



Zoroastrian Identity

California Zoroastrian Center - Council on Persian Culture

National identity has its roots in culture and culture in History. Culture is a collection of thoughts, words, and deeds of a nation, which have evolved in the course of Millenniums and in the form of written and oral history.

The Iranian culture is made of two fundamental and distinct parts, which have manifested in two different forms.

1. **Iran's Zoroastrian Culture** with a historical record of roughly 4000 years encompassing five enduring dynasties, starting with the legendary Kianians and historical Medes (Mad), Achaemenians (Hakhamaneshian), Parthian (Ashkanian), and Sassanid (Sassanian)

2. **Iran's Islamic Culture** with a recorded history of about 1400 years encompassing 89 dynasties most of whom have been of non-Iranian origins.

Iran's Zoroastrian Culture is made of the following two parts:

- **The Zoroastrian Religion**
- **The Zoroastrian Tradition**

The Zoroastrian Religion

The Zoroastrian Religion, which represents the ethical aspect of the culture, is based solely on the hymns of Zarathushtra, which reflects his wisdom and thinking. These hymns are preserved in the book of GATHA (songs in Persian). The Gatha shows us the way of good life for all humans and how to make this world a better place for everyone to live through achieving freedom and liberty based on three paramount principals of “**GOOD THOUGHTS, GOOD WORDS, and GOOD DEEDS**”. These three pillars describe the fundamentals of Zoroastrian Doctrine.

The Zoroastrian Tradition

The Zoroastrian tradition which comprise the historical aspects of Iran's rich Zoroastrian culture encompass various written documents of geographical, chronological, medical, health, hygiene, laws, religion, environment, ecology and administration of urban life. These documents have been written by many scholars and are the most valued remnants of Ancient Iran and are collectively preserved in **Avesta**. Therefore, Avesta is not only a selection of Zoroastrian daily prayers but also the manifest of history and culture of an ancient people, whose deep roots extend in annals of history.

Some of these documents, such as Vandidad, Dinkard, Ardaviraf Nameh, Bondehesh, etc. were derived from dominant economical, social and many times harsh political conditions of their times



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imposed on Zoroastrians in their homeland of Iran and throughout Millennia. They have been written and accumulated after and sometimes before the time of Zarathushtra and in many cases are not in accordance with Gatha. Therefore, they should not be considered as religious doctrine but more appropriately in historical perspectives and as a set of customs and traditions of an ancient and proud nation.

The information, provided in the accompanying pages is intended for the interested individuals and organizations and for endeared friends of the Ancient Persian culture. They are extracted from the Gatha of Zarathushtra, a collection of Hymns and Songs documenting words of wisdom and thought provoking advice emanating about 4000 years ago to this date and applicable to the modern life of the 21st century as well as for endless times to come.

ANCIENT IRAN AND THE ZOROASTRIAN RELIGION

Ancient Iran is the birthplace of the Zoroastrian religion. The greater Persian Plateau extending vastly from Indus River on the east to Mediterranean Sea on the west, to Ural Mountains on the north, and to the sea of Yemen on the south with multi-culture, multiple ethnicities living in peace has been the cradle of the religion. As such the Zoroastrian religion is a product of our ancestors' way of life and their culture. Since the religion is founded on knowledge, logics, and progressive thinking, its ideals are consistent with the desires of the contemporary world and have been the focus of attention by scholars for hundreds of years. The primal emphasis on freedom of thoughts, choice, democracy and liberty offered by Zoroastrianism is consistent with the needs of modern society.

In recent decades many advanced organizations of international caliber from around the world and numerous bright scientists and public leaders have paid attention to the Zoroastrian doctrine.

It is our hope that this doctrine can be responsive to the needs of the modern world and its critical minded citizenry.

THE PILLARS OF THE ZOROASTRIAN RELIGION

The Zoroastrian religion, ancient and historic but not old or outdated, before being a religious philosophy, is the method of good living based on ethical principals and moral standards. It reflects the sublime thinking and enlightened outlook of a highly learned by a man named **Ashu(1) Zarathushtra**, born in the Iranian highlands from a **Spanteman Aryan** family. He never claimed to be a prophet! His teachings of friendship, honesty and righteousness bear the global messages of progress and good fortune for the entire world. It does not address or mention a specific race, ethnicity or nationality.

GATHA AND AVESTA

Gatha is the name of the thought provoking songs of Ashu Zarathushtra, and the foundation of the Zoroastrian religion. The accumulated written documents of various thoughts, practices, traditions and customs, since the inception of the faith to date have been compiled in the **Avesta**. Gatha is the precious jewel of Avesta, and it is the only proclaimed words of Ashu Zarathushtra himself.



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FRAVAHAR, AHURA MAZDA – FIRE & LIGHT

Fravahar is not Ahura Mazda. It is a symbol of uplifting progress, evolution, perfection and bliss for man, based on three paramount principals of GOOD THOUGHTS, GOOD WORDS, and GOOD DEEDS as shown in the three-sectioned wing of Fravahar: the limitless universe (the large central ring), combined with two essential ideals of wisdom (the facial features of Fravahar) and love (the smaller ring of devotion to trust in the hand of Fravahar), moving forward and upward leading man toward progress, righteousness, and the blissful destiny (the spread wings of Fravahar).

Ahura Mazda is The Supreme Intellect, the creator of universe and the Lord of Life and Wisdom, as **Ferdowsi**, the great Persian Epic Poet has called him in **Shahnameh** - the Book of Kings. He is the only God, supreme and unique. He has no physical attributes but is a genuine friend, an all-present companion to man in his struggle in life against evil.

Fire, being the purest form of worldly substance purifies and exterminates the unclean, provides energy and warmth. And light as an offshoot of fire, made of photon particles is the purest form of Energy in the vast universe. Fire and light overcome darkness and enable vision, and have been chosen by Zoroastrians as their prayer altar and a symbolic link to Ahura Mazda, The Supreme Intellect.

BEHDIN

The word '**Behdin**' in Avesta is used for someone who is a adherent of Ashu Zarathushtra. Behdin is a Farsi word-meaning bearer of Good Religion. Behdinan is the plural form for Behdin. Thus Behdin's objectives should be betterment of the living world.

The '**Good Religion**' is a religion of choice, not a mandatory obligation forced on us by a supreme and fearful entity. In another word the good religion is reflective rather than prescriptive as many other religions are. Each person can by his or her own mind, personal preferences and free will select what he or she wants to believe in for conducting his or her life.

"Wisdom is man's means for choosing the right or wrong path for living." (Gatha 31-12) (2)

THE TEACHINGS OF ASHU ZARATHUSHTRA

The teachings of Ashu Zarathushtra are based on ethics, humanism, logics and goodness depicted on three Paramount pillars of "**GOOD THOUGHTS, GOOD WORDS, and GOOD DEEDS**". Gatha tells us;

"There is one path only and that is the Righteous Path. Compliance with it leads to the best way of life." (Gatha 43-9)



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DUALITY IN ZOROASTRIANISM

Gatha tells us that good and evil are the two opposing forces and the product of human mind. Good Thoughts or Spenta Menu is opposed with Bad Thoughts or Angra Menu (Ahriman). These are the philosophical description of man's thinking processes. They have nothing to do with believing in duality of having two gods in Zoroastrianism. Ahriman is not a competing supreme entity against Ahura Mazda. Ahura Mazda is the monotheistic supreme creator of the universe. (Gatha 30-3,4,5)

ASHA OR WORLD ORDER

The word 'ASHA' in the vision of Zarathushtra means the world order. ASHA is based on logical organization of physical laws that govern the entire creation in our universe. As such there are no superstitions in Zoroastrianism.

It should be noted that interfering with this orderly system yields undesirable consequences damaging the quality of life. A good example in our time is the environmental pollution. Fortunately nowadays, scientists and researchers with their advances in science and technology have discovered some laws of Asha and know how to protect man from the catastrophes of man-made events resulting in mental and material losses to the living world.

"Ahura Mazda, May we get closer to you by following the rules of Asha and discover the values of our body and soul." (Gatha 28-2)

PERFECTION

From the ethical perspective and clear conscience man has to take steps toward perfection to reach spiritual wholeness. This strategy is based on the concept of evolution. Fravahar symbolizes the ideal of perfection in Zoroastrianism.

"The reward for well doers is attainment of perfection and spiritual power." (Gatha 31-21)

"Only with thinking good and having clear conscience one can achieve perfection"(Gatha 33-8)

FREEDOM OF THOUGHTS, WILL AND CHOICE

The most precious gift of Ahura Mazda to man is his rightful Freedom. In Zoroastrian religion, no one has the right to take away the freedom of thoughts, will and choice from anyone. In Gatha (30-2) Ashu Zarathushtra has reminded us that man is free to choose his way as he wishes, however has high hopes for man to use his good mind, along with the help of Ahura Mazda, to reach the right path and happiness.

HUMAN RIGHTS

The Zoroastrian religion considers all men and women equal regardless of creed, ethnicity, race, nationality, religious persuasion, political views, etc. Superior is only the one who follows the path of "GOOD THOUGHTS, GOOD WORDS, and GOOD DEEDS." In Zarathushtra's messages documents



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in Gatha, happiness, salvation, and good fortunes have been the desire and the focal points for all peoples of the world regardless of their backgrounds.

The first Declaration of Human Rights issued by Cyrus The Great, a Zoroastrian king of Achaemenian Dynasty in 538 B.C. roughly 2500 years ago was based on the teachings of Ashu Zarathushtra in equality of men.

"God has created man free" (Gatha 31-11)

THE VALUE OF HUMAN STATUS AND LIFE

In the Zoroastrian religion, the value of human status is considered to be equal with Ahura Mazda's rank, provided men and women promote righteousness, goodness and betterment of life. In this belief system, the world is a sacred place and life is a gift of God. Therefore, it is absolutely worthy of protection and preservation to keep life intact and in good faith. The burning torch of life is to be passed on to the next generations, brighter and shinier than before.

" The ultimate goal of life is to become one with Ahura Mazda."(Gatha 45-11)

"Ahura Mazda is the kind friend and savior for all." (Gatha 43-14)

EQUALITY OF MEN AND WOMEN

In Zoroastrian religion, men and women enjoy equal rights. Wherever in Gatha, Ashu Zarathushtra speaks to people, he mentions men and women together. In religious writings, there are always references to good men and women of beneficence. (Gatha 30-2)

HAPPINES AND BLISS

In the Zoroastrian religion, God created the world to provide happiness, and in the rays of Good Thoughts and Love, peace and tranquility were granted for man's bliss. (Gatha 44-6)

The foundation of worldwide happiness is summarized in the following Hymn of Gatha:

Happiness belongs to the one who brings happiness to others." (Gatha 43-1)

Darius the Great, a Zoroastrian king of Achaemenian Dynasty depicts his well wishes for all, as carved on bas-relief slates of ancient remains of the Persian Empire.

RESISTANCE TO CRUELTY AND ABUSE

In the Zoroastrian religion, one must resist evildoers and abusers of power. First, an attempt should be made to approach the abuser(s) with kindness and friendship and direct him to the right path. Otherwise, resistance and fighting the evil is the next course of action, to achieve truth and eradicate lies.

"To promote truth and righteousness one must resist lies and liars." (Gatha 43-13)



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RENEWAL, RENOVATION, AND RE-CREATION

One of the outstanding philosophies of the Zoroastrian religion is renewal, renovation, and re-creation of the living world. Regression and non-creativity is discouraged and looked down in this faith.

“We wish to be amongst those who promote the world to progress and development and lead man to achieve righteousness and purity.” (Gatha 30-9)

DESTINY AND PREDESTINY

In Ashu Zarathushtra's vision, one draws his own destiny by his thoughts, words, and deeds. Men and women have freedom of choice, but the consequences of their choices are the logical reaction of their actions. This is part of ASHA and is governed based on the physical laws of action and reaction.

“Good luck and bad luck are the making of one’s deeds respectively.” (Gatha 31-20)

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

In Gatha 32-12 killing of animals is prohibited. In Gatha 32-10 protection of useful elements of life has been pointed out distinctly. Keeping the environment clean is one’s religious duty. The major elements of life, namely, Air, Water, Earth and Fire must be kept clean at all times.

THE FINAL MESSAGE

Let us point to this final fact that:

The Message of Ashu Zarathushtra is fulfillment of peace, love, hope, happiness and optimism

*FOOTNOTES: (1) The word **ASHU** with its plural form as **ASHAVAN** is applicable to someone who has a clean conscience for good thoughts, words, and deeds, plus clean demeanor and performance. He is conscientious for keeping his body, attire, home, district, city, county, region, country and the world clean. He is a pragmatic environmentalist for both the material and spiritual world.*
(2) Translation of Gatha by Mobed Mobedan, the late Rostam Shahzadi