

Zoroastrianism - The Religion of the Parsees

Robin Ghosh

Abstract: *This article delves into the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, shedding light on its origins, core beliefs, and ethical principles. Zoroastrianism, which dates back possibly 2,500 to 3,000 years, is one of the world's oldest religions. It centers around the teachings of Prophet Zarathustra Zoroaster and emphasizes the worship of one supreme God, Ahura Mazda. The religions unique blend of monotheism and dualism, the concept of good versus evil, and its focus on ethical virtues like good thoughts, good words, and good deeds are explored. The article also touches on Zoroastrianisms influence on other faiths and its enduring legacy among the Parsi community.*

Keywords: Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda, Ethics, Dualism, Ancient Religion

1. Introduction

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions, of the world, perhaps 2,500 to 3000 years old. It is the religion of ancient Persia and Parsees all over the world (although very few in number) even now observe this religion. Prophet Zarathustra, also known as Zoroaster in its Latinized version is regarded as the founder of this religion and Zend-Avesta or simply Avesta as its basic sacred text. Zoroaster teaches that there is one God and a continuing struggle in the world between forces of light and darkness. Before we know the basic features of Zoroastrianism as a religion we need to know something more about Zoroaster.

The confused and distracted humanity approaches God, the supreme creator with the complaint the evil had encumbered the entire earth and therefore he should send a saviour on it. The Supreme Lord there upon asks the angels around him whether they could name any soul who could undertake this task when the angles show their in ability in this regard, the Lord himself names Zoroaster as the saviour of the mankind and sends him on earth. Zoroaster first began to live like an ordinary household with wife (rather three wives) and children. It was at the age of thirty that we received a revelatory message from God. By the bank of a river he had a vision of the angle Vohu Manu who had appeared nine times the size of a man. The angle told Zoroaster that there was only on God Ahira Mazda and that he was to serve as his prophet. Zoroaster three most important ethical commandments were (1) good thoughts (2) good words and (3) good words. The show wow Zoroaster wanted to build upon ethically pure religion devoid of all ceremonialism and ritualism.

Key Documents (Ahura Mazda, Fire, Rg Veda, Yasedgard)
Basic features of Zoroastrians as a religion

- 1) Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion with a kind of internal dualism in Godhead.
- 2) Ahura Mazda is the one supreme God who is regarded as all-powerful, all wise, all good and is also regarded as the creator and ruler of the world.
- 3) God is subtle and therefore he is not to be given to ordinary knowledge of human beings. However, he sometimes reveals himself to men through his archangels.
- 4) The world is regarded as a picture of battle ground of two forces – the force of good prevails by Spenta Mainu

- and the force of evil as represented by Angra Mainyu or the evil spirit, which is called Ahirman. The battle will go on until finally the force of good prevails over that of evil. Man has been granted free will and he has to do nothing else than to lead a life of righteousness.
- 5) Zoroastrianism believes in a future life, good deeds performed by men go to heaven and bad deeds to hell. Every man will have to get across the bridge of chinvat good souls will go across to heaven and evil ones who pass, into hell.
 - 6) It also believes in the existence of angles and also stand surrounding God and wait for his orders.
 - 7) There are also evil spirits who accompany Ahirman in his spreading of evil in the world.
 - 8) It believes in the resurrection of dead, and the Day of Judgment.
 - 9) Fire is the symbol of Parsi religion. It remained a symbol of light and purity. Even the Bible God is said to be the light of the world, and Allah is said to be 'nur'.
 - 10) Even through three castes of Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas are known in the Gatha and Avesta, yet Zoroastrianism teaches equality and brotherhood of man.

God

As we have said earlier Zoroaster preached a strict monotheism in place of the prevalent polytheism. According to him Ahura Mazda is the only God whom people should adore and worship. Ahura means Lord and Mazda means All-wise thus by etymology, Ahura Mazda is the all wise – Lord. However many other attributes are also given to Ahura Mazda. He is regarded as all-good perfectly, holy, all strong and powerful, unconquerable kind etc. He is further regarded as the invisible and intangible creator and ruler of the world. Ahura Mazda is subtle and therefore he is not given to human senses. But then he reveals to mankind through six different modes, known as Amesha Spentas and usually translated as High Mortals. These six modes can be regarded as the six aspects of the supreme God through which he is so often reveals. These six aspects are known as Asha, Vohu Mano, Kshatriya Armati, Haurvataf and Ameretat. Even the six High immortals mentioned earlier are gradually taken as different Gods and many other Gods such as Atar (Fire) Mithra (theinvisible Sun) etc are also added. The following observations of Bouquet may be of relevance here. From the Gathas it is clear that the doctrine of Zarathustra himself was a sublime and distinct monotheism, though below the Supreme Being are satellites or Amesha, spentas, who are of the nature of archangels. Later fersian religion also mentions

Volume 12 Issue 10, October 2023

www.ijsr.net

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution CC BY

the God Mithras as possessing almost equal honour with Ahura Mazda. But it is fair to say that Zarathustra was a much a monotheist as the second Isaih. When in later Zoroastrianism we find reference to the evil spirit Ahirman, we are in different atmosphere.

Man

Ahura Mazda has created the world and has endowed it with laws so that the world, with stars and skies, flora and fauna may be stable and wholly dependable. By knowing the laws of nature one can predict the future and thus can control nature and guide one's behaviour in relation to the world. In this good world Ahura Mazda has made man and his spirit, breathed into his bodies endowed him with freedom of will. Why free will?

Because Ahirman and his associates have sown evil deeds in this world and cause many physical evils of flood and drought, earthquake and other calamities. Nay, the evil spirits prevent man's mind and corrupt his will. For this reason Ahura has granted free will to man so that he is free to choose the good for his salvation and final beatitude or may choose evil working against the physical and moral laws and thus may choose punishment for himself and death on the day of reckoning.

Ahura has endowed man with his guardian will who assists man in the choice of the good and avoidance of evil. But man has been created by Ahura as a militant and disciplined soldier to fight against evil in every sphere of life. A Parsee believes in a successful life and does not believe in a life of reduce.² As a house-holder he prays for his health vigour of his life, body, offspring on this earth. In the higher moments he prays for the purity of mind and heart.

Zoroaster says to men

"Hear with your earth highest truth I preach, and with illumined minds weigh them with care,
Before you choose which of the two paths to tread
Deciding man, each one for each,
Before the great New age is ushered in wakeup, Alert to spread Ahura's word. ³

Thus in only one life can attain perfection if one chooses the path of righteousness. A scheme of multiple life one after another as in Hinduism is neither recognised nor required, "Within the span of his one life on earth, perfection can be reached by fervent souls, argent in zeal, sincere in their toil."⁴

Evil and Suffering

If all its various features, Zoroastrianism is perhaps best known for its solution of the much discussed problem of evil. It attributes all evil and suffering of the world to the evil spirit Airman who constantly opposes the force of good represented by spenta Mainyu. Thus if tries to save the all good supreme God Ahura Mazda from all responsibilities of creating and sustaining evils. For moral evils also men are directly responsible, because they have been granted perfect freedom by God. Of course men are also reduced towards sin by the evil force Angra Mainyu himself along with its demons but sometimes Ahura Mazda is free from any responsibility of evil. Ahura Mazda is all good and cannot be

a party to the evil in the world. He is always anxious for establishing. The complete reign of good in the world by defeating the force of evil and for that he seeks the help of the righteous people. In the early literature of parsi religion evil was considered to be a necessary consequence of creating of finite universe, for creation means finalizing the Infinite Hence, M.N. Dhalla states.

The materialization of the divine thought in creation spells imperfection and Spenta Mainyu is shadowed by his inseparable opposite. These two primeval spirits who are spoken of as twins, emerged from the divine bosom and by their innate choice appeared as the better and the bad in the ought and word and deed.⁵ Therefore, for a Parsi, man's life is a constant struggle with evil. Man has to resist evil. Whether, whether in nature or in his mind or in his society. A Parsi in the past held on to Zoroastrianism and was always involved in conflict with the state and other religions Christians and Parsees fought for long in Persia and destroyed one another holy places of worship. It is the Parsees who have sown the seed of fanaticism of all forms of prophetic religions.

Life after Death

Like other religions Zoroastrianism believes in human soul which is not destroyed with bodily death. Zoroastrianism therefore, has a very lively eschatology of its own. This eschatology is quite constant with the Zoroastrian faith in complete freedom of man. Man has an after-life in accordance with the righteous or evil deeds performed by him during his earthly life. The righteous friends a place in heaven which is full of all sorts of present and beautiful experience and the evil doers are dammed in hell which is a place of terrible suffering. Developing in eschatology in details, Zoroastrianism points out that the soul after the physical death of man remains for twice days with the body and meditates upon its deeds. On the fourth day the soul parts with the body and makes a journey to the place of judgment. God's archangel keeps a complete record of every man's deeds on earth, and with reference to his account he balances the good and bad deeds of the soul in a scale. Those whose balance good deeds balance over the bad ones are sent to heaven and those whose evil deeds balance over the good ones are sent to hell. If the good deeds and bad deeds are more or less equal, the soul is sent to a kind of purgatory. The soul in its way to heaven or hell has to cross a bridge (called the chinvat bridge). For a soul destined to heaven the bridge proves to be a very easy path. Moreover the soul is greeted by beautiful maidens who escort it so to paradise. But an evil soul has a quite different experience. The bridge for it turns upon its edge and becomes as hard to walk as on the edge of a sword. Moreover it is tormented by an old hog. Eventually it falls off the bridge and offer deep into the hell. We find here that the eschatology of Islam seems directly taken from Zoroastrianism and that of Judaism and Christianity is also very much influenced by it. Here, it would not be out of context that none of world religions believe about this chinvat bridge. It appears to be a meaningless concept and seems to be purely imaginary.

Ultimate Destiny

We have seen in the Zoroastrian eschatology that in his afterlife man finds a place of happiness or suffering strictly

in according with his deeds. No power can save him from the consequences of his acts. Here Zoroastrianism seems to believe in something like the Hindu. Law of Karma, without believing in his adjust Samsara. Law of retribution is strictly follow in the scheme of Ahura Mazda. Thus the destiny of man clearly seems to consist in an abode either in heaven or in hell in accordance with his deeds.

“False brings an age long punishment. And Truth leads on to fuller, higher life.

But we have also seen that according to Zoroastrianism allotment of heaven and hell is not the final destiny of man. One is not damned to hell eternally. The idea of ultimate destiny of man is full of high optimism. Even the sinners will ultimately have the opportunity to share the membership of a world full of good, pleasure and happiness. Damnation to hell is only transitional. It may be very long but it is not eternal. Thus Zoroastrianism promises a very happy and elevated life for all its followers in the ultimate analysis. The ultimate destiny of man is sound to be good and great, because Ahura Mazda is essentially of the nature of good. But it is up to man himself whether he would like to expedite his attainment of the final destiny or he would delay it by his own acts of unrighteousness and sin. Ahura Mazda is kind and great enough to grant in life of eternal blessing to everybody.

Ethics and ways of Prayer etc

We have said that Zoroastrianism as preached by Zoroaster is a great ethical monotheism and therefore natural ethical virtues play a dominant role in a religious man's life here, Zoroaster as we have seen, preached good thought (Humate) good word (Hukta) and good deed (Harshta) to be the essential virtues or duties for every religious man, Ahura Mazda, the supreme Lord, is all good and he requires no worship from many other a life of goodness. Living a righteous life is all that is required in the religion of Zoroaster Quite in consonance with his three basic virtues mentioned above, Zoroaster also wants men to inculcate the virtues of truthfulness justice, compassion, chastity, charity, honesty, purity, care of cattle, service of human beings etc. We can thus see that all virtues of higher religious life are preached by Zoroaster, for he followers of his religion to inculcate. Zoroastrianism therefore, in its essentials is an out and out ethical religion although like many other religions, in case of later developments is made room within it for many kinds of retrials and ceremonies.

Zoroastrian worship mainly consists in offering prayers to Ahura Mazda requesting him to offer help for living a righteous life. Thus even the Zoroastrian prayer is mainly ethical in nature. No sacrifice other than offering sandalwood to sacred flames existing in Zoroastrianism. There are fire temples in which sacred flames burn externally. Priests tend these and Zoroastrian people often visit these temples with sandalwood to offer to the burning flames and to receive ashes of these sacred flames blood sacrifice is strictly prohibited in Zoroastrianism.

We find here a great contrast between Hindu religion and the religion of Zoroaster. There is no offering of flowers within at home on temples sandalwood burning sticks, showing

arati before the goddesses or god but there is a system of burning sticks both at home and temples known as ‘Hom’ and the ashes are put in their foreheads as sign of purity.

Fire is regarded as very pure by the Zoroastrians. Although fire is not the direct object of worship or devotion, it is a symbol of divine purity. The priest while tending the fire wear surgical makes on their faces so that their breath may not contaminate the sacred fire. Dead bodies are also not burnt by the Zoroastrians with the same fear of contaminating fire theragary. As a matter of fact, they do not even bury the dead bodies into graves. They have a peculiar custom in this regard. They have a specific place called the Tower of silence for the funeral of the dead. At this tower of silence, dead bodies are exposed on raised platforms so that the vultures may pick the flesh from the bones. The bones devoid of flesh are then thrown after a few days into a deep well dug nearby.

This is a crude method of getting rid of the dead bodies. We know that Islam and Christians put the dead bodies in their graves but the Hindus burn it in fire. This is quite a contrast between the three world religions.

Parshism and the Indo Aryan Religion of the Rg-Veda

Considering the historical fact that once the Indo-Aryans lived together and spoke the same language there should be much in common with the Gatha, Zendo Vesta and the Rg Veda.

- 1) As noted earlier the Indo-Aryans and Iranians worshipped together Indra- Varuna-Mitra-Asvins. So, on the whole they had the same kind of religion.
- 2) Both Parsism and Rg-Vedic religion regarded seargapapti as the highest destiny or summum bonum.
- 3) Both religions regarded the life of a house-holder as very important and did not encourage sanyasa.
- 4) Later on two religions differed in their emphases.
 - 1) Parsism kept close to moral view of life. Opposed to it was Rg Vedic religion which believed in the efficacy of animal sacrifice.
 - 2) Zoroastrianism held fast to monotheism. In contrast, Rg Vedic religion remained polytheist and at most went so far as henotheism. And towards the close of Rg-Vedic age chose monism.
 - 3) Zoroastrianism preached against idolatry and encouraged iconoclasm. But it appears that the Rg Vedic religion was not opposed to image. Worship but there is not much evidence for image worship in Rg Vedic religion. However it might not be in favour of iconoclasm.

Parshism and Modern Hinduism (Sanatana Dharma)

Rg-Vedic Hinduism has vastly changed into its present form which is better known as sanatana Hindu Dharma. This classical Hinduism has marked differences from Parsianism.

- 1) Parsianism does have classes but not caste. Even when classes of priestly people, warriors, traders and artisans are mentioned there is not mention of the shudras. Shudras are not really artisans. There sole dharma is to serve all other castes.
- 2) Even when four classes are mentioned, the warrior caste

- is considered superior to the priestly class. And this is so in the discourse of Buddha also.
- 3) Hinduism believes in periodic creation and dissolution. Hence there is the cycle of creation and dissolution.
 - 4) Parsiism favours the life of a house holder because the house holder is the mainstay of society. In contrast Hinduism accepts the important place of house holder but regards sanyos (remuneration) as the highest station of life in this earthly existence. Zoroastrianism has no place for animal sacrifice. In Hinduism animal sacrifice is no longer a popular creed. Only in Kali Puja or the worship of the Shakti, animal sacrifice is still practice. But this has almost dying out.
 - 5) One important thing in Zoroastrianism is that there is no place of Karma vada for the simple reason that there is no doctrine of rebirth in it. However, Hinduism has accepted the non-Aryan doctrine of rebirth and thereby it is committed karmavada i.e. the present life with its good and evil is the result of past karma.
- [3] J. M. Chatterjee, the Ethical conceptions p 511- 512
 - [4] Yama – 51 : 12
 - [5] M.N. Dhalla, Ibid P/36.
 - [6] Yas XIX 9 and the note of Martin Haug. Ibid P/188

Sects

The only surviving group following Zoroastrian faith is that of the Parsis living in India. These Parsees are supposed to be descended from a group of Zoroastrians who were banished from Persia by Muslim persecutors in about 716 AD. These parsees brought with them the sacred fire which all burns on perpetually tended in their so called fire-temples. Of course the religion of these Parsees has been mainly Zoroastrian, but it has not been without the impact of Hinduism on it. For example, the system of heredity priesthood has been adopted into it from Hinduism two sects of Parshis may be distinguished – the schahansshahis and the Kadmis. The Chief difference lies in the fact is that of a fact of history – as to when the fall of the last king of the sassanian Kings of Persia (the yazed gard) took place. The day of the fall is observed by the Parees as the day of Yazedgard, the New Years Day.

2. Conclusion

To sum up it can be very well said that it is rather an offshoot of Hinduism but being very old rather the oldest religion of the world but with a difference. Zoroaster teaches that there is only one God and a continuing struggle in the world between forces of light and darkness. It is a monotheistic religion and Ahura Mazda is the one supreme God who is all powerful, all wise, all good and is regarded as the creator and ruler fo the world. It also believes in the existence of angles and also evil spirits. Fire is the symbol of purity. It also like every other religion believes in human soul which is not destroyed with bodily death. God's archangel keeps a complete record of every man's deeds on earth. The soul on its way to heaven and hell has to cross a bridge (called the Chinvat bridge) The bridge becomes hard to work as on the edge of the sword and is tormented by an old hog. If it falls on the bridge other wise heaven is its suitable place. With the fall of the sassaniana kings of Persia (the Yezedgard) took place. The day is observed by the Parsees as New Years Day.

References

- [1] C. Bouquet opcit pp 99-100
- [2] Yama : 30 – 12