



Lord Karan Bilimoria, CBE, DL.

## **Zoroastrianism**

Zoroastrianism stands as a beacon of ancient wisdom, a testament to the human spirit's quest for understanding and unity with the divine. As the world's oldest monotheistic faith, its teachings have illuminated the path for countless souls, guiding them towards righteousness, truth, and harmony.

Drawing inspiration from the profound insights of Mary Boyce, a renowned scholar of Zoroastrianism in the UK, it is evident that the influence of this ancient faith on humanity is immeasurable. Despite the challenges faced by the Zoroastrian community, which now numbers around 100,000 globally, its teachings and values have remained steadfast, echoing the principles of the great Persian Empire from over two and a half millennia ago.

Mahatma Gandhi once said that the Zoroastrians are “in numbers beneath contempt, but in contribution great.” This sentiment encapsulates the disproportionate impact that the Zoroastrian community has had in the world — from business to finance, they have made their mark despite their small numbers.

The illustrious lineage of Zoroastrianism is intertwined with the legacies of great leaders like Cyrus the Great, Darius I, and Xerxes. Their reigns were characterised by principles of justice, tolerance, and magnanimity, values deeply rooted in Zoroastrian teachings. The 'Cyrus Cylinder', a symbol of Cyrus's humility and respect for diverse faiths, serves as a testament to the Zoroastrian ethos of harmony and coexistence.

As we traverse the annals of history, we find that Zoroastrianism's legacy is unparalleled. While ancient civilisations like the Greeks and Romans have seen their polytheistic beliefs wane, Zoroastrianism's flame continues to burn brightly, connecting diasporas from India to the UK, the US, and beyond. This unbroken historical link is a testament to the community's resilience, integrity, and unwavering

commitment to its values. But this faith is not something that has been consigned to history, it remains particularly relevant to our modern day.

In today's rapidly evolving world, where the cacophony of modernity often drowns out the whispers of the past, Zoroastrianism remains a resilient and relevant force. Its teachings, though ancient, resonate profoundly with the challenges and aspirations of the 21st century.

The Zoroastrian community, while numerically small, continues to make significant contributions in various fields, from business and academia to arts and philanthropy. Their success is not merely a testament to their industrious nature but is deeply rooted in the Zoroastrian principles of 'Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds'. These principles, simple yet profound, serve as a moral compass, guiding individuals towards a life of purpose and meaning.

In contemporary society, where divisiveness often takes precedence over unity, the Zoroastrian ethos of tolerance and coexistence offers a refreshing perspective. The faith teaches us to embrace diversity, to respect all forms of life, and to work towards the betterment of humanity. This universal message of harmony is especially pertinent in our times, marked by geopolitical tensions, environmental challenges, and social inequalities.

Indeed, the Zoroastrian emphasis on environmental stewardship aligns seamlessly with the global movement towards sustainability. The ancient rituals of venerating the elements – fire, water, earth, air, and ether – underscore the faith's deep reverence for nature. In an age where the consequences of environmental neglect are becoming increasingly evident, Zoroastrianism's eco-centric teachings provide a blueprint for sustainable living.

The global Zoroastrian diaspora, spread across continents, continues to play a pivotal role in preserving and propagating the faith. From the fire temples in Mumbai to the community centres in London and Los Angeles, the spirit of Zoroastrianism thrives. These spaces not only serve as places of worship but also as hubs for cultural exchange, fostering a sense of community and belonging among Zoroastrians worldwide.

The Zoroastrian diaspora has always been a key contributor to every society they've been involved in, and it's worth elucidating some of them in the two nations I'm most familiar with - India and the UK. Their impacts in the most diverse of fields is a hallmark of the versatility of Zoroastrians, and indeed every Parsi I know personally.

Jamsetji Tata stands as a monumental figure in this narrative. His visionary entrepreneurship laid the foundation for India's industrial revolution with the Tata Group. Yet, beyond his commercial ventures, Tata's philanthropic endeavours, such as the establishment of the Indian Institute of Science, resonate with the Zoroastrian ethos of community service and betterment.

In the realm of arts and culture, Freddie Mercury, born Farrokh Bulsara, showcased the global appeal of a Parsi boy from Zanzibar. His meteoric rise as the lead vocalist of Queen and his music, which transcended borders, exemplify the universal spirit of Zoroastrianism, where individual passion aligns with a broader, global resonance.

Political advocacy and bridging cultures were the hallmarks of Dadabhai Naoroji. His pivotal role in the Indian nationalist movement in 1892 and his distinction as the first Indian elected to the British House of Commons highlight the Zoroastrian principle of harmonious coexistence. Naoroji's efforts in advocating for India's rights on British soil serve as a testament to the community's commitment to justice and righteousness.

Lastly, through the literary lens, Rohinton Mistry offers insights into the Parsi community's life and challenges in India. His works, especially 'A Fine Balance', not only provide a poignant commentary on India's socio-political landscape but also echo the Zoroastrian values of resilience, integrity, and hope.

On a personal note, my journey with the Zoroastrian community has been one of profound learning and immense pride. The modern day incarnations of these communities exemplify the aspirations and achievements of this ancient faith. Their unwavering integrity, combined with a deep sense of heritage, has ensured the preservation of the eternal flame of Zoroastrianism.

In my endeavours, I have always been guided by the principles of Zoroastrianism in business and politics, and I have tried to bring those ideals to Cobra beer and my work in the the House of Lords. As the first Zoroastrian peer, I realised the grave responsibility on my shoulder to show the best of the Parsi community in everything I did.

As the President of the World Zoroastrian Chamber of Commerce in the UK, our motto, 'Industry and Integrity', resonates with the core tenets of Asha ('order'), integrity and righteousness. In the realm of leadership, Zoroastrianism teaches us the importance of always doing the right thing, a principle I have strived to uphold throughout my life. In 2013, I took a step further to bridge the gap between the Zoroastrian community and the global political landscape by founding the Zoroastrian All Party Parliamentary Group in Westminster. Serving as its founding co-chair, our mission has been to foster interest in Zoroastrianism and strengthen ties with the Zoroastrians and Parliament and interested individuals and entities worldwide.

Of course, there is much to be done, and much to be learned in the intricate tapestry of today's global society, where challenges like climate change, socio-political divisions, and technological disruptions are reshaping our world, the principles of Zoroastrianism offer not just solace but actionable guidance. As we grapple with

these multifaceted issues, the essence of our faith provides a compass, pointing us towards solutions rooted in harmony, integrity, and sustainable progress.

The world is at a crossroads. Rapid technological advancements, while bringing unprecedented opportunities, also present ethical dilemmas. Climate change, a pressing reality, demands immediate and collective action. Societies worldwide are seeking a balance between preserving cultural identities and embracing global unity. In this context, the Zoroastrian ethos, emphasising respect for nature, truthfulness in discourse, and the celebration of diversity, becomes profoundly relevant.

As a Peer and a businessman, I've witnessed firsthand the transformative power of these principles. In boardrooms and parliamentary chambers, the Zoroastrian values have been my guiding light, reinforcing the belief that ethical leadership and collaborative efforts can indeed usher in positive change. But this isn't a journey to be undertaken in isolation. It requires collective will, a coming together of minds and hearts, transcending boundaries and biases.

To the young Zoroastrians and indeed the youth worldwide, I extend a challenge: Harness the tools of the digital age, but anchor yourselves in the timeless wisdom of our faith. Innovate, create, and lead, but always with a conscience. The world needs your dynamism, paired with the moral compass that Zoroastrianism provides.

To the global community, I offer a vision: Imagine a world where decisions, be they political, economic, or social, are made with a genuine commitment to the greater good. Where the environment isn't an afterthought but a primary consideration. Where diversity isn't merely tolerated but celebrated. This isn't a utopian dream but a tangible goal, achievable if we draw inspiration from the core tenets of Zoroastrianism.

As we stand on the brink of a new era, let us not merely adapt but thrive, drawing inspiration from our rich heritage. Let the principles of 'Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds' be our guiding mantra, propelling us towards a future that is not just prosperous but also just, inclusive, and sustainable.

Thank you to Meher Bhesania for graciously inviting me to write this message. It's always a pleasure to talk about Zoroastrianism and my own history and experience with this wonderful faith.

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