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## A Comparative Study of Religions

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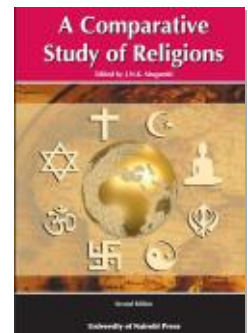
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## The Rise of Zoroastrianism

*D.W. Waruta*

### **Introduction**

In the next two chapters we are going to study Zoroastrianism. Of the four near-eastern religions which we shall consider in this unit, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Zoroastrianism is the second oldest, next to Judaism. It has had an important influence on the other three religions.

Zoroastrianism originated in Iran or Ancient Persia. Ling describes ancient Persia as:

“the true Middle East...., the meeting ground of East and West, the bridge between the culture of the Mediterranean world and that of India, the link between two widely differing civilizations” (Ling, p.76).

However, the inhabitants of ancient Persia (Iran) were closely related to the Aryan invaders of India and the early settlers of Greece and Rome. It is thought highly likely that they all had a common origin. This is suggested by the correspondence of the names Iran and Aryan, by the similarity of their gods, and similarities in their languages.

### **Pre-Zoroastrian Religion**

The pre-Zoroastrian Iranian religion was very much like the religion of the Aryans who invaded India in the second millennium B.C. and which is reflected in the Vedas. The religion was basically polytheistic. There were also numerous spirits both good and evil.

The popular gods were mainly personifications of prominent nature phenomena or powers such as the sun, the moon, stars, the sky, the earth, fire, water, winds and storm. The gods were known as the daevas. Some of the prominent daevas included: Intar or Indara, (rain-god and dragon-slayer); Mithra (god of war and light, perhaps also a sun-god, and supporter of treaties and pacts widely known among peoples of Aryan origin); Vayu (the wind-god); Yima (the ruler of the underworld of the dead believed to have been the first man to die); Fravshi or Fathers (the benevolent, protective ancestral spirits).

These Persian gods corresponded, respectively, to the following Vedic gods of the Indian Aryans; Indra; Mitra; Vayu; Yama and Pitaras.

Ahura Mazda became supreme over the other gods of Persian religion and corresponded to the vedic sky god. Asura Varuna. The latter, however, did not become the only god as Ahura Mazda did after Zarathustra's teachings. Parrinder points out that:

“Cyrus, the Persian ruler who conquered Media in 549 BC and captured Babylon and its empire, including Palestine in 538, was a worshipper of Ahura Mazda, “Lord Wisdom”. But his devotion to Ahura Mazda does not seem to have come from Zarathustra's teaching. He seems to have recognized the Babylonian gods as well as the Israelite God (see the book of Ezra).<sup>1</sup>

The worship of pre-Zoroastrian Persian gods involved numerous sacrifices to them, offered in open spaces as well as at altars, with priest as officiators. An intoxicating beverage from the sacred plant Laoma (Vedic soma) was taken by the worshippers.

Fire worship or adoration was practiced (compare the worship of Agni, the fire-god, in Vedic religion). The fire was lit ceremonially, the grass around the altar was sprinkled with Laoma juice, then portions of the burnt sacrifice were placed

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<sup>1</sup> Parrinder, E.G. *The World's Living Religions*, p. 63.

there for the gods. Before the sacrificial animal was slaughtered, it was touched with a bundle of certain sacred leaves or broughs; the worshipper held these before his face during the adoration of the sacred fire. Fire adoration has continued to be an important feature of Zoroastrian worship all through its history to the present day.

At the time of the rise of Zoroastrianism, the way of life and the economy of the ancient Iranians had gone through significant changes. The people were no longer purely nomads; they were mostly settled pastoralists and agriculturalists. As Noss observes, the old religion was “ill suited to their mode of life and developing economy. Its animal sacrifices were becoming increasingly burdensome”.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Founder: Zarathustra or Zoroaster**

The name of the founder of Zoroastrianism was Zarathustra. But he came to be more popularly known by the Greek version of the name, Zoroaster, from which the religion got its name.

The overwhelming tradition and view is that he was a historical and not a legendary figure, although our knowledge about him (mostly from the portion of Zoroastrian scriptures known as the Gathas) is scanty. He was born and worked in Iran, which was part of ancient Persia. He was doubtlessly a great prophet, sometimes referred to as the Prophet of Iran.

His time has been given variously, between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC. But the weightier evidence seems to favour the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC. The date of his death is given by some traditions as 547 BC at the age of 77, although one scholar, Braden, gives the 7<sup>th</sup> Century as the date thought most probable by many.

Zarathustra’s father was a priest of a pastoral tribe. According to later traditions, this great saviour’s birth had been prophesied 3000 years earlier, and then again 300 years before it took place.

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<sup>2</sup> Noss, J.B. *Man’s Religions*, p. 436.

His birth was miraculous: the glory of Ahura Mazda came down onto his mother-to-be (a fifteen year old unmarried girl). At birth he laughed. His life was miraculously preserved many times.

From early youth, Zarathustra showed great compassion and concern for others; he also showed great interest in finding out religious truth. He wandered about making enquiries from those wise people who cared to answer his questions. He would also spend long periods in seclusion in meditation. Some Greek sources say he lived as a recluse in a mountain cave for a number of years, and that he remained silent for seven years.

### **The Prophetic Call**

At around 30 years of age, he had a moving religious experience which constituted his divine prophetic call. The archangel called Vohu Manah (God Thought) who was a gigantic figure as big as nine men, appeared to him. He questioned him, then took him up in spiritual form to the presence of god (Ahura Madza, the Wise Lord).

Ahura Mazda was holding assembly with his attendant angels, and all of them shone with extremely bright light. He purified Zarathustra and appointed him his prophet. He also gave him instructions in the doctrines and duties of the true religion.

For the next eight or ten years, he continued to have vision-meetings with the other six archangels who gave him further instructions. He also had seven further conferences with Ahura Mazda. All this helped to strengthen his original revelation and his prophetic call.

The true religion which Zarathustra felt divinely called to preach and teach was the doctrine and the worship of the one true and only God, the Supreme Being whose name was Ahura Mazda (wise Lord) in opposition to existing polytheism. He also believed that he was divinely appointed and sent to convert all living men to this true religion and to make this world progressive.

## **Zarathustra's Mission**

Zarathustra set out on his divine mission of preaching and teaching the true faith in the one God, Ahura Mazda, and denouncing the current polytheism, idolatry and evil living.

He met great opposition, especially from the numerous priests who resisted reform in their religion; for many years he had hardly any success. He resisted great temptations from the evil spirit, Angra Mainyu, who wanted him to give up his faith in and worship of Ahura Mazda. He conquered these temptations by the use of appropriate sacred texts. He was also strengthened and sustained by his unshakable conviction in the divine mission for which Ahura Mazda had called, appointed and sent him. After ten years of preaching and teaching he won his first convert, his cousin.

Later, in eastern Iran, he converted King Vishtaspa but only after two years of hard effort and great struggle with the numerous priests who surrounded and dominated the King. With their many animal sacrifices and magical rituals for all kinds of purposes, these priests are presented in the Avestha as a greedy lot.

Vishtaspa's conversion marked the real beginning of the establishment and growth of Zoroastrianism in Iran. Members of the King's court and family followed him into the new or rather reformed faith. Vishtaspa then used his power to propagate Zoroastrianism, which became the religion of the state.

Later Vishtaspa was defeated in a war and his capital was occupied. According to tradition, Zarathustra was killed during that war.

By the time of his death, the new (or rather reformed) faith was sufficiently well established and rooted among the Iranians to enable its continued growth and expansion.

### **Activity**

1. At the time Zoroastrianism arose, there were already among the ancient Iranians a feeling of dissatisfaction with existing religion. Why was this?
2. Describe Zarathustra's prophetic call.
3. Explain the main difficulties Zarathustra met at the start of his mission.
4. List and comment on some important similarities between the religion of the ancient inhabitants of Iran, and that of the early Aryan invaders of India.

### **Further Reading**

Braden, C.S. *The World's Religions, a History*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954.

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Ling, T. *A History of Religion of East and West*, London: Macmillan 1968.

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