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**Antia's 'Acceptance':  
A Zoroastrian 'Ahrmogih' (Heresy)**

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*A little learning is a dangerous thing:  
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring:  
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,  
And drinking largely sobers us again.*  
ALEXANDER POPE

In the highly emotive debate on conversion in Zoroastrianism much has been spoken and written, but the problem has remained unsolved as too little has been understood. The layman is baffled as all and sundry clamour to express their views on this subject. The latest entrant into the fray is Kersey Antia with his booklet 'The Argument for Acceptance'. The purpose of the present work is primarily to reply to Antia, and to show the fallacy and illusiveness of the 'arguments' used in support of conversion or 'acceptance' as it is now euphemistically called.

It is earnestly hoped that the discerning reader will be motivated to go to the original sources and endeavour to discover the truth in a rational and logical manner.

**A** perusal of Kersey Antia's treatise *The Argument for Acceptance* proves it to be a motley collection of opinions and presumptions of various writers on Zoroastrianism regarding the idea of 'acceptance/conversion' in the Zoroastrian religion. Though Antia does not make any claims to scholarship, the reader may well fall for the appearance of 'scholarly evidence' in Antia's long-winded 'attempt to search for the truth in this matter'.

Antia is of the opinion that the North American milieu will compel Zoroastrians there to study what Zoroaster actually taught about conversion and be guided by it, even though it is contrary to present Parsi practice or politics. This statement implies that only in the North American milieu will Zoroastrians be able to study the actual teachings of Zoroaster, while the Indian milieu has not enabled Zoroastrians to follow what Zoroaster 'actually taught'. Apparently, Antia feels that the Parsi pilgrim fathers made a mistake in coming to the hospitable shores of India to preserve their religion, while the few Parsis who lately migrated to Western lands in search of greener material pastures and who are now seeking to alter their ancestral religion to suit themselves, are the true followers of the faith.

Antia extensively quotes passages seeming to support his theory of acceptance: conversion but he has obviously presented only one side of the coin as he has not even mentioned several equally eminent scholars who have denied the existence of the idea of acceptance conversion on the basis of original textual sources, custom, tradition and practice, rather than second hand opinions and 'innermost convictions'.

It is our bounden duty to warn the community against thoughtlessly adopting a line of growth that would inevitably toll its death knell. It is high time that the community understood the nature of some modern self-seekers who claim to be experts and rids itself of the thralldom to so-called expertise. Half-baked, self-proclaimed interpreters of the religion run away with the notion that their superfluous study of the religious scriptures have raised them to the level of experts whose pronouncements should be considered authoritative. It is no wonder then that these opinions are crude, ill-considered, often at times puerile and ridiculous; the thoughts of these experts not having been tempered by the study of original texts. Unbiased readers must have realised that the depth of Antia's learning and expertise only amounts to copying translations of the Avesta, often moulding them to suit his predilections. No scholarly credibility can therefore be attached to the treatise and the verbose quotes may be classified as opinions, views and ideas, certainly not as facts.

## **Conversion and Propagation**

At the outset let us clarify the difference between the terms conversion and propagation. According to *Webster's New International Dictionary* conversion means to change or turn from one belief of course to another, as from one religion, party or sect to another. To propagate means to transmit or disseminate. By propagation is meant the diffusion of the ethical commandments of the religion: the great necessity of following the prophet's commandments as to purify, devotion etc. It is noteworthy that Max Muller, the noted German Orientalist, classifies Zoroastrianism amongst the non-missionary faiths. It is a positive virtue to instruct mankind in the good things of life like speaking the truth, maintaining cleanliness, combating evil, etc., which are extolled in Zoroastrianism; in fact to propagate these ideas amongst all countries and humanity at large is a meritorious act. But asking people to change or convert their religion is another matter altogether. If one believes in Ahura Mazda, His greatness and wisdom, one has to believe also that people are born into a particular religion according to His Will and Plan. Yasna 43.1

specifically states that Ahura Mazda 'rules at will'. Obviously then, there is a plan and design, a scheme of things. Should mortals presume to alter that Divine Plan?

Antia (p. 3) quotes Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Vol. I (p. 294-5): 'The existence of the developed Zoroastrian code must have contributed to the failure of the Good Religion to gain converts beyond Iranian borders; for its stringency it makes demands of a kind to which it is better to grow accustomed from earliest childhood, so that acceptance of them becomes instinctive. Otherwise the requirements may well seem too irksome, the self-discipline needed too strict'. This is a clear statement indicating the difficulties a new convert would face, and is another reason why there has been no conversion.

Antia (p. 4) quotes R.C. Zaehner *Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, (p. 170-1): 'Of all the great religions of the world Zoroastrianism was the least well served. Zoroaster himself has every right to the title he claimed : ... but his successors never fully understood his message, nor had they a living and authentic tradition to guide them... in the Sassanian period, they... tried to impose a strict orthodoxy which few could tolerate..... One is tempted to say that all that was vital in Zoroaster's message passed into Christianity through the Jewish exiles, whereas all that was less than essential was codified and pigeon-holed by the Sassanian theologians so that it died of sheer inanition. ... All this does not detract one whit from the stature of the Iranian Prophet himself, who remains one of the greatest religious geniuses of all time. It merely shows how... even a great religion with a vital message for man... turn into something wholly different from what the founder had intended'.

After this, Antia himself adds by way of comment: 'This is specially true of what became of Zoroaster's original teachings on converting all of mankind to his faith'. This quote from R.C. Zaehner is incomplete and distorted. The concluding line actually reads:

'It merely shows how political vicissitudes can strangle the life out of even a great religion with a vital message for man, and turn it into something wholly different from what the founder had intended'.

This concluding statement is a reference to the Arab conquest of Iran and the subsequent Islamization of Iran, and has nothing to do with the prophet's so-called 'original teachings on converting all of mankind to his faith'.

Lacunae and interpolations in the body of the quotes themselves are suspect. Such quotes could misrepresent the letter and spirit of the original. The reader does not have access to many of the texts referred to, nor does he have the time and inclination to sift through the original works or wade through a lot of piffle to clarify such misrepresentations which then pass off as the truth. It appears that Antia has employed this ploy in an attempt to veer the reader along the path chosen by him.

### **'A little learning is a dangerous thing ...'**

The dangers of superficial scholarship are manifold and complex. Various exponents of Zoroastrian religion, history and culture have to be evaluated keeping in mind their own situation, environment and tradition. This has been very succinctly expressed by one such scholar, Mary Boyce in her article on 'The Continuity of the Zoroastrian Quest', W. Foy (Ed.) *Man's Religious Quest* (p. 603-6)

Zoroastrianism is probably the oldest revealed religion in the world, and has been the most misinterpreted. Its scriptures have not long been generally known, and by the time they were made accessible to the West, the Zoroastrian community itself had been reduced to two tiny isolated minorities, in Iran and India. Persecution had taught its members, moreover, the prudence of keeping silent about their beliefs and observances, and their reticence was often mistaken for ignorance or stupidity. So Western scholars, coming eagerly to the study of the Avesta, felt able to disregard them entirely in seeking to interpret their ancient scriptures. The first edition of the Avesta was published in 1852, and a few years later a brilliant young philologist Martin Haug, produced the first scholarly attempt to translate the Gathas into a European language (*Die Gatha's des Zarathushtra*, Leipzig 1858-60). He had identified these magnificently obscure hymns as the oldest part of the Avesta, and the only portion which could be attributed to Zoroaster himself; and for his pioneer rendering he drew both on his knowledge of Vedic, and on his expectations of what a great world-prophet should have taught. Thus he came to understand Zoroaster to have proclaimed a message of noble simplicity, a strict monotheism, with denial of the existence of any divine being other than Ahura Mazda, who was to be worshipped without rituals or sacrifices simply through heartfelt prayer.

Haug based this interpretation of Zoroaster's teachings on the following main points: firstly, he understood the word *daeva* to be, not an expression for a particular group of pagan gods, but a term for divine beings in general; and so he thought that, in repudiating the *daevas*, Zoroaster was rejecting all gods but the supreme Lord. Secondly, he regarded the 'Bounteous Immortals', the Amesha Spentas whose names reverberate through the Gathas, as only aspects of faculties of God, and not as independent divine beings to be invoked and worshipped. Thirdly, he supposed that when the prophet protested passionately against cruelty to cattle, and castigated (in one verse) the use of an unnamed intoxicant, he was inveighing against the traditional rites of sacrifice and the *haoma* offering. To reach these conclusions Haug had to reject the testimony, not only of living Zoroastrianism but also of all the remaining Avesta, which is full of veneration of the Amesha Spentas and other lesser divinities, together with execration of the *daevas*, and which abounds in reference to blood-sacrifice and the *haoma*-offering. He was therefore forced to suppose that soon after Zoroaster's death his community, while faithfully preserving his actual words and venerating his memory, greatly corrupted his teachings, reverting almost at once to beliefs and practices which he had banned.

'This approach, by which a European scholar, however gifted, could set his judgment, slenderly based on the study of one group of texts alone (and deeply enigmatic texts at that), against all the later scripture, tradition and observances of the once mighty Zoroastrian church now seems astonishingly presumptuous; but Europe in the nineteenth century was very sure of itself and ready to instruct the world, and for a variety of reasons Haug's interpretation was widely accepted. It established Zoroaster so long fabled for wisdom, as the teacher of whom the contemporary West could approve a rational theist, making minimal demands for observance. Most students of the Gathas were moreover philologists, like Haug, and were happy with an interpretation which allowed them to ignore complex traditions and the living faith, and to wrestle with these great texts alone in the quiet of their studies. There were, of course, those who were interested in them primarily as religious works, but some of these saw Zoroastrianism in the light of a forerunner of Christianity, whose significance ended when it had transmitted its chief doctrines to the younger faith. So they too were indifferent to its living forms, and also to those of its teachings which are unique and set it apart. W. Hinz and R.C. Zaehner are the most recent representatives of this school of thought, while S. Insler, who offered a new translation of the Gathas in 1975, adhered strictly to the philological approach, drawing, like Haug, on virtually no

external aid other than the language of the Vedas. Methods of interpretation initiated in the nineteenth century have thus had a long influence, and much of the work devoted to Zoroastrianism during the past century has been spent on attempts to justify them, and to explain why it is that the resulting conclusions so signally fail to fit the facts'.

Haug's interpretation hardened into academic dogma, notes Boyce in the same article and continues:

'One reason why it came to seem solidly based was that it had had an influence on Zoroastrians themselves. Haug spent the 1860's in India, and while there lectured energetically to the Parsis on his understanding of their prophet's teachings. He was listened to eagerly by one group among them, made up of those who had been educated at British schools in Bombay, and who were anxiously seeking means to reconcile the doctrines and practices of their ancient faith with the contemporary world of Western science and thought. Haug provided them unexpectedly with a startlingly simple solution, for according to him they could jettison almost all traditional beliefs and observances, and still account themselves faithful followers of Zoroaster. Many other Parsis rejected his ideas indignantly, since these constituted an attack on almost all that they held dear; but their adoption by the reformists meant that thereafter the community was divided, and could not speak with a single voice in the continuing debate on the nature of Zoroaster's message. Moreover, since the reformists wrote mostly in English, it was their utterances which reached Europe, where they were innocently cited as showing that Haug's interpretation must be right, since it reflected the beliefs of Zoroastrians themselves. The Irani Zoroastrians were able to preserve the faith of their forefathers unassailed for a little longer, being immured in a traditional Muslim society, which was itself impervious to any unsettling new ideas; and from them one can learn that the doctrine of a rigid monotheism, with rejection of rituals, had no place in living Zoroastrianism before European impact in the nineteenth century. This is substantiated, moreover, for the Parsi community itself by old records now available'.

It is oft repeated that Zoroastrianism is fundamentally good thoughts, words and deeds. Every religion however preaches good thoughts, words and deeds, but each religion has some distinguishing factor that sets it apart from other religions. Obviously then, there is something more to Zoroastrianism than just good thoughts, words and deeds. Every religion propounds an ethical system which is open for adoption by the world's people. But every religion also propounds a theological and ritual system which is special to itself. Zoroastrianism is firmly entrenched in what Antia refers to as 'purity laws'. These ritual purity laws were established centuries ago by our foresighted ancestors. But Antia (p. 6) states: 'We will therefore be well advised and well prepared to offer our future generations something that will still rightfully secure their allegiance to Zoroastrianism, even though in so doing they will move further away from ritualism and purity laws'. One wonders what kind of Zoroastrianism Antia plans for the 21st century? Certainly Peterson or any one for that matter can follow the ethical precepts of Zoroastrianism, but if they exclude themselves from ritualism and religious practices which are so much a part of the essence of Zoroastrianism, what is the point of the conversion? What else can the event of Peterson's navjote be called if not a 'farcical rite... a flippant dramatic action'?

### **'Mazdayasno ahmi Mazdayasno Zarathushtrish...'**

While giving evidence for conversion in India, Antia (p. 6) quotes the Rivayat of 1778 (*sic*) - the *Ithoter Rivayat*. However no credence should be attached to this Rivayat which is in part an unauthoritative, forged composition. The protagonists of conversion have time and again, taken recourse to this ridiculous

question answer (No. 13) of this Rivayat which has been proved by erudite Parsi historians like B.B. Patel and S.K. Hodivala to be an unreliable and fraudulent piece of writing.

The example of King Vishtasp's conversion seems to be a favourite with the pro-conversion lobby, who take any opportunity to quote it *ad nauseum*. It must be understood that before the advent of Zarathushtra on the Iranian scene, the religion practiced by the Iranians was a corrupted form of Mazda worship - Mazdayasna - and they were called Mazdayasnians. Zarathushtra accepted the religion into which he was born and when he assumed the role of prophet, he preached only a purified form of Mazda worship with the extraneous and corrupt elements removed. Mary Boyce notes in *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (p. 8):

'(Zoroaster) evidently accepted much of the faith into which he was born, but transformed it through a new teaching'.

The followers of Zarathushtra were called Zoroastrians, but they primarily remained Mazdayasnians. The Articles of Faith prayer begins by asserting that the faithful is first a Mazdayasnian and subsequently a Mazdayasnian Zarathushtrian:

mazdayasno ahmi, mazdayasno zarathushtrish  
'I am a Mazdayasnian, (I am a) Mazdayasnian Zoroastrian'.

Thus the question of converting to a new creed, entirely opposed to what one followed earlier, does not arise in the case of Vishtasp or any of those early followers of Zoroaster. Conversion presupposes rejection of one's own ancestral religion and adoption of an alien religion. In our booklet *Conversion in Zoroastrianism – A Myth Exploded* (p. 11) we have quoted Fravardin Yasht (13.99-100) to show that Vishtasp had not discarded his ancestral religion while supporting the religion of Zarathushtra. The existence of the Mazdayasnian faith is amply attested by the abundance of material of pre-Zoroastrian origin embodied in the Zoroastrian religious scriptures.

## Quotes misquoted

Antia (p. 9) quotes from Kotwal and Boyd's English translation of Dastur Erachji Meherjirana's *Rahbar-e-Din-e Jarthushti (A Guide to the Zoroastrian Religion)*: 'Q. Did Zoroaster want Vishtasp to accept his religion? A. Yes. Zoroaster had wished before God that Vishtasp would become his disciple, i.e., accept his religion (Yasna 28.8). Q. Did God tell Zoroaster that Vishtasp would accept the religion? A. Yes (Yasna 46.4 *sic*)...'. The quotes from Kotwal and Boyd (p. 24) actually read :

'Q. Did Zoroaster want Vishtasp to accept his religion? A. Yes. Zoroaster had wished before God that Vishtasp would become his disciple, i.e., accept his religion. In Yasna 28 (.8) Zoroaster says: "O Ohrmazd, give me the discipleship of Vishtasp who desires perfect mindedness". Q. Did God tell Zoroaster that Vishtasp would accept the religion? A. Yes. In Yasna 46 (.14) it says: "Courageous Kay Vishtasp is himself a praiser of your religion".'

Antia (p. 10) again quotes from Meherjirana as translated by Kotwal and Boyd (p. 183) Yasna 45.11: 'Ohrmazd becomes a friend, a brother and a father to the dastur or teacher who is beneficent and promotes the religion'.

However according to Stanley Insler, whom Antia regards 'as an Einstein among modern philologists', Yasna 28.8 translates thus:

'Thee, Best One, the Lord who art of the same temperament with the best truth, do I lovingly entreat for the best for Frashaoshtra, the hero, and for me, and (for those others) to whom Thou shalt grant it, the best for a whole lifetime of good thinking'.

Yasna 46.14:

'Zarathushtra, which truthful person is thy committed friend for the great task? Who moreover, wishes to become famed? Yes, it is Kavi Vishtaspa, with whom thou art allied. With words stemming from good thinking I shall call upon those whom Thou, Wise Lord, hast assembled in Thy abode.'

Yasna 45.11 :

'(to the Wise Lord). The person who, in this very way, has opposed the guilty gods and mortals who, in their turn, have kept on opposing this one – that is people other than the man who has been pious to him – such a person, by reason of his virtuous conception is an ally, a brother, or a father (of Thee), Wise Lord, the Master of the house Who shall save (us)'.

No mention is made in these Gathic strophes at all of Vishtasp accepting or promoting the religion.

Antia (p. 13) attributes the non-conversion policy of the Parsis in India to an influence of the Hindu milieu which followed a casteist policy. This, may not have been so in Iran, where the Zoroastrians have been often embarrassed into compromising even other long-standing traditions, on account of ridicule and at times coercion. But every serious student of history is aware that the Persian empire was perhaps the greatest force in the ancient world for centuries. Almost all of the then known civilized world, from Greece in the west, Egypt in the south, from the plains of the Punjab in India to the borders of China in the east and the Russian steppes to the north, all at some time or another were under the political sway of this mighty empire. Its influence was spread in all aspects of life. Yet, no documented evidence exists at all, either in Iranian or foreign sources that these mighty conquerors belonging to the Achaemenian, Parthian or Sasanian dynasties, forced the conquered people to submit to their religious beliefs. Cyrus the Great, as is well-known, freed the Jews from captivity and allowed them to rebuild their temple. At the height of his power and glory, surely Cyrus could have brought all the conquered Jews under the Zoroastrian religion, if indeed the religion had actually advocated conversion. The same holds true of all the great kings of Iran. The only religious persecutions that were followed were during Sasanian times, when Christians were converting Iranians to their creed. The persecutions were against such conversions. The Christians in their proselytizing zeal were guilty of political intrigue which ultimately ruined the Sasanian empire and led to its being conquered by the Arabs.

Further, Antia (p. 14) gives Bulsara's translation of Yasna 28.1 : 'That herewith may I spread Gladness in the Universe and Joy in all its souls'. However, the literal translation of Yasna 28.1 reads thus:

'For this, I pray with homage, with upstretched hands, for help, O Mazda, first of all (that I may perform) all deeds of the Holy Spirit through Asha and the Wisdom of Vohu Manah, through which I may propitiate the soul of the Earth'.

Insler translates the same strophe thus:

'With hands outstretched in reverence of him (our) support, the spirit virtuous through truth, I first entreat all (of you), Wise One, through this act, for (that) through which Thou mayest satisfy the determination of (my) good thinking and the soul of the cow'.

Obviously, Antia has changed his translator to suit his predilection, here as in other instances.

Antia (p. 19) quotes Boyce's translation of Yasna 28.4: 'While I have power and strength, I shall teach men (not just Mazdayasnis) to seek Asha', the words in brackets are Antia's interpolation and appear neither in the original nor in the translation of Boyce or Insler. Zoroaster's avowal to teach man the path of righteousness hardly can be held up to mean conversion. In the same paragraph, Antia quotes Yasna 43.11 : 'To do that which you told me was best shall cause me suffering among men'. Yasna 43.11 correctly translates thus:

'Then did I recognise Thee as Holy, O Ahura Mazda, when Vohu Manah came to me; when first by your words I have become learned: Thou hast instructed me about difficulties (in life, but my) faith in men (leads me) for doing that which you have told me (to be) the best'.

Several pages have been devoted to S.J. Bulsara's article 'The Religion of Zarathushtra Among Non-Iranian Nations,' in the *Journal K.R. Cama Oriental Institute* No. 35 (p. 87). Antia has reproduced Bulsara's wrong translation of the Fravardin Yasht passage : 'In the Farvardin Yast, Saena Ahum-Stut is extolled for having gone with a hundred disciples to distant lands spreading the Holy faith. So are also applauded in the chapter supplementing the Yasna Haptang-Haiti the Athravans who return from far off lands after successfully spreading there the Holy Faith of Righteousness'.

In the Fravardin Yasht (*Sacred Books of the East* Vol. 23 p.203) the passage regarding Saena Ahum-Stut reads thus:

'We worship the Fravashi of the holy Saena, the son of Ahum-stut, who first appeared upon this earth with a hundred pupils'.

The footnote to this line reads: 'Who was the first regular teacher, the first Aethrapaiti'. There is absolutely no mention of Saena having gone to distant lands to spread the religion. Regarding the reference in the Yasna Haptanghaiti (*Sacred Books of the East* Vol. 31 p. 291) :

'And we sacrifice to... the approaches of the Fire-priests, as they approach us from afar, and seek to gain the provinces, and spread the ritual lore'.

The note to this passage says: 'yoi yeya durat points to a migration of Zoroastrianism, coming West(?)'. Again, there is no reference to the Athravans who return from far off lands after successfully spreading there the Holy Faith of Righteousness'.

In quoting from Bulsara's work, Antia could have chosen no better way of proving that, had the Chinese and Indian communities converted to Zoroastrianism, they have long since been absorbed in the larger indigenous communities to such a degree that no trace remains either in recorded history or in folklore. Except for the Zoroastrians of India and Iran no other community of Zoroastrians exist in China, Mongolia, Turkey, Hungary or Greece and this fact should be an eye-opener for all those who are genuinely concerned for the protection and survival of our culture, identity, and above all, religion. If

conversion acceptance had been a practice, the result has been the complete annihilation of these communities.

## **Implicating the Achaemenians**

Antia (p. 29) makes a strange statement: 'In his Bahistun inscriptions Darius complains: "Those Elamites were hostile and they did not worship Ahuramazda", the reason being, some of them had already adopted Zoroastrianism... "This is a striking example, at their own threshold, of the Achaemenians' tolerance for the beliefs of the 'anarya' (that is non-Mazdayasnis)". This quote ostensibly from Mary Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* Vol. II p. 127, actually notes:

'In his inscription at Behistun Darius speaking of a revolt against him in Elam, states that he sent a Persian general who "smote and crushed the Elamites, and captured the chief of them; he was led to me and I killed him. Then the country became mine. ... Those Elamites were hostile and they did not worship Ahuramazda. I worshipped Ahuramazda; by the will of Ahuramazda, as was my desire, so I did to them". The Elamites are the only non-Iranian people who are anywhere reproached for not worshipping the "god of the Iranians"; and the reason is clearly that these ancient inhabitants of Persia were in a special relationship to the conquerors of their land, and that some of them had in fact adopted the cult of Ahuramazda, while continuing to venerate their own gods. Some of these "good" Elamites were employed at Persepolis, and received (as the cuneiform tablets from there show) grants of food and wine with which to make offerings to their own as well as to Persian divinities. This a striking example, at their own threshold, of the Achaemenians' tolerance for the beliefs of the anarya, and their readiness to support these, as long as those who held them were submissive and peaceable'.

Boyce further continues (*ibid.*, p. 175):

'Persian tolerance of "anarya" religions appears to have been the beneficent aspect of a fundamental indifference to them, tempered by pragmatism; and destruction of temples is recorded only as a punitive measure after political provocation. (The Babylonians had revolted, and the Athenians were Persia's open enemies, and had sacrilegiously murdered Darius' heralds). With the Daiva-sanctuary, Xerxes' words make it clear, there was a religious motive for the destruction. Old Persian daiva is equivalent to Avestan daeva; and the natural interpretation of Xerxes' words is that, as a Zoroastrian, he was recording the destruction of an Iranian sanctuary devoted to the worship of those warlike beings condemned by the prophet as having "rushed to Fury, with whom they have afflicted the world and mankind". What the nature of the "place of the Daivas" (Daivadana) was, can only be surmised'.

Antia (p. 29) would have us believe, quoting Boyce, that 'Cyrus and Darius... would have wished all their Iranian subjects to be their co-religionists; and the evidence of later times suggests that the Zoroastrian magi would have been zealous in urging them to bring this about'. The quote from Boyce actually notes (*ibid.*, p.176):

It is not known whether Cyrus or Darius had earlier sought to put a forcible end to un-Zoroastrian worship among Iranians; but it seems likely that in the interests of the stability of their own rule, if not for higher reasons, they would have wished all their Iranian subjects to be their co-religionists; and the evidence of later times suggests that the Zoroastrian magi would have been zealous in urging them to bring this about. But since Iran is a huge land, with mountains and

deserts, forests and valleys so remote that the king's commands could have gone long unheard there, pockets of paganism seem to have managed to survive down the centuries.'

Quoting Bulsara, Antia (p. 30) tries to prove that the Achaemenian king Xerxes practised conversion: 'Saith Xerxes the king: ... Among the conquered nations were some who worshipped Evil Spirits. So, by the will of Ahuramazda, the All-Wise Lord, ... I commanded them not to worship these Evil Spirits ... Instead I made them worship Ahuramazda the All-Wise Lord and Supreme Rtam, the Holy Law of Righteousness... So it seems that a religious zeal is shown by the Great King in forcibly imposing the worship of Righteous God on misguided people, but we know that the zeal was not exercised indiscriminately'.

In fact, the famous daiva inscription of Xerxes reads thus: (R.G. Kent, *Old Persian* p. 151-2).

'Saith Xerxes the king: When that I became king, there is among these countries which are inscribed above (one which) was in commotion. Afterwards Ahuramazda bore me aid: by the favour of Ahuramazda I smote that country and put it down in its place. And among these countries there was (a place) where previously false gods were worshipped. Afterwards, by the favour of Ahuramazda, I destroyed that sanctuary of the demon, and I made proclamation, "the demons shall not be worshipped !" Where previously the demons were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahuramazda and Arta reverent(ly). And there was other (business) that had been done ill; that I made good. That which I did, all I did by the favour of Ahuramazda. Ahuramazda bore me aid, until I completed the work'

There seems to be no reference at all to any sort of conversion in the above passage or in any other inscription of Xerxes, or of any Achaemenian king for that matter.

## **Dhalla's fallacies**

Antia opines (p.31) that 'the triad is known to be so antagonistic and allergic to Dhalla's views on this subject that I hesitate presenting them here even for simply proving the point that the other learned Dasturjis of our times did differ from the triad on this issue'. Perhaps it ought to be clarified at this point why scholars have differed from Dhalla. Taking the same quote as Antia (M.N. Dhalla, *History of Zoroastrianism* p.325) we read: 'Zaratusht first preached his new religion to the people of Iran where he was born; but Ormazd had commanded that the excellent religion should be spread among all races of mankind through out the world. In their commentary on the oft-recurring Avestan formula *fravarane*, the Pahlavi versionists add an explanatory gloss that every believer undertakes to proclaim the Zoroastrian religion of Ormazd to the entire world ... The Dinkart sanctions even the use of force for the conversion of the aliens. A Pahlavi treatise devoted mostly to the Zoroastrian rituals attests the practice of admitting outsiders into the Zoroastrian fold. Another Pahlavi tractate treating of the social and legal practices of the Sasanians lays down that if a Christian slave embraces the faith of his Zoroastrian master, he should be given freedom'.

Where Dhalla mentions that 'the Dinkart sanctions even the use of force for the conversion of the aliens', he gives a footnote indicating that this statement has been taken from the *Sacred Books of the East* Vol. 37 p. 89. However, the above mentioned page reads:

'At what degree of distance from *them they* have to carry the arms *and* appliances and the restoratives for the unfatigued and the fatigued; and the accoutrements being deposited, a warm bath prepared, and relaxation of the body affected, the reward of merit is given'.

A far cry indeed from anything to do with religion or conversion! But, on p. 89 of the same Vol. it is recorded:

'About admonition to the troops, and declaring the share and arrangement of special duty of each one in the fight; announcing to the troops the recompense of the active, telling and informing the troops of the reason of being worthy of death, of the worthiness of destroying foreigners, of the command of the sacred beings as to their destruction when they shall not accept the Iranian nationality (*Airih*), and the equally great reward and recompense for their destruction announced by revelation, the legal code (*dadistanikih*) of Iran'.

If this is the reference Dhalla wanted to give, then it still does not imply conversion at all. Accepting nationality does not amount to changing one's religion. Even the word *erih* according to D.B. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (p. 30) means 'nobility' or 'good conduct' originally and later did the association of these qualities with 'Aryan' and 'Iran' come about, the latter two words being derivatives of the former. In Sanjana's *Denkard*, Vol. 16 chap XXV para 22, the word *erih* has been translated as 'subjection', and the context is definitely a political and not religious one.

Dhalla further notes that a 'Pahalavi treatise devoted mostly to the Zoroastrian rituals attests the practice of admitting outsiders into Zoroastrian fold'. The reference given by Dhalla in the footnote is to the *Aerpatastan*, bk. I chap. 4 para 28, 29.

Evidently Dhalla relies on Bulsara's translation of *Aerpatastan and Nirangistan* (p.38) which translates *aburnayag ag-den* (occurring in folio 16a 1.3 in Sanjana's facsimile edition) as a child of wicked creed. Bulsara's version is based on the wrong meaning of this crucial word *ag-den*, thereby rendering the translation of this paragraph incorrect. The Pahalvi word *ag-den* means a person of bad religion or a person of wrong religion and is generally applied to a Zoroastrian convert to Islam. Even though Antia holds Bulsara's work in esteem and importance, yet he deliberately omits Bulsara where he explicitly translates:

'and though it may not be proper to bring it up as his own when referring to the so-called acceptance of a child of wicked creed by a person of the Good Religion.

## **Piety and politics**

Antia (p. 32) devotes much space to Neusner's 'Findings on the Treatment of Minorities in Sassanian Iran', in which the intolerant attitude of the Sasanian kings is discussed. Without debating each point regarding these so-called persecutions, let us reproduce Neusner's concluding remarks (*A History of the Jews in Babylonia* Vol. V, p. 71-72) on the subject, which Antia conveniently omits:

'Normally, moreover, the tolerant Iranian state left Christians at home pretty much alone except when it felt threatened by their supposed loyalty to Rome or took seriously their hope for, and persistent efforts to achieve, the eventual conversion of the Iranian nobility and throne to Christianity... In other words persecution of religion generally resulted from political provocation, whether in the actions of the persecuted or in the imagination of the state... Whatever happened, I

do not believe the Sasanian regime was attempting to divert attention from domestic and foreign difficulties by attacking the minority groups. If the government acted without general provocation, then I think the cause was the need of the king of kings to win over local enemies to replace his foreign friends, and chief among them would have been the clergy, who preserved fond memories of the piety of Yazdagird II... This account of events is purely conjectural, based upon a literal reading of dubious, because at best very late, traditions'.

Neusner is not alone in placing little or no reliance on these sources. George Rawlinson, *Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy* (p. 38-39), notes:

'But this entire narrative seems to be deeply tinged with the vitiating stain of intense national vanity, a fault which markedly characterises the Armenian writers, and renders them, when unconfirmed by other authorities, almost worthless'.

E.W. West, *Sacred Books of the East* Vol. V (p. lxx):

'This shows that how little reliance can be placed upon the assertions of foreigners regarding matters they view with antipathy or prejudice'.

W.B. Henning, *Zoroaster, Politician or Witch-doctor?* (p. 50):

'But the foreign sources, chiefly Syrian and Armenian Christian writers are undeniably hostile witnesses'.

Professor Pour-e-Davoud, *Journal K.R. Cama Oriental Institute* No.28 (p.129) notes:

'The persecution of the Christians in Iran no doubt occupies considerable space in history. It was mainly on political grounds and had nothing to do with religious fanaticism. In 294 A.C., the Christian saint, Gregory Illuminator, went to Armanastan and exhorted the people to follow Christianity. From this time onward, a large number of Armenians became Christians. Tiridates, the king of Armanastan himself adopted Christianity and died in 314 A.C. The whole of Armenia was gradually christianised and this was the cause of the constant tussle between Iran and the Byzantines. The Byzantines intrigued and instigated these Armenian Christians to create mischief in Iran. They insulted the Mubads, burnt the fire-temples and behaved disrespectfully towards them. The Iranians curbed with firmness these instigations made with political motives. The great German Iranist, Justi, notes that the Iranians must have been angels, not to take revenge on such great ruin and disrespect. On the other hand, we know that the Nestorian Christians, who had nothing to do with the Byzantines, were liked and respected by the Iranians and were very friendly to them. We can say with certainty that this persecution was purely on political grounds and had nothing to do with the Roman Church, but it was out of necessity only to save the honour of the Iranian race and religion'.

## **Gathic spirit mauled**

Antia believes that evidence for conversion in the prophet's own words is to be found in the Gathas. Stanley Insler's translation of these sacred hymns is relied upon to substantiate these claims. The Gathas, as any scholar of the language and religion will know, are extremely difficult texts to interpret and

understand. Randomly isolating lines, words or strophes without regard to context and tradition is hazardous.

No perfect translation of the Gathas exists. To interpret and understand these hymns solely in an academic context is to kill their spirit. One needs to be steeped in the tradition and well-versed in philology to be able to even remotely approach the letter and spirit that the prophet intended to convey.

Helmut Humbach (*Journal K.R. Cama Oriental Institute* No. 51 p. 40) pertinently notes:

'Any philological research in the field of the Gathas should be performed in two steps. The first step is to discuss the question: "What did the prophet *say* literally?" The answer to this question must be derived from the material analysis of the passage itself on comparison with material parallels which in each case must be traced and adduced. Material parallels are those passages of the Gathas, the other Avesta and also the Rigveda, which contain the same words or the same or a similar wording as the passage being investigated. The second step is to look for an answer to the question: "What did the prophet mean?" This means interpreting the result of the material analysis. Most scholars dealing with the Gathas have become accustomed to taking the second step before the first: They interpret a passage on the basis of its supposed content before materially analysing it, and from their anticipated interpretations, they derive the material analysis i.e., if they are interested in undertaking any such analysis at all. They may even find it inconvenient to go into details of material analysis because the results can be incompatible with their preconceived interpretation'.

Humbach concludes that this inverted procedure as a rule implies some very strange and hard to believe assumptions which are always unjustified.

In Insler's translation of the Gathas, the word that has been translated as convert is *vauraya* and *vauraitē*, both being derived from the root *var* -which means 'to turn, to choose, to believe to put faith in'. Insler himself explains the root as 'to turn' (p. 127) in his grammatical note to another cognate – *vauroimaidi*. This word is translated as 'to turn', but in case of the other two, Insler jumps to the idea of 'to convert' instead. He mentions however that 'a technical sense "convert" is present' for the two words *vauraya* and *vauraitē*, but apparently not for *vauroimaidi*.

We give below the translations of the relevant Gatha strophes:

Yasna 28.5: asha kat thwa daresani manascha vohu vaedimno  
gatumcha ahurai sevishtai seraoshem mazdai  
ana mathra mazishtem vauroimaidi xrafastra hizva.

'O Asha, when shall I, one who knows, see thee and Vohu Manah and the throne of the most powerful Ahura Mazda (and) Sraosha? Through this mathra (Holy Word) through the tongue, we shall cause the ignorant astray to believe in the Mightiest'.

Yasna 31.3: yam dao mainyu athracha ashacha choish ranoibya xshnutem  
hyat urvatem cazdonghvadebyo tat ne mazda vidvanoi vaocha  
hizva thwaha aongho ya jvanto vispeng vauraya.

'What reward Thou hast given through (Thy) Holy Spirit and through Fire, and Thou hast promised through Asha, for the two competitors, and what the decision is for the wise

ones – that, O Mazda, dost Thou reveal unto us for (our) knowledge through the tongue of Thy mouth, so that I may convince all living ones'.

Yasna 47.6: ta dao spenta mainyu mazda ahura  
athra vanghau vidaitim ranoibya  
armatoish debazangha ashahyacha  
ha zi pourush ishento vauraita

"Through this Holy Spirit (and) through Fire, O Mazda Ahura, Thou shalt give decision of reward unto the two competitors with the support of Armaiti and Asha. This (decision) will verily convince many desiring ones'.

The Pahlavi version translates all three words with the same equivalent – (MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* p. 93). The Pahlavi translator did not have any idea in his mind at all of conversion.

After laying great stress on Insler's scholarship, while quoting Yasna 30,1.2 (which correctly should read 31.1,2), Antia strangely enough abandons S. Insler and opts for S.J. Bulsara's rendering instead, the reason being that Insler is not in agreement with the views Antia wishes to put forward. Bulsara's translation of Yasna 31.2 (*Journal K. R. Cama Oriental Institute* No. 35 p. 81) reads thus:

"The doubtless and superior Virtues,  
So do I come unto you all as the Spiritual Lord  
Whom God All-Wise hath chosen over people  
To lead both the good and the wicked,  
That according to Righteousness may we all live!"

As a glaring contrast, Insler's translation of the same strophe runs:

"To them did the Wise Lord reply, as befits His rulership, He who is allied  
with good thinking and the good companion of sunlike truth : "We have  
chosen your good and virtuous piety. It shall be Ours".'

On the basis of the wrong translation of the last line of Yasna 31.2, Bulsara remarks 'These last lines also indicate that Zarathustra's was a Universal Religion... . But from the above translation of Insler, we can see that it is not so.

Most of Antia's quotes on the subsequent pages dealing with the Gathas are not the literal translations of the Gathic strophes but Insler's comments on some of the strophes as contained in the explanatory commentaries to each Gatha in his book. Insler's opinions have been foisted on the reader as translations of relevant Gathic lines and strophes.

Being unaware of the grammatical problems of the Gathic strophes, Antia (p. 36) follows Insler in Yasna 44.10b. According to Antia's quote, the line translates thus: 'Have they truly seen that vision which is the best for those who exist'. The Gathic line reads thus: *tam daenam ya hatam vahishta*. The word *hatam* in this line is clearly genitive plural, which indicates 'of the living' or 'among the living'. The correct translation is thus:

"That the religion which (is) best among the existing ones'.

Had the poet intended to imply that the vision was best for those who exist, he would have used the dative case. The Pahlavists too understood it correctly and translated it by the preposition *az* before *hastan* (living ones). Pahlavi *az* denotes 'from or among' (MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* p. 15).

## **Distortions and misrepresentations**

Zarathushtra says in the Gathas that the religion he is preaching is the best among existing ones, wherein one makes the conscious decision of allying himself with the good and against the bad so that evil will be eventually destroyed, resulting in Renovation.

We request Antia not to pose as an authority on religious matters as he has not the capacity to find out for himself what is laid down in the original texts. It is often that Antia has cited passages from the Gathas and other Zoroastrian scriptures and has ascribed to those passages meanings quite foreign to the text. Does Antia seriously want us to believe that he has even a fairly accurate grasp of the teachings of Zoroaster. We can only reply in the words of our prophet :

Yasna 32.9: dush-sastish sravao morendat hvo jyateush senghanaish xratum  
apo ma ishtim (apa) yanta berexdham haitim vangheush manangho ...

'The false teacher distorts the Scriptures, he indeed, through (his) teaching (distorts) the scheme of life; he removes indeed, (us) far (from our) heritage - the precious realisation of Vohu Manah'.

Antia claims to know many Parsis who continue to wear their sudreh and kusti even after converting to another faith. The sudreh and kusti, as they may not know are the spiritual emblems of the Zoroastrian faith and if these misguided people continue this practice they do so out of ignorance or for the sake of convenience. They may be termed religious zombies as they are neither in the religion they have renounced nor in the one they have converted to. Perhaps to them religion has no spiritual significance at all, in which case, the renouncement and conversion are mere meaningless charades.

It appears that Antia (p.39) does not know how to recite a very simple but important prayer - the confession of faith - which every child is taught. Antia notes 'Bar Khalak Farista Deh means that Zarathustra was sent by the Lord for this world'. If Antia's translating skills may be ignored, at least he should be aware that the Pazend prayer line is correctly pronounced thus:

Bar khalk firistadeh : (the Religion) was sent on this earth.

Antia profusely quotes Western scholars on Zoroastrianism, abides by what they have to say, and then unceremoniously accuses them of being primarily interested in their own academic games to get a name and fame for themselves (p.40). How is the impartial reader then to believe a word of what they say, or what Antia is trying to prove, for that matter?

We have tried to expose the specious reasoning of Antia. At a time when all quacks come in to try their nostrums in the interpretation of our sacred texts, we appeal to all serious students of Iranian literature to do their duty by showing that these quacks possess no cure of souls, as they feign to do, but they are merely self-opinionated people meddling with the common sense and plying upon the sentiments of the

community; misrepresenting facts and twisting the texts to find religious edicts to take in outsiders, talking vainly in an anti-Zoroastrian spirit.

We want *res non verba* - facts not words - from Antia. He must understand that religion is not an article for barter; and from us he can expect no quarter if he insists on killing our faith by misrepresenting the letter and the spirit of the scriptures.

For various reasons it is apparent to many that to open the doors to outsiders into the Zoroastrian fold would cause serious harm to the community. Far thinking co-religionists should not be led away by blind zeal or reform and the oft-misguided cry for progress. Rash and ill-conceived steps would lead to our absorption into larger communities and consequently complete annihilation as a fold. If our forefathers have not given effect to proselytism, it is because they were sagacious enough to discern that such a course was inadvisable, nay, dangerous.

## Conclusion

Let Parsi life be modeled on its own past and time-hallowed foundations : religious, moral and social; and let us draw from the West such good points as are capable of easy and natural assimilation within our own lines of growth. Let the spirituality, devotion and philosophy of the East take in and assimilate the activity, vigour and rational spirit of the West, and we shall have a combination that will be of the best and the brightest.

The ethics of Zarathushtra are only the foundations of Parsi life, and these, in our scriptures, are inextricably mingled with and founded upon the root principles of the Zoroastrian religion.

Antia (p. 43) professes to desire an exchange of views and facts on this subject of acceptance, but in the concluding remarks of the same para he states: 'Moreover, it will be so tragic and un-Zoroastrian if the Parsis in India will not come to terms with the religious sentiments of the North American Zoroastrians since it now seems to be an absolute certainty that they will soon opt for the acceptance of non-Zoroastrians amidst them based on their own study and scrutiny of our scriptures, with or without the priests going along with them (*Parsiana, 1984*)'. Obviously, Antia's desire for a 'meaningful dialogue' is another farce.

It would be fitting to end with the words of an 'objective and impartial' student of our religion, Mary Boyce. This is what she notes in the final paragraph of her article 'The Continuity of the Zoroastrian Quest' (p. 618-9) :

"The adoption by the reformists of so many European misconception has forced them to charge their ancestors with a lack of both fidelity and understanding, and they have had to take the unhappy position that the religion for which their forbears suffered so much was nine-tenths confusion and malpractice. The orthodox have been more loyal to their traditions, and now Western scholars are gradually coming to admit that the misunderstandings have been on their side, the result largely of ill-founded preconceptions. These misunderstandings have done harm both to scholarship, and, more seriously, to the Zoroastrian community itself; but as the cloud of misapprehension slowly lifts, it can be seen that, whatever changes and developments may now be desirable, the tradition of this community is one deserving of utmost respect. The Zoroastrians, it is plain, remained in prosperity and adversity staunchly faithful to the teachings of their prophet, which, though complex, were so lucid and logical and formed so clear a system of belief,

that even the humblest of his followers, helped by the prescribed devotions, could understand and live by them. They were, moreover, very positive teachings, which went with, not against, the normal bent of human nature, and helped men to live satisfying and fulfilled lives. In the light of all this, it ceases to be remarkable that Zoroastrianism survived for some 3500 years, and that the community, though cruelly reduced and of late perplexed, has still not lost the courage and vitality inspired by its prophet's original message'.

Hormazdyar K. Mirza

Kekhushroo M. JamaspAsa

Firoze M. Kotwal

The interested reader may further refer to:

- 1) Hormazdyar Dastur Kayoji Mirza, *Conversion Caucus*, Bombay 1971.
- 2) H.K. Mirza, K.M. JamaspAsa, F.M. Kotwal, *Conversion in Zoroastrianism – a myth exploded*, Bombay 1983.
- 3) Rustom A. Irani “*Acceptance – Never Ever !*” Pune 1985.