

Zoroastrian Renaissance: The Rebirth of A Chivalry of Light

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A. What does a Zoroastrian Renaissance mean?

Renaissance means rebirth, renewal. Like the phoenix we have been through the fire, and like the simorgh, we are preparing to once again take to the skies. It's time we rise from the debris, wipe away the ashes of grief and pain so that we can shine our light bright. We have the opportunity now, in ways we've never had before, to clear the fear, lack, betrayal, and humiliation deposited in our very cells as a result of our people living for so long in states of limitation and helplessness, a legacy some of us have inherited from previous generations.

At Harvard and elsewhere, I've researched how people and cultures recover and flourish following experiences of collective traumas like war, displacement, colonization, and genocide. How do we renew ourselves?

1. Restore our relationship with ourselves and one another

Many Zoroastrians have undergone generations of trauma, particularly our Iranian brethren. Even if you're not of Iranian descent, trauma may be for many a precondition of being alive. To have a true renaissance, let us commit to freeing ourselves from the baggage of trauma. Having had the privilege of working alongside Native American and other healers who do this work in their communities, I know it's possible.

Restoring ourselves to emotional health is essential to any renaissance: We cannot drag our past into the future and expect the future to be any different or brighter. For example, some may need to release long-held grievances against Arabs, Islam, and Muslims. And let's learn to have compassion for our Iranian Muslim brethren, many of whom carry the scars of generations of trauma themselves. Conversion, especially when involuntary or under pressure, can also be traumatic. Some who have converted to Zoroastrianism from the Christian faith may also need to heal grievances against the abuses of the Church.

Healing does not mean that we deny what was done and the pain that it caused. We acknowledge it, feel it, but dedicate ourselves to finding means of reconciliation and release. Love, compassion, and service are at the core of Zarathushtra's message and our ancient chivalric code. In today's world of separation, healing our grievances will help create the wholeness and unity (*haurvatat*) that Ashu Zartusht wanted for us all. Healing our minds and hearts fosters *humata* ("good thoughts") and supports the development of *Vohu Manah* (our "good mind").

Learning to release grievances is not just a generous act to those who we perceive have wronged us; we do it for ourselves. The quality of our thoughts reflect back to us in the circumstances of our lives: If we focus on our victimization, then that is what we are likely to get more of. Also, when we don't address our wounds, they are carried over to the next generations. We burden them with our pain. We cannot create a true renaissance – a life-giving, beneficial rebirth – if so many of us are still stuck in the wounds of the past. Let's acknowledge these wounds and invest in healing them, for the sake of our children.

2. Restore our relationship with the natural world

As part of a Zoroastrian renaissance, let's also commit to reconnecting to the natural world in long-forgotten ways, to remember that the natural world is sacred and sentient. We may applaud ourselves for being among the first environmentalists, but how many of us truly live in ways that honor the Earth, her human and non-human children?

Many of us have become too mental, lost in our heads and the world of ideas – I included – too seduced by scientific discourse with a mechanistic and linear view of reality. Like everyone else, the vast majority of us live disembodied lives, disconnected from the experience of sensuality without shame. We've become frenetic, too urbanized, far removed from the natural world and where our sustenance comes from. We have forgotten the ancient ways of communing with our Higher Minds, our divinity the elemental spirits of the trees, rocks, water, wind, and fire. There are those who know how to do this still; let's be humble enough to go to them and learn. Ashu Zartusht did not worship in man-made structures; he worshiped within the temple of Nature.

3. Discard excess baggage

I invite us to do a thorough inventory of our traditions, so that we may weed out those beliefs, teachings, and practices that have been added to our religion over time and that are *inconsistent* with Zarathushtra's main tenants or *no longer serve* our collective interests. For one, let us shed any misogyny and toxic masculinity that we've absorbed from the dominant traditions we've had

to accommodate, going back perhaps to the Greek invasion of Persia. If Ashu Zartusht were alive today, I have no doubt he'd call himself a feminist – believing in the equality of men and women. How many of you do? I'm not speaking just to our men here, but to our women as well, some of whom enable patriarchal and misogynistic traditions.

As we do this soul searching, let's remember to be kind and compassionate toward one another, understanding that we suffer from a measure of "internalized oppression," having adopted some of the methods of those who have oppressed us to hurt ourselves. Our community has been through an ordeal – it's a miracle we've survived.

Every religion has cultural traditions that have been linked to their religion but actually have little to do with the original teachings of their prophets. Muslims, for example, are dealing with the scourge of Female Genital Mutilation, mistakenly linked to their faith but that is only a cultural artifact. What are our Zoroastrian equivalents to Female Genital Mutilation, even if not as severe? A Zoroastrian renaissance means having the courage to do an honest inventory and to lighten our load of these so we can fly higher and bring our best to the world.

4. Restore the original teachings: a focus on sovereignty and universalism

Renaissance may also mean restoring the essential teachings, to the best of our abilities. It is fortunate for us that our first principles – our true orthodoxy – is remarkably progressive, as though designed for this modern age, and that returning to them is liberating.

There are many conversations underway in our community, in Gatha groups and the like, about Ashu Zartusht's "original teachings." Given the limitation of space here, I will note just one body of "original teachings" I suggest we return to: the value placed on *human sovereignty*.

Zarathushtra core teachings are meant to support humanity to develop its true sovereignty, free from any form of enslavement, both internal (bondage to fear, despair, rage, limitation) and external (petty tyrants, whether they be political, religious, or other). To be sovereign also means the responsibility of knowing oneself as a creator being, not a victim. Like the larger topic of Zoroastrian Renaissance, the notion of true sovereignty is worthy of a book, but I will just point out one thing: Sovereign people are free to choose their faiths.

Apostasy, which is considered a crime in Islam, is therefore foreign to us, as we recognize that it is a product of belief systems designed to enslave people. The crime of *religious exclusion* is also foreign to our faith, as Zarathushtra proclaimed that it is up to each individual's conscience to learn, contemplate, and choose wisely. Although a measure of community consensus is important, our true orthodoxy assigns no gatekeepers who have the authority to determine who's in and who's out according to some false notion of superiority-inferiority based on biology, blood, or caste.

Just as we don't discourage conversion (or reversion), neither do we chase it. The aim of a Zoroastrian renaissance is not necessarily to convert as many people as possible to the faith. Zoroastrianism has had the rare capacity to not just tolerate but generously support other faiths to

thrive. Of course, we are vulnerable being so small, but still, we are not in competition with other traditions regarding who has the biggest club membership. And we are not like a corporation, seeking greater market share. More members is not necessarily a measure of greater value.

Eleanor Roosevelt, the driving force in 1948 behind the U.N.'s "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" once said, "Freedom makes a huge requirement of every human being. With freedom comes responsibility. For the person who is unwilling to grow up, the person who does not want to carry his own weight, this is a frightening prospect." In the same way, not everyone will find Zoroastrianism and its message of human sovereignty – freedom and responsibility – appealing. For some, it may be frightening.

Even if we were to remain few in numbers, we can still be influential. Let's engage in healing ourselves, reconnect with the natural world and core teachings, and get out and be more involved in the larger world, unafraid to broadcast and model our *healed* beliefs. The fact that we exist with such a fundamentally different worldview may be enough to disrupt long-held and toxic certainties – to positively influence the interpretation of other faiths.

B. Why is a Zoroastrian Renaissance Critical at This Time?

We live in unprecedented times: the exponential rate of development of new technologies in this digital age and artificial intelligence are activating unheard-of rates of transformation, all while Earth undergoes climate change and a sixth mass extinction. It's a time thick with fear and disruptions, as well as positive potentials. What will become of us? And for those who survive, what will life on our planet be like? What can Zoroastrianism possibly offer at this pivotal juncture in human history?

The collective stories and beliefs of humanity have the power to shape our realities going forward. The religious beliefs that have dominated the past two millennia speak of a sinful and not-to-be-trusted humanity that needs saving by an outside, superior force. According to these prevailing narratives, Earth is not even worth redeeming since the spiritual and material realms are considered separate, with the spiritual superior to the material.

What we collectively believe creates our reality and so, given this stew of toxic beliefs, it is no surprise that we have an increasingly polluted and overcrowded world with an overwhelmingly downtrodden and irresponsible humanity resembling "a plague on the Earth," in the words of the naturalist and *Planet Earth* narrator Sir David Attenborough. There is certainly evidence to support the indictment that we humans are in the process of destroying ourselves and everything precious on our beautiful, blue-green planet. But there's nothing actually true about the negative perception of humanity or the Earth: The state of our world *mirrors* our collective beliefs.

I have wondered, if Ashu Zartusht (what Iranians call the prophet Zarathushtra) were alive now, how might he respond? What might he think, say, and do? Even in his own time, he bore witness to the worst that people were capable of doing to one another. And yet, remarkably, his perspective on humanity was hopeful. For example, he considered us "originally blessed" (in

contrast to the notion of “original sin”), much beloved, having inherent dignity, deserving of freedom, enjoying abundance, and all that is good.

He realized, of course, that humanity has nasty inclinations as well, but he encouraged us to choose to step into our divine capabilities (*Amesha Spentas*), to become *Saoshyants*, those who bring benefit, to be responsible stewards of the Earth, co-Creators of beauty and harmony here, now. He believed that humanity has inherent greatness that needs to be elicited, and he birthed a tradition that was designed to cultivate our greatest selves.

What would happen with a love like that, the love that Zarathushtra held for us and our potential? What might the world look like in a hundred years, in a thousand years if the prevailing beliefs became focused instead on the sacredness and intrinsic value of the natural world (not just what commodities it offers us humans), and on the inherent divine capabilities of humanity, and not on its supposed “fall from grace”? In my most hopeful moments, I imagine an ectopia – an ecological utopia. The current alternative is far from that.

The choice remains ours. Our beliefs *will* shape the future, which is why a Zoroastrian Renaissance may be more critical today than ever – not just for the few hundred thousand of us who identify with this faith and who may have a sentimental attachment to it surviving. A Zoroastrian Renaissance may serve the billions who don’t yet know what Zoroastrianism is.

The future, the unborn, are sending us an SOS. Will we heed their cry?

A Zoroastrian Renaissance is a call to reestablish *Espabad*, the chivalric traditions of the Zoroastrian dynasties. Some say that western chivalry was informed by Persian traditions. We were among the first Knights of Light and it’s time we reclaim our place.

Who among you, women and men, will step up and be knighted? Who is prepared to join me in renewing the chivalric pledge, in defense – and celebration – of the future, the sentient Earth and ALL her children?

