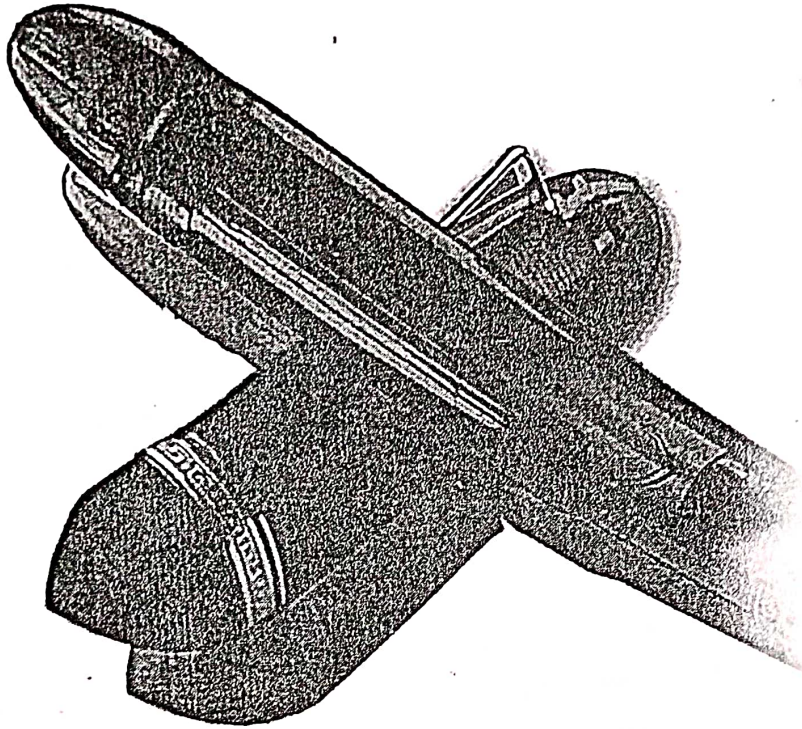


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## Zoroastrianism and Perfect Freedom of Will;

### A Humanistic Vision

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#### Abstract

Today, humanism, which was once a separate branch of philosophy advocating purely human values, is in a quandary, as owing to existential problems, Man who was once accorded the highest place of God, has become callous, indifferent and atomized floating aimlessly like dust particles in a void of nothingness. To protect him from extinction at the hands of the thunderbolts of dehumanization and excremental culture, Humanism, needs the support of spiritualism or what we generally call Religion.

Among the great religions of the world, Zoroastrianism probably has a greater claim to be called humanistic than any other religion. Though Buddhism and Confucianism have humanistic leanings, they are heavily laden with metaphysical speculations. They are concerned with ultimate reality in relation to the phenomenal human existence and the universe around. They take recourse to reason, observation, analysis distrustful of imagination and inspiration. Zarathushtra, being not a very educated man, has couched his moral, ethical and spiritual exhortations in the most simplistic language which is not obtuse. Moreover, Zarathushtra was a poet and his *Gathas* are songs divided into stanzas and strophes. As a sage and saint endowed with the faculties of a poet in his verses one can easily sense the combination of imagination and truth inspired and controlled by a peculiar insight. The five *Gathas* attributed to Zarathushtra have one ultimate aim and purpose which is to help people grow from this world of intellect, this world of divided consciousness with its discards, dualities to a life of harmony, love and freedom which are the hallmarks of true humanism. The first and foremost humanist tenet which is being constantly and consistently enforced by Zarathushtra is "Perfect and ideal manhood" which one can achieve by having "Good thoughts", "good words" and "good deeds".

**Key Words:** Zoroastrianism, *Gathas*, Humanism, Buddhism,

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Zarathushtra's religious humanity as enunciated in his *Gathas* some 3,500 years ago is still relevant, and it will be relevant till the world exists. His religiosity which is highly ethical and homo-centric has formed the basis of the very thinking and activities of great men and women like Mahatma Gandhi, Dadabhai Naoroji, and a number of others who fought for "Truth, Love and Justice" and saints and sages who had devoted their life for the cause of the uplift of humanity. One can always wonder how a simple man who lived in the remote past living among pagans and primitive people could make religious utterances which encompass a philosophy and a way of life (humanism) relevant for people of all ages and all countries. Some of our religions detest man while others give paramount importance to him. A.G. Bouquet remarks: "Christians are equally committed to the belief in man's utter need of God. Man needs God. Man cannot be all that he ought to be, or fulfil his grand possibilities – apart from the life of God" (257). According to Buddhism, "Man is in bondage and is living a life of conditional existence" (Tiwari 66). Hinduism also says that man is a victim of ignorance [*Anjana*] and is in bondage. In the opinion of Swami Vivekananda, Hinduism focuses more on God-realization than on the individual's realization of his potential 'self' though it has its own glories. He says:

In the Hindu philosophy we find a stage, of the same proximity of God to us. But we do not stop there. There is the non-dualistic stage in which man realizes that the God he has been worshipping is not only the Father in heaven and on earth but that 'I and my Father are one'. He realizes in his soul that he is God himself . . . All that is real in me is he; all that is real in Him is I. The gulf between God and man is thus bridged. (Vidyatmananda 6)

While making a fusion of religion with humanism Dr. Radhakrishnan writes:

Humanism is a legitimate protest against those forms of religion which separate the secular and the sacred, divide time and eternity and break up the unity of soul and flesh. Religion is all or nothing. Every religion should have sufficient respect for the dignity of man and the rights of human personality. We cannot preserve them, if we repudiate religion. As the Indian visitor is reported to have said to Socrates, if we do not know about God we cannot know about man. (*Recovery of Faith* 50)

After making a comparative study of all the major religions of the world, Tiwari concludes: "of all the religions, however, Zoroastrianism seems to give the greatest dignity to man . . ." (249). This observation is absolutely true as one finds enough evidences to prove that

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Zoroastrianism hinges more on human dignity and perfectibility than on mere religious precepts and rituals.

The infliction that is released on man, living in the world is complete freedom to choose between good and evil and act accordingly. Of course, God wants man to choose the path of good, but it is up to him what path he chooses. According to Christianity, Man comes to earth stained by what is called "Original Sin" and according to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism he takes birth with the blurring cloud of ignorance and the burden of the past 'Karmas'. But according to Zoroastrianism man is born completely pure and spotless with perfect freedom of will. Thus, for every act of him, man himself is fully responsible. This is not the case in the context of other religions. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism man comes to earth with certain limitations and therefore in one sense neither he can be taken as completely free nor he can assume the full responsibility for his work. In Islam, the case seems to be even worse. Islam's belief in absolute decree of God and predestination of everything tends to make man an insignificant plaything in the hands of God and thus he seems to have been denied freedom of will completely. Certain verses in the *Quran* may make some room for man's freedom, but the overall tone and tenor comes out to be deterministic. No religion in the world other than Zoroastrianism grants man that amount of freedom to live well and to choose well.

For a Zoroastrian, infliction comes as he is torn between the forces of evil and good. Zarathushtra, the founder of the religion, knew the difficulties of man who is often baffled when the question of making the right choice arises before him. Therefore he made the *Gathas* a religious work having a number of moral characters who laid an external foundation of reality to 'goodness' as an ideal of a perfect man whose main concerns are humanistic. Nargolwala comments:

Zarathushtra showed the path of freedom to man, the freedom of moral choice, freedom from blind obedience to unmeaning injunctions, freedom from the multiplicity of shrines which draw our worship away from the single-minded chastity of devotion. (*Parsi Fiction I. 53*)

Through his extensive speeches Zarathushtra strove to make Zoroastrianism an intensely human religion as his intention was to make every Zoroastrian an ideal man true to himself and to his fellow-men. Nargolwala throwing more light on this aspiration of Zarathushtra further says:

Zarathushtra preached that the moral worth of dead comes from the goodness of intention, and the value of his religion was in upholding man in his life of good thoughts, good works and good deeds. Zarathushtra was the first prophet in history who emancipated religion from the exclusive narrowness of the tribal god, and offered it to the universal man. Without doubt, such a high conception of religion of the ultimate ideal of perfection which must be revealed to all humanity, even at the cost of martyrdom, is unique in the history of any religion belonging to such a remote dawn of civilization. (53-54)

Zoroastrianism pictures the world as a real battle ground of two forces – the forces of good as represented by *SpentaMainyu* and the forces of evil as represented by *AngraMainya* which is also called *Ahriman*. In the battle, good prevails over the evil. Again, although God wants man to choose the good and help himself and the other human beings, it is totally up to man himself which side to choose. If a man prefers to take the side of the good, he will lead a righteous life doing good to himself and all around. Through such a choice *Gatha SpentaMainyu* helps *Ahura Mazda* [the supreme God] in his fight against all the evils and devils in the world.

The Zoroastrians stress again and again that “Choice” and “human concern” are at the very centre of Zarathushtra’s teachings. Howard F. Voss says that Zoroastrianism is “the first religion to be voluntarily and individually accepted”. He adds: “It is said that he [Zarathushtra] was emphatically a prophet of Moral choice” (228).

Tirkey, while pointing out the central message of Zarathushtra observes: “He tried to show men the path of freedom – freedom from the multiplicity of shrines that make a travesty (i.e. imitation) of devotion, freedom to choose truth and justice. In a way in that region, he was the first man to express his thoughts on free will” (478).

Moulton who had translated the *Yasnas* into English remarks that Zarathushtra himself has said: “I, who have set my heart on watching over the soul, in union with good thought, and as knowing the rewards of Mazda Ahura for our works, will, while I have power and strength, teach man to seek after right” (Yasna XLIV 18).

If one goes deep into the teachings of Zarathushtra, one will find how valuable his words are in the present day topsy-turvy world in which all kinds of inhuman and false values rule the roost. Extreme consumerism and commercialism have deprived man of his essential humanity. Technological advancements have outstripped all his moral values. The new

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diseases that crop up everywhere are pollution, immorality, debauchery, sexism, alcoholism etc. These diseases have sucked out the human sap and put man out of shape. In such a context, the teachings of Zarathushtra suffused with the desire to have an altruistic human world can serve as a proper panacea by saving humanity which is at the grim prospect and peril of extinction. In a world where everyone is making a rat race to gain fulfilment individually, Zarathushtra's words come as warning shots:

Down with wrath!

crush cruelty,

You who would maintain through Truth

The widespread penetration of the God Mind

In whose company walks the just man . . . (Jungalwalla 74)

As one who upholds human solidarity, Zarathushtra never advocates isolation, rather he prefers human oneness and preaches that all should be involved with the world around. He advocates action and not non-involvement and alienation from the mainstream of life. In one of his *Gathas* he recites

This precious reward of Thine O Mazda

Thou gives by way of the good mind

Thou givest to vigorous bodily life to him who

works for and tends to Thy Creation,

Who furthers Thy beneficent.

Plan by the power of his understanding

Guided by Thy Spirit of Truth. (qtd. in Homi D. Sethna 19)

Zarathushtra has pointed out how a man can humanize himself and be of use to others. Sethna quotes from one of his works.

The man of devotion is beneficent to all.

He is beneficent because of his wisdom,

Because of the goodness in his thoughts

in his words, in his deeds.

Unto him Ahura Mazda shall grant the

Kingdom of the Good Mind

And verily this blessing I too long for. (21)

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In another *Gatha* he says "Happiness unto him who brings happiness unto others"  
(19).

Bringing out the strain of humanism that runs through the entire corpus of  
Zarathushtra, the well-known *Avesta* scholar Dr. Stanley Isler of Yale University succinctly  
puts:

The extraordinary contribution of Zarathushtra is the profound realization that  
man can both serve and honour God more meaningfully in the enactment of  
the lordly principles of Truth and Good feeling among his fellow-men than in  
the awesome reverences founded upon fear and dread. It is true that God  
merits praise and worship but chiefly so because He created and offers to his  
people those instruments of God which can in turn offer dignity and happiness  
in the world of man. (qtd. in Homi D. Sethna 19)

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