

CONVERSION IN ZOROASTRIANISM

The Truth Behind the Trumpery

Zarathushtra preached a religion which demanded of individuals responsibility for reflective moral living, and transformed human existence from social abrasion to social harmony. He wished us to become thereby HEALERS OF EXISTENCE. Many who consider themselves Zoroastrians, mainly among the Parsi community, seem to claim that this message was addressed by Zarathushtra to a specific tribe. Hence, if someone of nonZoroastrian parentage, upon hearing the message of Zarathushtra, and being convinced by it, declares himself or herself to be a Zoroastrian, such a claim would, and should, be rejected by the religious community of Zoroastrians. This view, though widely accepted, is intellectually absurd and morally inhuman and bigoted, beside being totally incompatible with the teachings of the Prophet.

That this view is incorrect, both conceptually and textually, is what we wish to present here. We examine briefly the theological perspective on the matter, and collect the various texts where the issue is adverted to. Our contribution is not wholly original: the position we hold, viz. the universality of Zarathushtra's teachings, had been affirmed in a pamphlet prepared in the first decade of this century by scholarly Zoroastrian priests; it was also supported by eminent Western scholars of Zoroastrianism. Several percipient dasturs over the last eighty years had expressed remarkably similar views. In recent years a pamphlet addressing this issue was published by the Zoroastrian priest Dr Kersey ANTIA.

The fallacious and bigoted view nevertheless continues to be promulgated. We were, however, disconcerted by recent articles from highly respected High priests of Bombay, and express our disquietude at their arbitrary joint statement that a principle exists by which CONVERSION IS NOT ACCEPTED BY ZOROASTRIANISM, and further, that CONVERSION IS BOTH ILLEGAL AND INVALID (Parsiana, November 1995, pp.29-34; Bombay Samachar, 24th December 1995) . Apart from the fact that no such principle has EVER arisen within our universalist religious system, it is exceedingly difficult to understand just what they collectively mean by "illegal and invalid" -- which LEGAL criteria have been applied, and why, and on what basis can one discredit an individual's informed and deeply held SPIRITUAL belief, and its practice, as LACKING VALIDITY! Why are quasilegal constraints sought to legislate against clearly formulated RELIGIOUS precepts? Conversion is not some idle hypothetical problem which can be dismissed through misconstruing and disinformation. It cannot be made to vanish through arbitrary denials and empty nuances.

Conversion is a practice apparently unacceptable among the Parsis today, and has been so for some 150 years. It is a social practice of the community for the establishment of which. good reasons were perceived in the socio-political environment of the times. It must be clearly recognized, though, that it is a matter of social practice affected by social conditions, and NOT a matter of theological doctrine.

A theology like Zarathushtra's, based upon the grasp of the eternal and universal Truth by the divinely endowed Good Mind enabling us to implement the Righteous Order in existence, is so clearly a universal message that it would be altogether irrational to limit its acceptance and practice to a community identified by biological ancestry. Identifying religious commitment by birth is an extremely primitive form of tribalism, entirely incompatible with Gathic teaching. We are aware of the bizarre thesis that God places each soul into the womb of a

mother belonging to a tribe and expects the individual so born to believe in the religious doctrines of a tribe. Apart from the intrinsic absurdity of this view, the slightest exposure to the words of Zarathushtra, with his emphasis on individual judgement and responsibility, enables us to recognize the anti-Zoroastrian character of this view.

We have long been acquainted with the suspect methodology by which attempts to assert the reverse of our religion's injunctions regarding conversion have been made. They are in the nature of factoid claims achieved by careful contrivance and are simply not probative.

We encounter rather weak efforts at glossing our texts at the same time as claiming to "correctly" interpret them. Being groundless, they do not stand up to scrutiny, and yet it appears that the fictionalizing process is energetically, and deliberately, pursued.

Among the minor but blatant fictions is the entirely false invocation of the Qisseh-ye Sanjan's "five conditions" as proof that Jaydev Rana granted asylum to our forefathers provided that no conversion of his Hindu subjects was attempted. There is NO SUCH CONDITION among the five to which we supposedly agreed.

Our eminently rational religion primarily urges a world-view based on clear-mindedness whereby the Good Mind aspect of Ahura Mazda may be attained in quest of Truth. Its texts -- from the Gathas of Zarathushtra to the Persian Rivayats -- extend over some two thousand eight hundred years, in the long course of which they responded to religious evolution, the conflicting ideologies of newer religions, and the unpredictable forces of a rapidly changing history. But understanding the theology enables one to recognize immediately its universal message.

WE STRESS THAT NONE OF OUR LATER TEXTS CONTRADICT EARLIER RATIONALIZING PROCESSES, EVEN LESS THEIR UNIVERSALIST PURPOSE: THEY ARE CONSISTENT THROUGHOUT ON THE SUBJECT OF ACCEPTANCE AND/OR CONVERSION.

That these texts may be distorted to suppress or yield meanings entirely alien or out of context is a wilful exercise against which we must take issue. Our priests surely should apply religious laws, for they too are subject to them, and not obscure socio-economic regulations which vaguely find their origins in dubious traditions. And the vociferous followers of such traditions would do well to also learn from our texts, being the root and branch of our universalist religion.

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