

## **Mysticism in the Religion of Zarathushtra**

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Date of Submission: 10-03-2021

Date of acceptance: 25-03-2021  
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The Sufis have two opinions : the first is 'Hame ust' (All is God, or All is Him), and the second is 'Hame az ust' (All things emanate from God, or all things come from Him). The religion of Zarathushtra seems to believe in the principle 'Hame az ust', because it has not been stated therein that nature and God are one and the same. On the contrary it has been stated in various places in Zoroastrian scriptures that the Lord alone is the creator of all nature. The yogis believe worldly life to be illusory (maya), and since it is an obstacle in the path to reach God, it should be abandoned and one should become a recluse (or take Sanyas). The Zoroastrian faith accepts life as a duty and points the path to the court of the Lord by leading as righteous as life as possible and returning to Him with a smile on the face. The yogis believe the body to be a fetter, suffer bodily hardship by starvation and other means and weaken it. Zoroastrians make full use of the body and speak of performing righteous acts through it. The faith of Zarathushtra does not believe in inflicting pain and hardship on the body deliberately. Thus there is a fundamental difference between the Zoroastrian viewpoint and the viewpoint of mysticism. Mysticism is idealistic while Zoroastrianism is realistic and rational. Both have the same goal, reaching up to God, but the yogis want to reach their goal immediately as they cannot bear separation from God. The religion of Zarathushtra pursues the belief that through fullness gained through righteousness and kindness, one can approach near to God. Both mysticism and Zoroastrianism are devotional in their approach. The yogis are so intense in their devotiion that they get absorbed in transcendental meditation. On the other hand, Zoroastrians hold the view that by falling into transcendental meditation often creates disturbance in performance of righteous acts. Not only that, but they feel that others have to take responsibility to look after such yogis who have gone into trance. From this it becomes clear that the symptoms of mysticism are not to be found in the Zoroastrian faith.

The subject, however, deserves a deeper scrutiny. A detailed study of Zoroastrian scriptures and traditions does reveal some seeds of mysticism therein, but these have not sprouted and grown due to absence of favourable circumstances. In reality, every prophet is a yogi at heart, eager to be at one with God, and Zarathushtra was no exception to this rule. When he was a youth of twenty years, he left society and went atop a mountain, and there he contemplated and meditated upon Ahura Mazda for ten years. Finally he had a vision of Ahura Mazda and the Ameshaspands (Archangels). He got the inspiration that he himself was the prophet of Ahura Mazda and he prepared himself to deliver and establish by proof the message of the Lord. He possessed all the eagerness to be at one with the Lord which yogis have. This is clearly borne out by the following passage, from the Gathas: 'O, all knowing Lord, when shall I reach up to You through a mind made holy?' (Yasna 28.2). 'O Lord: when shall I come near to you through prayer, praise and songs of adoration?' (Yasna 34.2). 'O Ahura Mazda! I place my two requests before You- A vision of yourself and speech with You' (Yasna 33.6). 'Come unto me, O holiest and best Ahura Mazda in Your resplendent forms along with Asha (Truth) and Vohu Manah (Pure Mind)', (Yasna 33.7). Again and again, Zarathushtra says: 'O Ahura Mazda through devotion and righteousness and pure mind, eagerly I am yearning to attain You' (Yasna 50.9). Finally, Zarathushtra says: 'Through good thoughts, good words and good deeds, with my eyes of soul I see Ahura Mazda clearly' (Yasna 45.8). From these utterances of Zarathushtra, it becomes clear that he was essentially a yogi. He was married and lived in the world, and yet he lived the life of a yogi. Still, it is worthwhile to consider whether there is mysticism in the faith preached by him, because he was a yogi.

Amongst the Hindus, Avatars (incarnations), like Rama and Kirshna were married. Sanyasis (recluses who have cast away the world) like the Buddha and Mahavira were also married and had off springs. (The Buddha and Mahavira later had abandoned all ties with the world for ever). From their examples it is apparent that to qualify for the status of a yogi, it is not necessary to have sanyas (casting away the world), unbroken celibacy (Brahmacharya), leaving off ties with the family life, or mortification of the body. Thus there is no doubt whatever that though Zarathushtra was married and lived a family life, he was a lover of God and a true yogi.

It cannot be said that the faith preached by Zarathushtra was mystical because he was a yogi at heart. As seen earlier, the faith of Zarathushtra was realistic and practical, and therefore it is not possible that it has elements of mysticism therein. Even so it is necessary to examine the question critically. As seen earlier, Ahura

Mazda alone created the universe and everything originated from Him. Amongst the hundred and one names of Ahura Mazda, the name 'All Pervading' cannot be seen. The absence of this name is significant. But, in the first Yasht (Hormazd Yasht), many names of Ahura Mazda are mentioned, and therein Ahura Mazda says: 'My third name is 'Avi-tanyo'. (Ervad Kavasji E. Kanga ascribes the meaning 'All-Pervading' to the expression 'Avi-tanyo'). If this translation is correct, then we have to conclude that the Lord pervades the whole of Nature and that the faith of Zarathushtra is pantheistic. Then, we have to accept that mysticism does exist in the faith.

Another strong argument can be advanced to support the statement that the religion of Zarathushtra had mysticism therein, and that is the existence of the philosophy of the Fravashis. The philosophy of the Fravashis is not contained in the Gathas, hence, it cannot be said to be Zarathushtra's own; yet in spite of this the first indications relating to the Fravashis are found in Yasna Haptanghaiti, composed by an intimate disciple of Zarathushtra. This point has to be borne in mind. As seen before, in every object of the universe, animate or inanimate, man or animal, Fravashi exists. This Fravashi is complete, divine and eternal, and in each and every object, big or small, it is like the presence of God therein. Even men after realising their moral and spiritual growth, have to get submerged ultimately into their own Fravashis or their own divine essence. Man is like unto incomplete God; but though righteous, he can become complete and ripe, and then he can seek oneness with his Fravashi or divine element in him. The religion of Zarathushtra is not normally regarded as pantheistic; yet if we penetrate deep into the philosophy of the Fravashis, we have to admit that even in the faith of Zarathushtra there are indications of mysticism.

From the history of every religion it can be seen that after the spread of any new faith, the mystic element contained in its heart does not emerge immediately. This emergence takes time. Mysticism has got intermingled so much in Hinduism, that its like cannot be found in other faiths. But even in Hinduism, the mystic element was not seen in the beginning. The viewpoint of the Rg Veda being practical, the mysticism contained therein is not apparent at the first cursory look. We see the emergence of mysticism during the later era of the Upanishads. Even so, the writers of the Upanishads cite authorities from the Rg Veda to support their propositions of mysticism. This mysticism, which was established with firm foundations in the Upanishads, continued in many great religious works through ceaseless work of the yogis. Similar instances can be seen in Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths.

What then is the condition in Zoroastrianism? Zarathushtra himself was a yogi and the Gathas also contain thoughts to nourish mysticism. Then how did it come about that mysticism is not to be found in its fully developed form? The answer to such query is to be found in the history of Iran. In ancient Iran, the circumstances were not favourable for the blossoming of mysticism in the faith of Zarathushtra. As we saw earlier, during the rule of the Sasanian dynasty (in the first half of the third century of the Christian era) the Zoroastrian faith was in a scattered state and the first requisite was its re-establishment. Then again, in the same century, during the time of Shapur I, a thinker named Mani spread his advanced religion, agitating and confounding the minds of the people. Then during the fifth and sixth century after Christ, during the era of King Kobad, another thinker named Mazdak, influenced the king by his powerful personality and spread faulty and anti-social views, and created chaos in society. On the other hand, Christianity with its missionary zeal started its activities of converting people to their faith. To counter such state of affairs, the Government of Iran had to take stern measures. Further, the kings of Iran had to wage constant wars with Rome. Under such adverse conditions, Zoroastrian priests paid greater attention to elaborate, imposing and pompous rituals, rather than on the subtle secret essence of the faith. In the result, ignorance, superstition, hypocrisy, dullness and infighting spread throughout the community. The whole of Iran was weakened on every front. That was why Iran crumbled against the invasion of the Arabs, who followed a different religion. Intolerant and vehement, the Arabs not only destroyed and desecrated the land of the Zoroastrians, but also their religion. The temples, scriptures and priests of the Zoroastrians were cruelly destroyed. In such painful and terrible conditions the scattered fragments of Zoroastrian scriptures were collected with great difficulty and after sufficient lapse of time. From these remains, some religious literature was composed in Pahlavi; but the time of peace and quiet needed for the growth of mysticism never came. If during those times attention was focussed on the philosophy of the Fravashis, then perhaps mysticism might have flourished. But the dawn and spread of the philosophy of the Fravashis came later, when during the later Avesta period the thirteenth Yasht (Fravaddin Yasht) was composed. During the period when the Pahlavi literature was composed hardly any attention was paid to the philosophy of the Fravashis. In the first instance, there was the factor that Zoroastrian religion was practical, and in the second, instance, there were numerous adverse circumstances; the result was that mysticism could not take root in such conditions.

Like the Zoroastrian faith, the Islamic religion was also a practical one. Both these faiths were opposed to abandonment of family life, sanyas and mortification of the body. Even so, in later times, mysticism took root and flourished in Islam. A majority of Iranians ceased to be Zoroastrians and became Muslims. These Muslim Iranians took enthusiastic interest in mysticism (Sufism) and they attempted to give support to principles of Sufi philosophy by citations from the Qur'an. The reason for this eventuality was that in the older Iranian Zoroastrian

religion mysticism failed to survive, and when such philosophy took root and favourable conditions were created, Iran had been conquered by the Arabs, and many Zoroastrians had been converted and had embraced Islam. Then later in Arabia and in Iran, the rule of the Qur'an was so firmly established that public discussion regarding matters of Zoroastrian faith became a highly dangerous activity. Under such adverse circumstances, it was but natural for Iranian Sufis who had already been converted to Islam to cite passages from the Qur'an in support of their doctrines. By reason of the support lent by the Qur'an, the philosophy of Sufism was propagated and it could flourish. Thus, mystic philosophy and Sufism was born in Islam, but the earlier Zoroastrian faith had a substantial share in its nurture. For this reason, for the growth of Sufism, Islam found excellent and fertile ground in Iran. The seeds for Sufi philosophy were present in the Arabic faith of Islam, but the tree of its abundant growth was created in Iran, and that too through Iranians who had been converted to Islam. Iranian poets in their Persian poetry and literature published Sufi philosophy in various forms. The great and well-known Sufi saints were only Iranians. From this it can be seen that if Zoroastrian Iran had got the opportunity, then from its ancient faith it would have created mystic philosophy. For this they had the potential and capability. It has been truly said that whatever was valuable in the religion of Zarathushtra, often flourished in other lands and in alien faiths.

The Zoroastrian faith has produced saints and holy men in good numbers. Amongst these in Iran were Prince Shiavash, King Kaikhushru, Dastur Peshotan, Dastur Tansar, Mobed Arda Wiraz, and Dastur Adarbad Mahraspand. From amongst these, Mobed Arda Wiraz had vision of heaven and hell when he had fallen into a deep trance; hence, we can infer that he had some mystical power. India must have also produced many Parsi saints, but their names have not been noted in history. Whatever is available in Indian history, especially of Gujarat, is of a date later than the sixteenth century. The record of history relating to Parsis in Gujarat in India is not available prior to Dastur Meherji Rana (sixteenth century after Christ). Even after him no special efforts seem to have been made to preserve the names and deeds of Parsi saints. The names of six saintly men have become well-known amongst the Parsis: Dastur Nairyosang Dhawal (twelfth century after Christ). Camaji Homaji of Bharuch (died 1762), Homaji Jamshedji of Bharuch (died 1783), and amongst the recent ones, Dastur Jamshedji Sohrabji Kukadaru, Jehangir Jamshedji Vimadalal and Jamshed Nuserwanji Mehta of Karachi.

No mystical yogi has been produced from Zoroastrian faith, except one. The exception is Dastur Azar Kayvan (1588(?)- 1672 (?)) and his disciples. Dastur Azar Kayvan was born in an affluent Zoroastrian family in the Iranian city of Shiraz. He was an eminent scholar and knew several languages. He left Iran and settled down permanently in Patna, in India. It is believed that he corresponded with Emperor Akbar. If the date of his birth mentioned above is correct, such correspondence must have taken place in his early youth. But it is hardly believable that a very youthful Azar Kayvan could have carried on correspondence with Emperor Akbar of India. Hence, his dates of birth and death, 1529 to 1614 obtained from another fairly reliable source, seem to be more acceptable. An unauthenticated book named 'Dabistan-al-Mazahab' was written in Persian by an Indian Muslim named Mohsin Fani during the seventeenth century. (There is a controversy about this author's name amongst scholars). That writer says that he himself had met Azar Kayvan and his disciple in Patna. Azar Kayvan was a yogi of great merit. He had many disciples, among whom the well-known ones were Farzan Bahram of Shiraz, Mobed Hushiyar of Surat, Mobed Sarosh and Khudajui. Apart from these Parsi disciples, he had some Hindu and Muslim disciples and helpers Azar Kayvan had reproduced his philosophy in his 'Mukashifate Azar Kayvan', a book of Persian poetry. His Parsi disciples also wrote books like 'Jam-e-Kaikhushroo', 'Khishab', 'Zardasht Afshar' and 'Zinderud'.

One thing is noteworthy here, that Azar Kayvan and his disciples were mystic yogis. They were vegetarians and ate no meat, observed fasts and lived a vargrant's life, they performed various penances and mortified their bodies. On some occasions, they had extra-sensory experiences. Azar Kayvan and his pupils, specially Mobed Hushiyar, often went into Samadhi (transcendental meditation). Some of them are said to have performed miracles. According to tradition after Azar Kayvan's death, he was buried and a memorial tomb was erected over the site. But the material available about Azar Kayvan is very scanty and not free from doubt. (The material reproduced here is from the recently published booklet 'Dastur Azar Kayvanu Jeevan Vrtant' (An account of the life of Dastur Azar Kayvan) by Buurjor N. Desai with grateful acknowledgement)."

From the above it is clear that the life style and philosophy of Azar Kayvan and his disciples was distinct from the customs and usages of the Zoroastrian religion. Azar Kayvan had come into contact with Hindu yogis and his thoughts on religion were greatly influenced by them. Then, should Azar Kayvan be called a Zoroastrian? He had been born in a high class Zoroastrian family in Iran. There is no evidence that after coming to India and becoming a yogi he abandoned the faith of his ancestors. So we must come to the conclusion that he remained in the Zoroastrian fold, and through the yogic practices of the Hindus, attained a high spiritual level. Again, if under the influence of another faith, a yogi has had direct experience of God, and becoming God-intoxicated is absorbed in Him, then it would be futile to conjecture whether he carried the impress of his original faith or of another faith or was influenced by alien practice and philosophy. We have

only to remember that by birth and actions he was a Zoroastrian, that he had direct experience of God and that he lived the life of a yogi.

On this material we arrive at the inference that the faith of Zarathushtra gives prime of place to morality and ethics, that its aim and object is to create men and women of high character, and that it has produced some saintly persons. But mysticism or the philosophy of yoga has not flowered in Zoroastrian religion, hence the possibility of yogis and mystics being produced from the faith, is very poor. Azar Kayvan and his disciples must be considered only as exceptions. The example of Zoroastrian yogi Azar Kayvan and his disciples is very rare indeed in the history of the Parsis.

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