

Introduction to Part 4 : History & Traditions.

History.

Part Four touches on ancient origins and homelands, evidence of Zarathushtra's date and place, and certain historical facts pertaining to the religion, with a view to showing why historical Zoroastrianism sometimes corroborates, and sometimes differs profoundly from, the original teachings, and it may help you to understand why.

You well may wonder: How could Zarathushtra's views on such basic things as the nature and identity of the Divine, 'heaven', 'hell', 'creation' etc.,¹ be so radically different from the conventional beliefs of some (but not all!) Zoroastrians, millennia after Zarathushtra.

Well, one has only to look at other religions ~ even those that have not suffered the burning of texts, the killing of the learned, persecution and near eradication. I am more familiar with Christianity (having attended Christian schools) so let me give you some examples from the history of Christianity. Ideas about the Trinity (which impacts a perception of the nature of the Divine) have differed widely in the history of Christianity and its various denominations.

In the Middle Ages an official arm of the Catholic Church, the Inquisition, tortured and burned alive people suspected of disagreeing with authorized Church views (most of which Christ never articulated in the Gospels ~ texts that were written closest to his time to record his life and ideas). The early church eradicated the Gnostics (many of whom considered themselves Christians). Catholics burned Protestants, Protestants persecuted Catholics, and they both persecuted Jews. All such conduct was so very different from Christ's original teachings such as ~ 'love thy neighbor'; 'do good to those who hate you'; 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you'.

So also, Christian dogmas pertaining to original sin, damnation in an eternal hell of torture, the prerequisites for salvation, the sacrament of confession (in Catholicism), pre-destination (in Calvinism), the denigration of the spirituality (and worth!) of women, and many other dogmas and traditions, are not stated in any of the words of Christ and indeed in many respects are contrary to the way he lived his life, and his words (as remembered by his disciples, and recorded a century or less after his death in the Gospels of the New Testament). Yet for many centuries these dogmas and traditions were foundational beliefs of many denominations of Christianity (some surviving to this day in certain denominations).

Returning to Zoroastrianism, a great deal of knowledge was lost for many reasons ~ the long passage of time, the syncretization of the original teachings with pre-existing and later religious belief systems, as well as destructive wars in which texts were burned and the learned killed ~ first when the Achemenian empire fell to Alexander, and even more so, after the Arab invasion of Iran.² The killing of the learned in particular resulted in severe loss of knowledge and understanding in time periods when most people may not have been literate, and when texts were not widely available (before the invention of the printing press). By the time the Pahlavi texts we have today were written, Zoroastrians had lived under Islam for 200 or more years. The intolerant religious environment which dominated their lives, believed in the notion of 'God' as a separate entity, paradise and hell as places of reward and punishment, (instead of as states of being), and many other beliefs which are very different from Zarathushtra's original teachings (the language of which, by then, was no longer understood in any event).

Zoroastrians who survived and lived in this controlled, dominated, intolerant environment, were doubtless affected by it (in some ways perhaps unconsciously) compounded by the enormous loss of knowledge that followed the invasions of Alexander and the Arabs. Some of the Pahlavi texts faithfully and lovingly recorded ancient knowledge (such as the fire that exists in all things),³ but between the loss of knowledge, and the mental conditioning of the environment in which they lived, the authors of some of these texts no longer understood much of what they were transmitting, let alone the metaphoric and allegorical nature of Zarathushtra's imagery which they so faithfully recorded, or the ideas these metaphors and allegories were intended to convey.⁴

Some traditions.

In this *Part Four*, I will also touch upon certain cultural practices and traditions which are alien to Zarathushtra's thought, were not prevalent during Avestan times, and which today are obsolete and divisive. Those who wish to ridicule Zoroastrianism, claim (falsely) that some such practices are part of the religion. And readers who are Zoroastrians may be upset that I have discussed such traditions in this *Part*. With respect, we cannot hide our heads in the sand. We cannot leave our children unprepared to meet and answer such negative and inaccurate information. It is always better to face such things ~ with truth and facts. In opposing such false propaganda, truth is the best weapon we have. So I will identify such practices and traditions, show how they may have come about, and establish with evidence that they are not part of Zarathushtra's teachings, and came to be practiced (if at all) many centuries after his time.

Any rational, informed person would be outraged if Christianity were taught using primarily the writings and the cruel practices of the Inquisition during the Middle Ages.

In the same way, practitioners of Islam would be outraged if their religion were taught, using primarily the beliefs and the cruel practices of ISIS.

Yet Zoroastrianism is taught (in Universities in Iran), based in large part on obsolete cultural practices and traditions in the *Vendidad* which are alien to Zarathushtra's teachings, and alien even to later Avestan texts (which were composed during Avestan times).

The information in this *Part Four* may help you to answer, or lay to rest, some ancient practices which were never a part of Zarathushtra's teachings, are repugnant to our sensibilities, and were not even widely prevalent in ancient times, but are so often dragged out and paraded by those who want to ridicule and discredit Zoroastrianism.

The tradition of not allowing into the religion, anyone whose parents were not Zoroastrians has already been discussed in another chapter,⁵ which demonstrates that non-acceptance was never a part of the Zoroastrian religion for over 1,000 years, and did not come into being until after the Arab invasion of Iran and the later migration of some Zoroastrians to India. So I will not discuss that tradition here.

But there are other 'traditions' which are practiced by some Zoroastrians that have become obsolete and divisive. Zarathushtra requires us to search for truth in the existences of matter and mind ~ ongoing ~ as part of our spiritual/religious mind-set.⁶ His teachings are 'reason' based, not 'faith' based. It is ironic (is it not) that many religions that are 'faith' based have shed practices and traditions that no longer are supported by reason. Yet Zoroastrians (whose religion is 'reason' based), cling to obsolete and irrelevant practices with unquestioning faith.

If we choose to follow Zarathushtra, then spiritual/religious beliefs and practices must, of necessity be in sync with the factual and abstract truths that we continue to discover. The information in this *Part Four* may enable us to look at certain traditions, and decide ~ each person, and each congregation, for itself ~ whether such traditions are consistent with the on-going search for truth which is a fundament of Zarathushtra's teachings.

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¹ Detailed in *Part One: The Nature of the Divine; The Identity of the Divine; and Does The Devil Exist;* And in *Part Two: The Houses of Paradise & Hell; A Question of Immanence; and The Puzzle of Creation.*

² See in *Part Four: Loss of Knowledge Before & After Alexander;* and Shahin Bekhradnia's essay *Loss of Knowledge After the Arab Invasion of Iran.*

³ The YAv. and Pahlavi texts which discuss the fire in all things are identified and detailed in *Part Two: Light, Glory, Fire.*

⁴ See for example, *Part Two: Light, Glory, Fire*, which discusses how the Pahlavi texts recorded the concept of the fire in all things (accurately), and commented on aspects of this idea (inaccurately). See also *Part Three: The Absence of Damnation & Hell in Other Avestan Texts*, which footnotes Pahlavi commentaries on YAv. texts which speak to the breaking of contracts, in which it is obvious that the Pahlavi commentaries were inaccurate in their understanding of the Av. ideas. The Pahlavi scholars had no real knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of Avestan. But they faithfully recorded, as best they could, the knowledge, ideas and traditions that came down to them, for which I am deeply grateful. Had it not been for their efforts, all such knowledge would now be lost to us. Yet for all that they no longer understood Avestan, at least some schools of Zoroastrian thought in Pahlavi times demonstrated a fine understanding of Zarathushtra's ideas as I often point out in various chapters.

⁵ Detailed in *Part One: A Teaching For All Mankind.*

⁶ Detailed in *Part One: The Search For Truth, and The Freedom To Choose.*