

Dina G McIntyre - Differences in the Spirit of Yenghe Hataam

The idea has been expressed by some Zoroastrians that all religions are the same in their “ethics” and that it is only in their rituals that they differ. With due respect, such arguments overlook the huge differences that exist between religions in their dogmas, in their world-views, and in their spiritual paths. There are major differences between Zarathushtra’s teachings as set forth in the Gathas, and the beliefs of other religions.

It is not right to put down other religions. But we should not confuse a put-down with analysis. It is important to revere what is good in other people’s ways, as our Yenghe Hataam prayer teaches us. To look for similarities with other religions, as we do with inter-faith activities, increases our appreciation for other religions, helps to dissolve the prejudices caused by fear of the unknown, and increases friendship. Different religions are just different ways for man to grow spiritually, and relate to the divine -- each religion filling the particular needs of those who choose its path. Indeed, I am not really comfortable pointing out differences between Zarathushtra’s thought, and other religions. I would much prefer to look for, and dwell on, similarities. But we have been raised in societies dominated by the major religions, and have unconsciously absorbed into our thinking, some of their teachings and mind-sets. To truly understand our religion, and make an informed decision as to whether it fills our spiritual needs, it is also important to know how Zarathushtra’s original teachings differ from the teachings of other religions.

I am not a student of comparative religions. And this is not an exhaustive study. It simply highlights a few key differences, based on my somewhat limited knowledge of other religions. Having gone to Protestant and Catholic schools, I am more familiar with those religions than I am with Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam, which is why there are more comparisons in this piece with Christianity than with other religions.

The Tree of Knowledge:

In a dynamic and gripping lecture many years ago in Chicago, Dr. Farhang Mehr pointed out a basic difference between Zarathushtra’s teachings and that of Judaism and Christianity. It pertains to the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” and the first “sin”. According to the Bible, when God set man and woman in the Garden of Eden, He commanded them to not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Specifically, the Book of Genesis, in the Bible, says:

“And the Lord God commanded the man saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die.” Genesis Ch. 2, verses 16 -17.[2]

According to Christian belief, when the first man and woman ate that fruit, they committed original sin, and were banished from the Garden of Eden.

By contrast, Ahura Mazda does not prohibit us from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. On the contrary, He requires us to do so. He requires us to use our minds / hearts, to search for truth (asha) -- the physical truths of our universe, and also the truths of mind and spirit -- such knowledge being a pre-requisite to acquiring wisdom.

Obedience versus Informed Independent Judgment, and the freedom to choose:

In the Garden of Eden story, the mandate laid on man by God was unquestioning, unthinking, obedience. The same requirement is expressed in the story of Abraham and his willingness to kill his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God, in response to God’s command. Abraham was being tested to see if he would obey God unquestioningly, even if obedience required such a difficult act.

In contrast, the freedom to choose is a fundament of our religion, and Zarathushtra tells us that we should make our choices independently, after listening and reflecting with a clear mind. In other words, we should make informed judgments, informed choices.

"Listen with your ears to the best things. Reflect with a clear mind – man by man for himself – upon the two choices of decision,..." Y30.2.[3]

This is not to say that "obedience" does not exist as a concept in Zarathushtra's thought. It does (sraosha). But it is a thinking obedience that Ahura Mazda wants from us. Even when He Himself instructs us, it is not through dictate or fiat, or fact-specific prescriptions, but through good thinking:

"...instruct through good thinking (the course) of my direction....." Y50.6.

I know very little of Sufism, but, according to Idries Shah[4], a basic tenet of that way is that the student must secure a master, and must submit unconditionally to the master's authority. Indeed, of the ten elements of Sufism, surrender of choice is the fifth.[5] We see the same requirement expressed in the poetry of Hafiz:

"...When one can surrender the illusion, the crutch, of free will,"[6]

I prefer Zarathushtra's teaching of individual responsibility, of listening to others, but deciding for ourselves. True, we are bound to make mistakes. But there's nothing wrong with that. Mistakes are a great way to learn. Besides "masters" or "gurus" are also human. And no human is exempt from making mistakes. To me, it seems better to live our own mistakes and learn from them, than to blindly live the mistakes of others. A slave mentality does not generate growth or wisdom.

Zarathushtra does not see himself as a guru or a master -- as someone who has all the answers. To him, life is an on-going search, an on-going quest for truth (asha), a quest from which he does not exempt himself.

".....as long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth [asha]. Y28.4. Truth, shall I see thee, as I continue to acquire ... good thinking" Y28.5.[7]

The Sufi way teaches that spiritual development is powered only by love -- rejecting both asceticism and the intellect. Many new age religions also disparage the mind -- teaching that it must be disregarded or subjugated for true spiritual growth. Like the Sufi way, Zarathushtra does not advocate asceticism. But neither does he reject the intellect. On the contrary, he teaches that a good mind, and good thinking are divine attributes, which man also possesses. Good thinking is the tool with which we search for truth. He teaches that we advance ourselves spiritually, and make our world a better place, by using a good mind, and good thinking. Zarathushtra may never have known of the left side of the brain (which governs intellect) and the right side of the brain (which governs creativity, emotions, et cetera). But he teaches that a good mind, and good thinking (vohu mano) includes both the intellect and its functions, logic, critical analysis, et cetera (left brain functions), and also creativity and the good emotions (right brain functions), in a seamless integration.[8]

The Sufi way and Zarathushtra's teachings agree however in the idea that to truly learn something, you have to experience it[9]. And the Sufis have other very beautiful ideas that are very close to Zarathushtra's thought, such as the immanence of the Divine in all things, and in the way they address "God" as Friend.

Zarathushtra's teachings pre-date the Sufis by at least a millennium, possibly more. It is interesting that Sufi thought, which also originated in Iran, is said to be found in literature from at least the second millennium BC [10] -- many centuries before the advent of Islam. Some of the similarities between the Sufi way and Zarathushtra's way are so striking, that I cannot help but wonder if the original Sufis may have been an off-shoot of (or derived some of their beliefs from) Zarathushtra's teachings.

Original Sin, Damnation and Redemption:

According to Christian dogma, Adam's and Eve's act of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, was original sin. And ever since that time, each and every person is born with the stain of that original sin. Man is born sinful. I cannot see any justice in visiting the "sin" of two people Adam and Eve (if what they did was a sin in the first place) on all other souls, who never participated in that original "sin". If I murdered someone, it would not be justice to call my children and grandchildren murderers. In Zarathushtra's teachings, there is no concept of original sin. No person is responsible for the wrongful choices of someone else.

Christian dogma holds that having once “fallen from grace” man cannot redeem himself. It was necessary for God to send His own son to earth, to suffer and be killed, in order to pay for man’s original and on-going sins, so that man could be saved, redeemed from damnation, but only if he acknowledges Christ as his savior. All others are damned, cast into eternal hell regardless of how good a life they may have led. Not all Christians believe this today, and I doubt this was Christ’s original teaching (we don’t have his own words). I am inclined to think this idea was what later Church authorities came up with, perhaps to control behavior through fear, perhaps to justify how it could be that the God they worshipped was tortured, and killed. In so doing they missed (in my view) some of the most meaningful, beautiful and essential lessons of Christ’s horrific death (as discussed in the last section of this piece). The above dogma is problematic (to me) in many ways.

First: It presents the view that God’s sense of justice requires punishment, and also permits the wrongful conduct of one person to be expiated by inflicting the punishment for it on an innocent person. It could be argued that Christ, out of love, accepted the punishment for us. But that does not explain why punishment in eternal hell was necessary in the first place. What does punishment in hell accomplish? Does it undo the wrong committed? Does it make the wrongdoer a better person? Does this view reflect the justice of God, or does it reflect man’s notion of a revenge-based justice.

Zarathushtra reveals a vision of God with a different sense of justice. He teaches that each person is responsible for his own conduct. The law of asha includes that perfect justice which generates the law of consequences, so that whatever we do comes back to us -- the good and the bad (in effect, we create our own hells). But the law of consequences (and this concept of justice) is not for punishment. A person’s wrongful conduct comes back to him for the purpose of enlightenment, to increase understanding. When we are on the receiving end of the kind of wrongful conduct that we at some time dished out, it helps us to understand why such conduct is “wrong,” and results in our concluding, through our own good minds (and the loving, ashavan, help of others), that this is not the way things should be, thereby changing our preferences, and affecting our future choices in a good way.[11]

In short, there is a fundamental difference in the focus of Christian dogma and Zarathushtra's thought, in dealing with evil conduct. The focus of Christian dogma is to punish evil, or forgive it in return for contrition and allegiance (contrition alone being insufficient). In Zarathushtra's thought, the way to eliminate evil is by changing minds, through understanding.

Second: the foregoing Christian dogma presupposes a God who (1) condemns man to eternal hell for behaving in the very way in which he was created – fallible, or (2) condemns man to eternal hell unless he gives (unquestioning) allegiance, and (3) offers redemption (escape from punishment) in return for such allegiance, regardless of what kind of a life he may have led, or may be leading, so long as he says he’s sorry and accepts Christ.

By contrast, to Zarathushtra, there is no concept of eternal hell either for making mistakes, or for failing to give allegiance. There is no concept of damnation, and hence no necessity for “redemption”. There is no concept of man being born sinful, and incapable of redeeming himself. True, he is born with the capacity for evil. But he is also born with a capacity for the divine (asha, vohu mano, etc). Salvation according to Zarathushtra is not being redeemed by someone else’s suffering and death, rather it is the end result of living in accordance with divine values (truth, good thinking, et cetera) – thought by thought, word by word, action by action, choice by choice -- a long process of growth and evolution (as we become what we choose). “Salvation” is attaining completely, the divine attributes -- truth (asha), and its comprehension good thinking, a good mind (vohu mano).

"...let that salvation of yours be granted to us: truth allied with good thinking!..." Y51.20.

"... let salvation be granted to the beneficent[12] man..."Y34.3.

There is no silver bullet for “salvation” in Zarathushtra’s thought. It is something we must do for ourselves, for each other, and for our world, with loving, mutual, help.

"Yes, those men shall be the saviors [saoshyanto] of the lands, namely, those who follow their knowledge of Thy teachings with actions in harmony with good thinking and with truth, Wise One...." Y48.12.

The idea that a person is redeemed only if he acknowledges Christ as savior, presupposes a God to whom allegiance is a higher priority than in how a person lives his life. Zarathushtra's view is the opposite. Allegiance is irrelevant, except for allegiance to the values that make for divinity. And he tells us to revere all good men and women, not just good Zarathushti men and women.

The material world:

Almost all the major religions require a rejection of, or a withdrawal from, the material world in order to achieve spiritual growth -- even those that do not advocate asceticism such as Buddhism. Zarathushtra's vision is uniquely different. Just as an artist needs paints and canvas to express his ideas, just as a musician uses material instruments to express the music in his soul, in the same way Zarathushtra teaches that the material world is the matrix, the medium, through which we create and experience divine values. To him the material world is not "evil", to be rejected and withdrawn from. It is something to be used for good, and in the process, enjoyed, celebrated. The material world is so large a part of our "reality." It does not make sense to me that "God", on the one hand, would create this beautiful world (whether through evolution or otherwise), and all the delightful and enjoyable things in it, and give us the capacity to enjoy it, but at the same time insist that we reject it. Zarathushtra's vision opens a different understanding of "God". I am touched by the generosity, (and the playful paradox) of a Deity who gives us material tools to achieve spiritual growth, and who crafts these material tools in such a way that the process of achieving spirituality includes moments of pleasure and joy.

The Buddhist religion attempts to deal with the unhappiness of the human condition by teaching that we should detach ourselves from wants and desires. To me this is essentially a negative solution. It addresses problems by denial. To illustrate: if unhappiness is caused by poverty, the Buddhist solution is: "Don't desire to be wealthy." If unhappiness is caused by the loss of a loved one, the Buddhist solution is: "Don't be so attached to those whom you love." Zarathushtra by contrast addresses problems by engaging them in an active way. His solution, in essence, is: If you see a problem, try to solve it, using your mind / heart, and all the material tools at your disposal. Sometimes you'll make it. Sometimes you won't. But always, if you look, you will learn from the situation, and in the long run, good will come of it -- even from horrific problems (especially from horrific problems -- the heavy blessings).

Heaven:

The descriptions of heaven in Christianity and Islam may be metaphoric. I don't know. But the implication is that heaven is a location or place of reward to which we go after death. The Zarathushtrian heaven, by contrast, is a state of being -- a state in which we have attained completely, the attributes of divinity, the amesha spenta. The Buddhist heaven is said to be a state of nothingness. It is also said to be a state of pure mind (not unlike Zarathushtra's thought). This reflects an inconsistency, in my view, because pure mind is something. Therefore, if heaven is pure mind, it cannot be a state of nothingness. Or perhaps I just have not understood the Buddhist belief accurately.

Understanding God:

Figuring out, (or constructing), the nature of "God" is something that has exercised the mind of man from time immemorial. Islam (except for the Sufis) sees man as the slave of God. Other religions have on occasion described God as a God of vengeance -- wrathful and punitive. Some see God as a Father, loving, but authoritarian, perfect from the start, separate and apart from man. This is not Zarathushtra's vision. Zarathushtra does not describe Ahura Mazda as either Master or Father (in literal, as distinguished from interpretive translations of the Gathas), but as Friend, and Beloved (a view shared by Sufis). He is pure goodness. Wisdom personified. There is no anger or vengeance in Him. Nor is He separate and apart from us. Zarathushtra teaches the immanence of the Divine in all things (as do the Sufis). Ahura Mazda is the fire within - in us, a part of us, a part of all things, and thus, of necessity, a part of the perfecting process. When we attain haurvatat (perfection, completeness) we complete Him and He completes us.

In the spirit of Yenghe Hataam:

For all that I cannot relate to much of the later Christian dogma, (just as I cannot relate to much of the later Zoroastrian dogma, in the later texts written by unknown authorities of the Zoroastrian Church many centuries

after Zarathushtra) I find many poignant and beautiful lessons in the life of Christ – an illumined soul – which lessons I find to be very Zarathushtrian -- perhaps an indication of the universality of truth. Christ taught by stories and words, with which we are all familiar. But he also taught without words – by how he lived – a very Zarathushtrian thing. In the spirit of our Yenghe Hataam prayer (which teaches us to revere all good men and women and the divine values within them), here are a few of Christ's silent lessons that I particularly love and respect.

First, I think of his birth. He did not choose to be born into a wealthy or noble Roman family (which was the cream of society in his day). He was born into poverty, and to a racial minority having little power (as the world defines power) at that time, demonstrating that self worth is not defined by wealth, or power, or race. An important lesson.

Second, I consider how he lived his life. He was not a powerful priest or king, controlling the lives of others. He lived life simply, generously and lovingly, (beneficently, to use Zarathushtra's word), serving his fellow man, alleviating pain and suffering, healing bodies and souls, and spreading truths that are food for the soul, or, to describe it in a Zarathushti way, advancing the forward progress of creation – the spenta way of being.

Finally, I think of his death – alone, betrayed, in great pain and suffering. And yet, this did not cause him to hate or reject those who rejected or harmed him. A very powerful lesson, showing us by example (instead of just telling us) how to react to betrayal, pain, torture and death – with courage, without hate, indeed with beneficence.

Confronted by wrongful conduct, it serves no useful purpose to imitate it. In my view, there is nothing wrong with using force if necessary to stop someone from harming me or someone else. That's a different matter. But if someone hates me, and I hate back, that just creates more hatred. If someone harms me, and I harm back (for revenge), that just creates more harm, more pain.

I hope I may be forgiven for viewing Christ's life and death through Zarathushtrian spectacles, but to me it exemplifies a core teaching of Zarathushtra – that we cannot achieve a good end with wrongful means. If the desired end is union with Ahura Mazda, then we can get there only by following the path of His divine attributes -- truth and what's right (asha), its comprehension (vohu mano), its realization in thought, word and action (aramaiti[13]), et cetera. As stated in a very beautiful later Avestan prayer:[14]

Through the best [asha[15]]
Through the highest [asha]
May we catch sight of Thee,

[i.e. understand Mazda through His divine attributes, the amesha spenta[16]]

May we approach Thee,

[i.e. follow the path to Mazda, which is the path of His Divine attributes[17]]

May we be in perfect union with Thee

[i.e. become one with Mazda].
Y60.12.

[1] This article was posted on vohuman..org on July 4, 2006.

[2] Authorized King James Version, (World Bible Publishers, Iowa, 1986).

[3] All quotations from the Gathas in this piece are to the Insler translation as it appears in The Gathas of Zarathushtra, (Brill 1975), although he may, or may not, agree with the inferences I draw from his translation.

Round parentheses () in a quotation appear in the original translation by Professor Insler, and indicate words inserted by him, for purposes of explanation. Square brackets [] in a quotation are insertions by me, to show you the applicable Gathic word, but usually without their grammatical variations.

[4] Idries Shah, *The Sufis*, (Anchor Books, 1971 reprint of the Doubleday original published in 1964).

[5] *Ibid*, page 423.

[6] *The Gift, Poems by Hafiz the Great Sufi Master*, translated by Daniel Ladinsky, (Penguin / Arkana, 1999), page 114.

[7] Y285 says: "Truth, shall I see thee as I continue to acquire both good thinking and the way to the Lord..." Y28.5. The way to the Lord is the path of the amesha spenta -- truth and what's right (asha), its comprehension (vohu mano), its realization in thought, word and action (aramaiti), which is the benevolent way of being (spenta mainyu), which brings about completeness and non-deathness (haurvatat / ameretat) to the soul, and establishes a good social order in our world (vohu xshathra)..

[8] For the evidence on which this definition of vohu mano is based, please see: *Harmony in Paradox: The Paradox of the Material and the Spiritual*, which appears on www.vohuman.org.

[9] Robert Graves' Introduction, to Idries Shah, *The Sufis*, page viii.

[10] *Ibid.*, page viii.

[11] This is necessarily a simplistic description of the law of consequences, and how it changes minds. For a more detailed view, and the evidence from the Gathas on which it is based, see *Harmony in Paradox: The Paradox of the Freedom to Choose and the Inevitable End*, and also, *Metaphor in the Gathas Part 1.2* dealing with fire and the law of consequences, both of which may be read on www.vohuman.org.

[12] "Beneficence" is included within the notion of asha. See for example: "..... the Lord, beneficent through truth [asha],...." Y48.3. If Mazda is beneficent through asha, then asha must include within it, the notion of beneficence.

[13] Aramaiti means making asha real, giving it life, substance, with our good thoughts, words and actions. See for example: "But to this world He came with the rule of good thinking and of truth, and...enduring [aramaiti] gave body and breath (to it)..." Y30.7. How do we give "body and breath" (i.e. life) to the rule of truth and good thinking? We cannot do so with right-mindedness alone. We can do so only by giving it substance, making it real, with thoughts, words and actions. Similarly: ". . . Through its actions, [aramaiti] gives substance to the truth [asha]. . ." Y44.6, indicating that actions are a part of the meaning of aramaiti. See also "Virtuous [spento] is the man of [aramaiti]. He is so by reason of his understanding, his words, his actions, his conception [daena]. ." Y51.21; indicating that the meaning of aramaiti includes within it all three -- thoughts ("understanding") words, actions and daena, vision, (which is an aspect of thought).

[14] Y60.12 is not a part of the Gathas, but it is entirely in accord with Zarathushtra's teachings. This translation of Y60.12 is by I..J..S. Taraporewala, in his book, *Daily Zoroastrian Prayers*, (Hukhta Foundation, 4th edition, 1986), pages 2 -- 3.

[15] I have left "asha" untranslated because I do not agree with Taraporewala's translation of asha as "righteousness". Asha, literally means "what fits". In my view, is more accurately translated as truth, including both physical truth, as well as the truths of mind and spirit (of which righteousness is a part).

[16] The words in square brackets [] in this quotation of Y60.12, have been inserted by me by way of explanation. These explanations do not appear in the original text (as a Zand or commentary), or in Taraporewala's translation of the text.

[17] This verse, Y60.12, states that we understand, approach, and become one with Mazda through asha. This is in accord with Zarathushtra's teaching that the path to Mazda is the path of the amesha spenta, because each amesha spenta is some aspect of asha. Vohu mano (good thinking) is the comprehension of asha, aramaiti is its realization in thought, word and action, vohu xshathra is the good rule of asha and vohu mano ("...the rule of truth and good thinking..."Y29.10). The rule of aramaiti ("...Grant thou [aramaiti] your rule of good thinking..."Y51.2). Haurvatat and amaretat are the state of being that is attained when asha is completely personified, and the reason for mortality ceases.