

## **A Case for Conservatism**

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This article is written in response to the petition titled 'Against Parsi Conservatism'. I would like to invite fellow Conservative Zoroastrians and their family members who share our commitment to conserving Zoroastrianism to sign the petition so we can have our voices heard:

<http://www.petitiononline.com/TradZ/petition.html>

I am born and raised in the United States, and embrace my Parsi culture and religion dearly. I have experienced firsthand the vast contrast between liberal Parsis and conservative Parsis as I grew up in New York, and was part of a Zoroastrian organization there for 18 years. It is perhaps one of the U.S.'s most liberal Zoroastrian communities. They of course believe they are making progress, but towards my 18 year tenure at that organization, it became clearly obvious to me that liberalism, though totally embraced, is erasing our cultural and religious identity. Sudreh-Kustis are few and far between and 'Prayer' classes focus on long courses of Persian history and very basic liberally-slanted Zoroastrian theory. The true meaning of Navroze and other holy days in the year is muddled by socializing, eating, and dancing.

Often times when discussing religion, I hear words like 'Fascist', 'Racist', etc. when liberals talk about conservatives. It's not my intention to convince anyone to become a conservative but to recognize that we are not bad people and furthermore, deserve respect and the right to practice the religion the way it has been practiced for millennia. I will steer clear as much as possible from pure religious beliefs as I know liberals and conservatives simply do not see eye to eye on them.

People fall on varying degrees of the spectrum when it comes to 'left' and 'right'. I don't think it would be a stretch to say that a large portion of the people who support intermarriages also support conversion into the religion by people who have neither a Zoroastrian Mother or a Zoroastrian Father. While some liberals hold the Sudreh-Kusti dear to their heart (and good on them for that), it's a mixed bag when it comes to the liberal bunch. Many liberals insist that this is not an essential part of being Zarthusti, which is ironic because this rule comes directly from our scriptures.

The point I am trying to make here is that when it comes to liberal ideology there is no end in sight with regards to what reform will come next. At what point will we say, "Enough is enough, this doesn't sound like Zoroastrianism anymore"? Furthermore, liberals are quick to dismiss or discount other tenets of our religion and reduce Zoroastrianism to a mere philosophy. If Zoroastrianism is just a philosophy, I am puzzled as to why liberals would fight to reserve their right to liturgical ceremonies should they marry out.

It is innate in the traditional ideology to preserve as much as we can when it comes to our beloved religion, as so much has already been lost to time. I hear very often "But where

in our scriptures does it say ...?”. I am not sure if everyone is aware that we have a fraction of our original scriptures available to us. We understand at a high level what the lost Parsi scriptures are comprised of from descriptions and connections provided in scriptures that have survived. Furthermore, of the texts that we do have, you will find literally tens to possibly hundreds of translations which vary depending on the spiritual lens that they are seen through. We don't know if the translations capture the esoteric meanings of what they were intended for. Our religion is an extremely scientific one, the more you study it with an open mind the more you will realize that. It is for these reasons that one cannot solely look at our scriptures and learn about our religion. It must be a combination of understanding our scriptures and devotion to practicing our established tenets. I can assure you that there are both tangible and mystical reasons for EVERY rule that our religion lays down and it is not arbitrary or 'man made' as many liberals claim. Any change made to the religion today, for example accepting converts, would in-fact be man made and detrimental in the spiritual realm.

Traditions, but more aptly religious traditions, are the only credible source of practical religious knowledge we have left. This is why conservatives cling to them so dearly and resist change. We also view our religion as not needing reform, in that it has survived against all odds, for thousands of years. It is only when we began tampering with it as early as the 1900s can we see a noticeable downward trend in our communities religious values and practices.

Another argument I commonly hear is “but you don't follow 100% of everything we are supposed to do...”. My answer to that is, of course not! It is close to impossible in this day and age to adhere to 100% of all of our religious practices. The main difference here is that liberals will challenge, resist, and create reasons for why we should not do something that they feel is not convenient or is contrary to 'modern thinking'. Furthermore, when they fail to adhere to certain rules they wish to pretend as if that's OK and still expect to be considered a Zoroastrian. Conservatives on the other hand accept the fact that when they omit items that they are supposed to do (i.e. pray 5 times a day, etc) it will only reflect negatively on their spirituality. They do the best that they can do to adhere to as many tenets as possible. Every tenet of our religion is important (including our philosophy of good thoughts, words and deeds) and to that extent we should try as much as possible in our daily lives to adhere to them. The main schism between the liberal and conservatives in this area is that liberals in some instances choose not to stick to the main tenets which deal with Zoroastrian identity and this is where hard lines in the sand are drawn between right and left.

When it comes to identity, here is what conservatives take as fact. Zarathustra was not the founder of our religion, nor did he invent, or think up the basic prayers, ceremonies, or the Sudreh-Kusti we use today. Zarathustra was born into the Mazdayasni faith. Mazdayasni loosely means Mazda worshipper. His Navjote was performed and he was an ordained priest. The Mazdayasni faith, like modern day Zoroastrianism fell into a state of disrepair, with many of its populace doing things in the name of religion that they should have not been doing, for example idol worship. When the Mazdayasni religion degenerated to such a state which was no longer tolerable, Ahura Mazda sent Zarathustra

to us to right all of those wrongs. This clearly showcases that there is right and wrong when it comes to religion and there are rules to be followed. The people who lived in Zarathustra's geographic region, though led astray, were already of the Mazdayasni faith. There was no one to 'convert' but rather set them upon the right path once again. When you read in texts that 'Zarathustra converted Vistaspa' etc. it was more of a conversion of mindset than religion. Zarathustra was pivotal in restoring the faith to its previous glory by showing people what was right and what was wrong when it comes to religious practice. It was not his intent to 'convert' non-Mazdayasnis in neighboring regions. Over time we have shortened the name of our religion to Zoroastrianism, but in fact we follow the Mazdayasni Zarthusti religion. Lastly, some liberals claim that converting people into our faith will somehow enhance and strengthen our religion and numbers. I cannot even comprehend that logic. When a vast majority of Zoroastrians are confused with the most basic Zoroastrian principles, how are people totally alien to the faith going to help the situation? And ironically, will they be taught the truth that Zoroastrianism does not endorse conversion?

It has been a long standing practice since we came to India, and prior, to marry only within the religion. I said I will steer clear of religious rational, and instead will rather present other reasons why we do not marry outside of our religion. Before I do, let me say unequivocally that our religion has NEVER allowed men to marry outside the religion. It has always treated women equally with regards to women holding positions of power and respect. The only reason why we are in this absolutely incorrect situation is that in the early 1900's a group of wealthy Zoroastrian men thought of themselves to be higher than our religion. In true liberal fashion, they demanded that the laws break for them. The BPP or law at the time did not recognize the men or their spouses as Zoroastrians. The law was appealed and due to their considerable pull and financial affluence they were able to win this case. Though this case was not the type to set precedent (*obiter dictum*), many Parsis took this as a license to do the same. When liberals think that this rule is of conservative origin, I find it very ironic since it is people very much like themselves who started this whole mess. This ruling caused way more harm for our community than it did good for the plaintiffs' families. I would also like to add here that any ruling made in a secular court which contradicts our religion holds no weight in the spiritual world. Legal laws which contradict our religion can be passed, people can (incorrectly) follow them, but at the end of the day our religious rules are what bind us in the spiritual realm. This clearly demonstrates religion should mold the individual, not the other way around.

Furthermore, on this topic of intermarriage, many liberals claim conservatives are somehow racist/elitist, i.e. if a Zoroastrian marries a caucasian that would be accepted vs. marrying someone of another race. Out of all the conservative people that I know (and I know quite a few). I can't say that I know ANY that subscribe to this laughable argument. Marrying outside the religion to us, is marrying out. It is regardless of race or socioeconomic status.

Whether one likes it or not, Zoroastrianism has and will always be an ethnic religion. Though we migrate from continent to continent, all of our ancestry invariably goes back

to one place. When our forefathers saw the destruction of our religion and their homeland, they left everything they had and came to India and other parts of the world. It's very important to note that of all the parties that left Iran, only the Parsis who migrated to India flourished. Why is this? To understand this very important topic, we need to fully understand two concepts - Cultural Assimilation and Acculturation. They sound the same but are very different.

The Parsis who went to other lands opted to break (or perhaps were forced to break) their religious rules and marry outside of their religion, and in effect, culturally assimilate with the local populace. Over generations they lost their identity, culture, and sense of what it means to be a Zoroastrian. What will be left in three or four generations if your kids, grandkids, and their children continue to marry outside of the religion? We could speculate, but let us take a real life example: the Native American Indian. Their religion is similar to ours in that their culture, heritage, traditions, and religious tenets are all intertwined, and that they are a small populace in an ocean of millions. The Native American Indians who have married within their fold are the ones who are able to keep their religion alive. For those who have married outside, perhaps not immediately but inevitably, generations later only the name remains as a faint memory. Often times you will hear people exclaim 'I am one sixteenth Cherokee on my dad's side!' and that is all they know. If we embrace the liberal ideology of intermarrying, the same will be true of our future generations.

Of the Parsis who went to India, they realized that following their religious tenets in this foreign and new land was the only way to survive. The acculturation via our tenets enabled our forefathers to positively interact with their neighbors all while preserving their precious religion which they left their homeland to protect. We may have adopted (or customized) Indian language, dress, food, customs etc, but we were able to maintain our religious and cultural identity. An important point to note here is that our prohibition of conversion was also a key factor to our peaceful stay in India. While other religions and factions of religions warred amongst themselves, we were left mostly unscathed because of the tolerant and respectful attitude we had towards other religions in viewing them as our equal. We have always encouraged other faiths to flourish and believe that the faith that God put you in is the faith you should practice. Emperor Cyrus the Great after liberating the Jewish people when their Tower of Solomon was destroyed funded from his own wealth the construction of their temple and encouraged them to follow their own faith.

Much of our pride, which the liberals often confuse with superiority, comes from the fact that being ~.01% of India's population our tiny spec of a community has produced so many gems and leaders in almost every imaginable field. It would be impossible for any true blue Parsi to not be proud of the tremendous role that we as a community have had upon Bombay in particular and India in general, and aspire to contribute to society and community in the manner that they have.

To conclude, I hope that my article has helped all Parsi Zoroastrians understand the default conservative viewpoint. I trust that with this renewed understanding, more respect

is shown towards tradition and our ability to conserve what Zoroastrians have been practicing for millennia. This respect can be shown by not forcing the conservatives to subscribe to a new ideology that goes against our beliefs and not changing the very essence of what we hold sacred. If you agree with this stand on our religion, then please sign the petition stated at the beginning of the article.