

Conversion in Zoroastrianism – A Myth Exploded

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We have read with grave concern reports appearing in a certain section of the press regarding some irresponsible members of our priestly class residing in North America having performed the so-called Naojot of a 27 year old American of Christian faith, Mr. Joseph Peterson, on Saturday, 5 March 1983, at New York.

The press reports do not say what happened to Mr. Peterson's baptism and subsequent confirmation to his ancestral religion, and it is not known whether he renounced it before the Naojot.

Conversion against the Zoroastrian religion

The so-called Naojot of Mr. Peterson is against the Zoroastrian religion, tradition, and long-standing customs, manners and practices. In their long and chequered history, even during the days of their empires, the Zoroastrians had never adopted a policy of conversion or proselytism. A lot has been said and written from the Zoroastrian view-point against this 'conversion', 'proselytism' or, as it is euphemistically called, 'acceptance'.

The story of scholarship is a subterfuge

In defence of this so-called Naojot, it is claimed that Mr. Peterson is a scholar of the Zoroastrian religion, but no details have been given. This claim to scholarship is a mockery of both religion and scholarship, and at the most it is only a subterfuge.

During the last two centuries many great non-Zoroastrian scholars of India, Europe and America have studied the Zoroastrian religion, its languages, literature, history, customs and manners; some have devoted their lives to the study of our sacred scriptures and have published and are publishing innumerable books and articles on these subjects, but none of these erudite scholars of international fame has ever thought of discarding his or her ancestral religion and adopting the Zoroastrian faith.

A flippant dramatic fiction

The so-called Naojot is an insult, mockery and a cruel joke perpetrated against both the Zoroastrian and Christian religions. In defence of this so-called Naojot, it is argued that 'a **sadro** does not make a Zoroastrian', and it is also claimed that Mr. Paterson is practicing the Zoroastrian religion for the last six years ! If it is so, where was the necessity of the Naojot ceremony? This clearly indicates that the farcical rite was only a flippant dramatic action on the part of Mr. Peterson, the irresponsible performers at the initiation and their advocates.

The alleged 'Freedom of Choice'

The proponents of conversion claim that the Zoroastrian religion grants 'freedom of choice'. In other words, they argue that any one can be converted to the Zoroastrian religion, and in support thereof they quote Yasna 30.2. It has been pointed out often that this is misunderstanding and misconstruing of the original Avestan text. In connection therewith we quote from our write-up published in **Jam-e-Jamshed** of 6 March 1983, **Bombay Samachar** of 13 March 1983, and the March issue of **Parsiana** :

“The question of conversion is subtly introduced also under the guise of ‘moral choices’. This is a gross misinterpretation of the ancient text and misguidance of the public. The Gathic stanza Yasna 30.2 is often quoted to show that Zarathushtra grants freedom of ‘moral choices’, in other words, enjoins conversion. To say the least, this is not correct. The said stanza, Yasna 30.2, may be translated as follows : ‘Do you hear by ears with best mind, do you see by eye-sight : decision of two choices, man for man, for one’s person before the great consummation, to be accomplished for us, O thinking ones !’

Avesta **averanao** is in the dual number : ‘of two choices’. These two choices are mentioned in Yasna 30.3, and they are, ‘good and bad’. The said stanza, Yasna 30.2, lays down that man has to choose from two paths of life : good and bad. Man is free to choose any one, either good or bad, but a warning has been given in Yasna 30.4 and other stanzas that the result of good will be good and result of bad will be bad (e.g. Yasna 43.5). There is no idea of freedom of choices or conversion in the said Gathic stanza. In support of this interpretation, we quote another Gathic Stanza, Yasna 45.3 : ‘Then do I declare the foremost of this life, which the wise Ahura Mazda revealed unto me : Those of you who shall not practise here this holy word (**manthra**), as I think and speak, unto them shall be woe at the end of life.’”

The principle of Divine Justice

Further, the advocates of conversion quote another Gathic stanza, Yasna 31.3, and argue that the Zoroastrian religion favours conversion of ‘all living beings’. This again is a wrong interpretation. The said stanza has been explained already in detail (see H. K. Mirza, **Conversion Caucas**, Bombay 1971, 6-10) and should be translated:

‘Through the Spirit and through the Fire, Thou hast ordained, and through Asha Thou hast promised, that reward for the two fighters (**ranoibya**) - that (is) the ordinance for the wise ones – that, O Mazda, teach us to learn through the tongue of Thy mouth, so that I may convince all living ones. Avesta **ranoibya** in the dual number ‘two fighters, rivals, competitors’ used in this and other Gathic stanzas represents ‘two parties – of good and bad. There is no word for ‘faith’ or ‘religion’ and no idea to convey ‘conversion’ or ‘proselytism.’

In this stanza Zarathushtra wants to convince his listeners about the ‘reward’ ordained for the ‘two parties’. In other words, he wants to convince about the principle of Divine Justice – that bliss shall be for the good and punishment for the wicked, as explicitly stated in connection with **ranoibya** ‘two fighters’ also in Yasna 51.9. This Divine Justice will ultimately be administered to all mankind at the time of Renovation. Zarathushtra emphasizes this fact and wants to convince ‘all living ones’, not only the Zoroastrians, about the universal principle of Divine Justice.

The principle of Divine Justice incompatible with practice of conversion

From the view-point of basic religious belief and preaching, the people professing religions may be divided into two groups :

1. Those who preach that man will be judged by God according to the actions performed in this life.
2. Those who preach that man will be judged by God according to the religion professed in this world.

The first group, to which the Zoroastrian religion belongs, lays down the principle of Divine Justice : good for good, bad for bad. On the contrary, the second group believes that whatever a man does here in this life, he will go to heaven if he professed a certain religion.

Naturally and logically, the religions of the first group cannot and do not preach and practise conversion. The very idea of conversion is contrary and repugnant to the principle of Divine Justice. Hence Zoroastrianism, which emphatically inculcates the principle of Divine Justice, cannot logically preach conversion, and the very idea is foreign to it.

The propagandists of the religions of the second group preach that one can go to heaven simply by adopting a certain religion. They believe and preach that only the followers of that particular religion would and could go to heaven, and those professing any other religion shall have no place in heaven. Such propagandists can preach and practise conversion. Moreover, such propagandists believe that by converting a man of another religion they do an act of great merit, and thereby they can secure a better place in heaven ! Through this belief, they become fanatic convertors and would go to any extremes of believing that to kill a man of an alien religion, or get killed, is an act of merit and a way to secure a better place in heaven! In ancient times such fanatic propagandists willingly accepted so-called martyrdom by such deeds under any pretext. Hence such aggressive religious beliefs had become in ancient times a very fruitful source and a very fertile ground for trouble, strife and human misery.

Ancient Aryan heritage - spiritual values of human life and man's responsibility for his action in life

In common with the Zoroastrian religion, the ancient Aryan religion and culture lays down that there are spiritual values of human life, and that man is responsible for his actions. Thus, it also lays down the principle of Divine Justice explained above. This is an important heritage of the ancient Aryans. Since this is the main principle, there can never be any idea of conversion. The ancient Aryan words for 'initiation' had no idea of conversion for it was foreign to ancient Hinduism. The Vedic **diksha** indicates a life of 'religious studentship', and it is the ceremony of initiation of a **child** (particularly of a Brahman) to the religious studies. The Sanskrit word **dvija** 'twice born' is an epithet of the Aryans in general or of Brahmans in particular (see Macdonell, **Vedic Index I**, Varanasi 1958, 386). The 'twice born' indicates 'a man of any one of the first three classes, any Aryan, (especially) a Brahman, reborn through 'investiture with the sacred thread' (see Monier-Williams, **Sanskrit Dictionary**, 504). Moreover, the Sanskrit word **upanayana** is 'the act of leading to or near, bringing . . . in which the **boy** is invested with the sacred thread . . . (different for three castes) and thus endowed with second or spiritual birth and qualified to learn the Veda by heart' (ibid., 201).

'An alien religion is perilous' : The Bhagvad Gita'

None of the Aryan words explained above indicate any idea of conversion. **The Bhagvad-Gita** expressly states that one should stick to one's religion, and that an alien religion is perilous (see R. C. Zaehner, **Hindu Scriptures**, London 1977, 26.5; **The Bhagvad-Gita, III. 35**) :

'Better one's own duty (**dharma**) (to perform)
though void of merit,
Than to do another's well;
Better to die within (the sphere of) one's own
duty;
Perilous is the duty of other men'.

‘Conversion’: A derogatory term in India

What has been stated above shows that ‘conversion’ was viewed with utmost disfavour. This is further supported by the words used for ‘to convert’ and ‘conversion’ in modern Indian languages. In Gujarati the words are thus explained. (સાર્થ ગુજરાતી જોડણી કોશ, નવજીવન, અમદાવાદ, 1015) : “વટલ (લા-) વું : હલકી મનાતી જતી કે ધર્મમાં જવું.” “વટાળ, - લો – વટલાવાપણુ; ંષ્ટતા.” The above meanings indicate that ‘conversion’ is regarded as ‘a corruption, a pollution.’

Misinterpretation of the Persian Rivayats.

In The **Persian Rivayats** (see B. N. Dhabhar, Bombay 1932, 275) ‘a grave-digger, a corpse-burner and a **darvand**’ are mentioned (but nothing has been stated about their religion), and a question is posed whether they can become Zoroastrians. From this it is argued that they were non-Zoroastrians. There is no reason to believe that they belonged to an alien religion. About 300 to 400 years ago, some Parsis, particularly those settled in places away from the centres of Zoroastrianism, had adopted non-Zoroastrian customs, habits and practices. This is indicated from the same source (**Persian Rivayats**, 108, 160, 162), and also from some suggestive Parsi surnames used even at present. In this context, the term **darvand** does not mean a non-Zoroastrian; it implies a Zoroastrian who has discarded Zoroastrian practices (see H. K. Mirza, **Conversion Caucas**, 13). In some cases the Zoroastrians in far off places were forced to adopt certain professions and to do certain work. Even at present there are Zoroastrians bearing the surname **ghorkhodu** ‘grave-digger’. The ancestors of this family were forced by the Mohammedans to dig graves. In 1670, Ogilby writes about the Zoroastrians (**apud** R. B. Paymaster, **Early history of the Parsees in India**, Bombay 1954, 45) : ‘In course of time, these settlers forgot their origin, their religion, and even their name’, This shows the general condition of at least some Parsis, particularly those living in distant places, in those ages.

Mazdayasni and Mazdayasni Zarthoshti

In the Avesta, the first man is called **gaya maretan** (later **gayomard**) ‘one having mortal life’, the originator of the Iranian peoples. According to the Fravardin Yasht (13.87), Gaya Maretan was the first to hear the thought and commandments of Ahura Mazda. Hence the religion of pre-Zoroastrian Iranians is termed ‘Mazdayasni’. Our revered prophet was a reformer as well as a revealer of God’s Will; he reformed the Iranian society and also brought the revelation : Ahunavar, Ashem, Yenghe Hatam and the Gathas. Zarthushtra received and preached the new revelation, but the old Mazdayasni religion was not totally discarded. Hence the religion preached by Zarathushtra is termed ‘Mazdayasni Zarthoshti’ and also ‘Ahuirian Zarthoshti,’ and for the sake of brevity it is simply known as ‘Zoroastrian’ religion. Every Zoroastrian - male or female, priest or layman - solemnly declares during the **kusti** prayers : **mazdayasno ahmi mazdayasno zarathushtrish** ‘Mazdayasnian am I, Mazdayasnian Zoroastrian (am I)’. This clearly indicates that the pre-Zoroastrian Mazdayasni religion was not completely abandoned. The above quoted article of faith shows that when a child is born of Zoroastrian parents, it is a Mazdayasni (-designate) by birth, and with the Naojot ceremony it becomes a Mazdayasni Zarthoshti. The said prayer therefore cannot be recited by one born of non-Zoroastrian parents.

King Vishtaspa was not converted

It is at times argued that King Vishtaspa was converted, but this shows gross ignorance of the situation as depicted in the Avesta. In the Avesta, Zarathushtra prays for a divine boon so that he may cause King Vishtaspa to follow 'in accordance with the thought, in accordance with the word, in accordance with the deed of the religion'. King Vishtaspa became the royal 'friend' of Zarathushtra and 'supporter and helper' of the Zoroastrian religion. The Turanian people, a branch of the Iranians, generally did not accept the Zoroastrian religion; but some of the Turanian families, notably the Friyana family, had accepted the Zoroastrian religion.

Moreover, the activities of Vishtaspa as noted in the Avesta are also an important pointer in this matter. It is stated in the Avesta (Yt. 13.99-100) : 'We revere the Fravashi of holy Vishtaspa . . . , who sought freedom for **Asha** sideways and forward, who declared freedom for **Asha** sideways and forward, who became arm and support of this religion, which (is) Ahuirian, Zoroastrian; who brought her (i.e., the religion, which was) stagnant, bound, out from the Hunus; he established her sitting in the centre, highly organised, steady (lit., not shaky), holy, contented with animal and fodder (i.e., prosperity), beloved with animal and fodder'.

Conversion was never a policy of the Zoroastrians even during the days of their empires

During the long and variegated history, the Zoroastrians never adopted the policy of conversion of non-Zoroastrians. The Achaemenian king's were well-known for their liberal religious policy. They ruled over diverse peoples professing many religions, whom they granted full freedom to practise their respective religions. They even afforded financial help to build their places of worship. For this magnanimity they have secured an honourable place in the history of mankind. Similarly, during the Parthian and Sasanian periods the followers of various religions were living peacefully in Iran, and practicing their respective religions within their religious institutions.

No idea of conversion among the Zoroastrians of India

As explained above, the practice of conversion started with those peoples who had the mistaken idea of securing a place in heaven through the intervention of a prophet. The Zoroastrians had never had such an idea, neither in Iran nor in India. If one believes in a revealed religion, that man is created by God with a divine purpose, and that there are spiritual values of human life and the principle of Divine Justice, then one cannot honestly preach and practise conversion. On the other hand, if one believes that religion is man-made, that birth of man is accidental having no divine purpose, and that there are no spiritual values of human life and no principle of Divine Justice, then there is no spiritual need for a religion, and no question of conversion arises. Yet, for one reason or the other, conversion is preached and practised evidently for ulterior motives.

Twelve centuries of tragic consequences

As noted above, the practice of conversion has brought strife, destruction, devastation and misery on mankind. On account of this practice the Zoroastrians of Iran suffered unimaginable hardships, indignities, misery, persecutions and massacres for about 12 long centuries. It is tragic that the present generation has forgotten these ghastly events that our ancestors passed through to keep the flame of Zoroastrianism burning.

A dangerous play and game

We are living in a free country, enjoying freedom in all spheres of life. But we must not forget that there are Zoroastrians living in non-secular countries, ruled by religious heads under religious principles. If it is established that the Zoroastrians are a proselytising community, then what would be the position of the Zoroastrians living there? Where there is conversion by any method - force, inducement, persuasion - trouble is certain to arise. From all practical viewpoints, conversion would prove to be a dangerous game and a disastrous play with fire for our small community. We therefore earnestly hope that this puerile attempt and anti-Zoroastrian action on the part of a very small band of dissidents will not be tolerated, recognised and accepted by our co-religionists.

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