quoted by I. J. S. Taraporewala, in his book, *The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra*, (reprint, Hukhta Foundation, Bombay, 1993), page 182. (This book by Taraporewala is hereinafter referred to as "Taraporewala").
- ⁵ Bode & Nanavutty, *Songs of Zarathushtra, The Gathas*, (George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1952), p 52.
- ⁶ Humbach, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra and the Other Old Avestan Texts*, (Heidelberg, 1991), Volume 1, p 127.
- ⁷ Ichaporia, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra, Translation and Transcription of Ahunavaiti and Vahishtoishti Gathas*, (FEZANA, 1993), p 11.
- ⁸ D. J. Irani, *The Gathas, The Hymns of Zarathushtra*, (Center for Ancient Iranian Studies, 1998), p 38.
- ⁹ Jafarey, *The Gathas, Our Guide*, (Ushta Publications, 1989) p 35.
- ¹⁰ Kanga, *Gatha-Ba-Maani*, ((Parsi Panchayat Funds and Properties, 1997) p 43.
- ¹¹ Mills, *Sacred Books of the East*, (1981 reprint by Motilal Benarsidas, of the 1887 original) Volume 31, page 41 (hereinafter referred to as "SBE").
- ¹² SBE, *ibid* Vol. 31, p 41, footnote 8.
- ¹³ Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism The Hibbert Lectures delivered at Oxford, 1912*, (1980 AMS Press reprint of the 1913 original) p 352.
- ¹⁴ Nanavutty, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra*, (Mapin, 1999), p 83.
- ¹⁵ L. H. Mills, *A Study of the Five Zarathushtrian Gathas*, (Oxford 1892, AMS Press Reprint, 1997), p 57. This work includes an English translation of the Pahlavi translation edited with collation of manuscripts from all known codices, as well

as an English translation from a collation of five ancient texts of Neryosangh's Sanskrit translation (hereinafter referred to as "Mills' compendium").

¹⁶ Mills' compendium, p 57.

¹⁷ Sethna, *The Teachings of Zarathushtra*, (1978 reprint), p 29.

¹⁸ Sidhwa, *The Gathas of Asho Zarathushtra*, (1998), p 21.

¹⁹ Taraporewala, *ibid* page 178.

²⁰ A post-Sasanian text, the Dinkard V, is said to describe how prophets before Z had accepted the revelation. I do not (yet) have a copy of this text. Based on historical evidence, I find it doubtful that the worship of Mazda was a part of any proto-Indo-Iranian religion. Professor Thieme (and many other scholars) is of the opinion that Mazda, as the name of God, was the invention of Zarathushtra. He points out that there is no equivalent deity called Wisdom in the Vedic pantheon, but only the feminine noun "medha" meaning wisdom. Thieme, *Reflections on the Vocabulary of Zarathushtra's Gathas*, in Proceedings of the First Gatha Colloquium, 1993, (WZO 1998), p 201. By contrast, the other pre-Zarathushtrian Iranian deities of the Yashts and later Zoroastrian texts have their counterparts in the Vedic pantheon. But even if we accept, for the sake of argument, that some sort of worship of Mazda pre-dated Zarathushtra, it could not have been the religion as taught by Zarathushtra -- the "mazdayasno Zarathushtrish" of the "Jasa Me Avanghe Mazda" prayer which was composed in Sasanian times as a Zoroastrian credo.

²¹ Humbach, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra and Other Old Avestan Texts*, Vol. 1, page 7, footnote 9.

²² Y42.6 speaks of reverencing "...the approaches of the Fire-priests, as they approach us from afar, and seek to gain the provinces, and spread the ritual lore...." Mills translation as it appears in SBE Vol 31, page 291. This verse is clear that even the rituals were not restricted, and were open to anyone who wished to join the religion.

²³ For my explanation and discussion of the Ahuna Vairya, see *Three Prayers and the Name of God*, on www.vohuman.org. The article on the Ahuna Vairya (from that collection) also appears on www.zarathushtra.com. For a more in-depth discussion of the Ahuna Vairya, see *The Talisman*, which also appears on www.vohuman.org.

²⁴ Mills translation as it appears in SBE, Vol. 31, page 261.

²⁵ The Farvardin Yasht (Yasht 13) is written in the Younger Avestan language, not in Gathic, and was composed several centuries after Zarathushtra. By the time it was written the old pre-Zarathushtrian Indo-Aryan deities had found their way into the religion of Zarathushtra, so the Farvardin Yasht differs from the teachings of the Gathas in some ways, but reflects them in other ways.

²⁶ As translated by Darmesteter, in SBE Vol. 23, page 202.

²⁷ Meher Niyaaesh, Sethna, *Khordeh Avesta* (1980 reprint), p 61.

²⁸ Sethna's *Khordeh Avesta*, *ibid*, Khorshed Niyaaesh p 51; Mah Bakhtar Niyaaesh pp 71 -- 73; Ardivi Sur Niyaaesh p 83; Atashi Niyaaesh p 93; Nirange- Hormazd Yasht p 111; Ardibehesht Yasht p 125; Sarosh Yasht Hadokht p 141; Sraosh Yasht Wadi p 165.

²⁹ Sethna, *ibid*, page 63.

³⁰ Sethna, *Khordeh Avesta* *ibid*, page 169;

³¹ Sethna, *Khordeh Avesta*, *ibid* page 173.

³² SBE Vol. 31, p 258, Mills translation.

³³ As translated by E. W. West, in SBE Vol. 5, pp 61 -- 62.

³⁴ As translated by Darmesteter in SBE Vol. 23, pp 226 -- 227.

Zoroastrianism: A Universal Religion.

Part II.

By

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Zoroastrianism is a universal religion, open to anyone who may wish to become a Zoroastrian.

In Part I of this article, we considered the evidence of Zarathushtra's own words, and some later texts and prayers. Let us now consider the evidence of some ancient and modern opinions and ancient traditions and customs.

Modern and Ancient Religious Opinions.

Most if not all high priests in India advocate non-acceptance and exclusionary practices on the grounds that conversion is forbidden by the religion. But the fact that they say so, does not make it so. They have to cite chapter and verse, and this, to date, they have not been able to do.¹

In the early 1980s, an American, Joseph Peterson², after long study, first by himself and then under a Zoroastrian priest, concluded that he wanted to become a Zoroastrian, and wished to have his initiation ceremony done. A Mobed in the United States, (a luminous soul), wrote a letter to the Council of Mobeds of Tehran, requesting guidance. In an official opinion (No. 466 issued in May of 1983), the Council responded. Citing chapter and verse from ancient authorities, it concluded that the religion of Zarathushtra is a universal one, open to all, and that the admission of a non-Zoroastrian to the religion is a meritorious act. The Council's Opinion states: (in English translation):

“...It [the Mobed's letter] describes ... the opposition shown by certain persons ... as well as the fact that certain parents have alienated their sons and daughters who have married non-Zoroastrians. The Council discussed the contents of your letter at an official meeting.

“You have, in your detailed letter, asked the opinion of the Council regarding the acceptance of people into Zoroastrianism. Let us glimpse through Zoroastrian scriptures and find an answer to it.”

The Council's Opinion starts by quoting from the Gathas, and concludes:

“The above stanzas show that Asho Zarathushtra does not advocate force to spread the religion, but has kept it open for all He has never reserved it for the Aryans, or for a particular caste of people. Yasna 46.12 shows that the religion had spread into the Turanaian lands during Asho Zarathushtra's lifetime. Because he praises Friyana a Turanian Chief who supported Mazdayasna.”

The Council's Opinion next gives references to later texts and concludes:

“The above citations show that the propagation and promotion of the religion is a meritorious deed...If we Zoroastrians believe that our religion is one of the great living religions of the

world and that it is beneficial to all the peoples of the world, we must persevere to propagate it. We must accept persons who want to embrace the Zoroastrian religion. In fact we should follow those who set us an example.”

Nothing wishy washy about that! In Zoroastrian communities today, so many of us are reluctant to take a stand against practices which we know to be wrong. We talk about it. We complain. We sympathize in private. But we don't act. In issuing this 1983 Opinion, the Council of Mobeds of Teheran acted -- a shining example of courage, learning, and civility for us to follow.

There is an ancient text called the Aerpatastan and Nirangastan, which describes itself (according to S. J. Bulsara's translation) as "being portions of the great Husparam Nask". The text covers many aspects of the practice and administration of the religion in the society of that day. It takes for granted the right of a non-Zoroastrian to convert to Zoroastrianism, and focuses on prohibiting forced conversions. It states that a man who converts to the Zoroastrian religion should not force his wife to convert. He should not strike her, or stop supporting her, or "forsake her treacherously", nor does she "pass from the condition of being his wife", because she refuses to convert.³ This ancient text was one of the authorities cited by the Council of Mobeds of Teheran, in its 1983 Opinion which concluded that the religion is universal and open to all who wish to join it, but should not be forced on anyone.

In the centuries that followed the migrations of some Zoroastrians to India, disputes arose among the priests in India about what the religion allowed and did not allow. On various occasions over the course of several centuries, Zoroastrian priests in India sent emissaries to the Zoroastrian Mobeds of Iran to get answers to their questions. These questions and answers are in written form, and have been preserved in texts called the Rivayats. I do not have copies of most of these Rivayats, and the following information and quotations from the Rivayats are taken from an excellent article by Professor K. D. Irani, and Farrokh J. Vajifdar.⁴

In 1478 A.D., the first such Rivayat was given in response to questions taken to Iran by Nariman Hoshang of India. In one answer, the Iranian mobeds gave the opinion that slave boys and girls in Zoroastrian houses could be initiated into the religion with sudreh and kusti, and when they became intelligent, attentive and steadfast in the religion should be given barashnum (the cleansing ritual).

In 1599 A.D., the Kaus Mahyar Rivayat gave the opinion that even grave-diggers and corpse-burners (i.e. non-Zoroastrians who performed burials and cremations) should be allowed into the religion, provided that they were steadfast and occasioned no harm to the faith.

The last of the Rivayats was the Itthoter Rivayat of 1773 A.D. Here, 78 questions were prepared by the priests of Broach and Surat in India, and taken to Iran by Mobed Kaus Jalal. The replies to these questions were given in writing, signed by nine Iranian dasturs, and nine religiously versed behdins (Zarathushtis who were not priests). Question 13 asked whether boys and girls who were servants in Zoroastrian houses and who had been accepted into the religion, could have their remains consigned to the dakhma upon death. The Iranian mobeds and behdins unanimously replied that indeed they could. Here are a few excerpts from their own words. They start by affirming that such youngsters should be accepted into the religion.

".....teaching the Avesta to the sons of Juddins who have been acquired and converting them to the din-i beh-i mazdayasnan earns one great merit."

[Referring to the arguments that these youngsters should be excluded from the dakhma in death]: " Such iniquitous arguments do not profit the religion of Zaratusth and the Righteous Path, Indeed it is necessary for the mobeds and behdins to show greater mercy for these youngsters and to allow the bodies of the deceased ones to be laid in the dakhma according to the rules of the din-i behi, and this will be a source of gladness for Ormazd and the Ameshasfands....."

".....the Creator of the righteous material world has ordered the honourable Zaratusth Esfantaman anushe-ravan to lead all men to the Din-i Beh-i, to the Main Path, to edify His joy, His glory, and His honour. Secondly, at the time of Hoshidar-mah, Hoshidar-bami and Siavashans [the three millennial Saviours of Zoroastrianism] all the Juddins will be converted to the Din-i Behi. It follows that according to the Din-i Behi it is appropriate and necessary to convert these youngsters. It is a very great merit and a righteous good deed. Therefore, those who hinder this and are against it can be considered as belonging to the religion of the Juddins, and they are not even aware of the Origin and of the other world. They proceed along the path of aberration and vanity and according to the religion it is not possible to define them as Behdins, since if they were Behdins, they would increase the Din-i Beh-i."

In quoting from this Rivayat, Irani and Vajifdar say that they have followed the Vitalone translation, with minor changes for ease of reading, and that the translation of Ervad Shehryarji Bharucha, is in accord.

One can only feel deep respect, admiration, and affection, for these nine dasturs and nine behdins of 18th century Iran, who lived with severe persecution, and yet signed their names to this document expressing opinions which could have earned them death, but which were nevertheless true to the teachings of Zarathushtra, and the traditions of the religion.

Ancient Traditions, Laws, and Practices:

We all cherish the many small things that give us a sense of community identity, especially since Zoroastrian communities these days always exist as minorities in larger populations. But the things that generate the feeling of "community" that we all so cherish are shared experiences and a state of mind. They are not defined by genetics.

Any student of history knows that Zoroastrians are a part of the Indo-European family of races (which anthropologists believe came over from Africa). One has only to look around a room full of Parsis to appreciate that we could not possibly have come from one racial stock. In skin color, height, hair, bone structure, and physiognomy, we are too diverse. The same racial diversity is apparent in the friezes at Persepolis and Susa, and hundreds of years after Zarathushtra, in the proselytizing traditions of the Aerpatastan and Nirangastan where, for example, it is written: "When a slave professing any other creed comes over to the Good Religion he then becomes a direct subject of the King of Kings who shall give his price....."⁵ In those (post-Achaemenian) days, slaves were often people from other nations who were not Iranian.

While the Shahnameh may be more legend than history, some of our most famous ancestral heroes were the children of "mixed" marriages. The saintly warrior king KaiKhosrov's mother was an alien, as was Rudabeh, the mother of Rustam, the quintessential Persian champion.⁶ Those who favor exclusionary

rules argue that such rules have always been a part of our tradition. If this were true, then King KaiKhosrov and Rustom (among others) would not have belonged to the community of our ancestors.

In those ancient days, women too were treated with a greater measure of equality than in later times. We are told that Banoogoshasp, Rustom's daughter, was a renowned warrior in her own right and, although the granddaughter of a non-Persian, she was considered a valued part of the community. Like her father, in times of need the community called upon her to do battle in its behalf against its enemies. And Persian warriors and princes vied for her hand in marriage. In the Shah Nameh, her husband Geev says: "..... warriors and knights entitled to wear the golden coronet all vied for the hand of Rustom's daughter ... Toos [a Kayani prince] was also one of the suitors. But Rustom gave me the hand of his eldest daughter, Baanoogoshasp who, herself, was a knight in her own right." ⁷

Conclusion:

In conclusion, whether we look to Zarathushtra's own words in the Gathas, or to other ancient prayers and texts written long after Zarathushtra, or to ancient and some modern religious Opinions, or to our ancient traditions, laws, and legends, all the available evidence supports the conclusion that the religion of Zarathushtra is universal, and open to all who may wish to join it.

The proponents of exclusion have ignored all this evidence. They have elevated ethnicity over the teachings of our religion. Their exclusionary practices have reduced Zarathushtra's magnificent concept of divinity to that of a tribal god of limited relevance. A tragedy indeed.

The truth and beauty of Zarathushtra's teachings cannot be "owned" by a few. They are not things that anyone can rightfully withhold from any other soul. As the late and much beloved Dastur N. D. Minochehr Homji of Bombay, India once said, in his Chicago lectures, "A person who withholds the light from others will be the first to stumble in the dark."

Zarathushtra exalts goodness, generosity, truth, knowledge, and reason, as divine values which he tells us we must strive to attain. He sees the Divine in all men and women. It is interesting that in searching for "God" he discovered the brotherhood of man, and indeed of all things -- the fire within.

The problems that confront us in this century will not be solved by clinging to customs which were forged in the cauldron of persecution and fear, and which are not relevant to our lives in most of the countries in which Zoroastrians live today. Nor can such problems be solved by (heaven forgive us!) the arrogance of racial exclusivity which has arisen among some Zoroastrians in India, and which is contrary to Zarathushtra's teachings.

We can successfully address our problems by using our minds and hearts to search for the truth and what's right with friendship and goodness, making asha a reality with our choices in thought, word and action – Zarathushtra's formula for a good life. The choice is ours.

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¹ No textual authority has been cited by these priests in support of non-acceptance. A corollary to the practice of non-acceptance is the treatment of Zoroastrian women who have married non-Zoroastrians. Such women are no longer considered Zoroastrians, they cannot enter a fire temple,

and their children cannot be admitted to the religion, according to the high priests of India, one of whom, Dastur Kotwal, has cited, in support of this practice, Chapter XVIII verse 62 of the Vendidad, which (according to him) "prohibits union between a Mazdayasni and non-Mazdayasni." (Page 2 of a letter dated August 22, 1990 from Kotwal to The Chairman & Trustees Bombay Parsi Panchayet, which is initialed on each page initialed by Kotwal, and signed at the end with his full name and titles). However, in the original Vendidad which is in the Younger Avestan language, this verse does not refer to interfaith marriages. Verses 61 and 62 state that Mazda is caused grief by a courtesan ("Gahi") who sleeps with the faithful and the unfaithful, the worshipper of Mazda and the worshipper of Daevas, the wicked and the righteous; (SBE Vol. 4, page 200, as translated by Darmesteter). The Pahlavi translation of the Vendidad in its commentary translates "Jahe" as follows: "Gogosnasp said: 'This is an adulteress' "(Behramgore T. Anklesaria, *Pahlavi Vendidad (Zand-i Jvit-Dev-Dat)* published for the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1949, page 366). An adulteress is a married woman who sleeps with someone who is not her husband. So this verse, which is the only textual authority cited by anyone as a prohibition against interfaith marriages, has nothing to do with interfaith marriages. It speaks against indiscriminate prostitution (according to the Avestan text) and indiscriminate adultery (according to the Pahlavi commentary). With one-sided justice, the Vendidad does not condemn the fellows who enjoyed the woman's favors. But that is another story.

² Joseph Peterson's website may be viewed at www.avesta.org. This site is a compendious resource for Zoroastrian texts (in translations whose copyrights have expired) and other knowledge.

³ Aerpatastan and Nirangastan, Book I, Chap. V, verses 4 and 5, page 40 of the S. J. Balsara translation, published by the Trustees of the Parsee Panchayat Funds and Properties, Bombay, 1915. It is only fair to note that this text also recommends that as long as the wife refuses to convert, the husband should not sleep with her. Whether such advice was taken by the converted husband is not known.

⁴ K.D. Irani and F.J. Vajifdar, *Conversion in Zoroastrianism, The Truth Behind the Trumpery*, as it appears in *Humata*, (Journal of the Center for Ancient Iranian Studies, Winter 1998 -- 1999 issue).

⁵ Aerpatastan and Nirangastan, Chap. IV, verse 29, page 38 of the S. J. Balsara translation, *ibid*.

⁶ The Shah Namah of Firdaosi, as translated by Bahman Sohrab Surti (1986), Vol. II, pages 194 – 197, 252, 259; Vol. I, pages 11, 43, 61-62.

⁷ Surti, Shah Namah of Firdaosi, Vol. II, page 264.