

*The following short paper was submitted to the Inter-Religious Working Group on Human Rights as part of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The paper, together with contributions from other faiths, was published and distributed to religious organizations in North America.*

## **Mankind and the Freedom of Choice in Zoroastrian Scripture**

By Kersi B. Shroff

Zarathushtra, the Prophet of ancient Iran, says in his Gathas, the divine songs of reverence to Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord:

O Mazda, from the beginning you created soul and body. You granted man the mental power and knowledge. You placed life in the physical body and gave mankind the power to act, speak and guide. You wished that everyone should choose his or her own faith and path freely. (Yasna 31, verse 11, translated from the Avestan language).

The significance of the verse is that having been given the faculties to make the right or free choice, mankind must bear the consequence of that choice.

The theme of freedom of choice is replete in the Gathas. In Yasna 30, verse 2, Zarathushtra urges mankind to decide with 'sucha manangha' (an open mind) and make a clear choice 'avaenata' (between the two paths) of the good or evil:

Listen with your ears the highest truth, consider it with an open mind carefully and decide each man and woman personally between the two paths, good and evil.

A French scholar thus remarks on individual freedom manifested in the Gathas:

Freedom of thought, a zealous sense of self-respect, magnanimity in religion, a sharp intellect, and a zest and fervour for principles of ethics,... are peculiarly manifested in the Gathas of Zarathushtra.

It is the spirit of forbearance and respect towards the religious beliefs and cultural traditions of all people that was reflected by Cyrus the Great, a Zoroastrian King of the Achaemenian dynasty of Iran, in his Declaration of Human Rights inscribed on a clay cylinder in cuneiform. Cyrus conquered Babylonia in 539 BC and liberated the Jews from slavery and assisted them in returning to the Promised Land.

Cyrus's Declaration of Human Rights states:

I am Cyrus, King of the World. When I entered Babylon I did not allow anyone to terrorize the land. I kept in view the needs of its people and all its sanctuaries to promote their well being ... I put an end to their misfortune. The great God has delivered all lands into my hand, the lands that I have made to dwell in peaceful habitation.

A replica of the decree is displayed in the United Nations.

Cyrus's tolerance and magnanimity earned him the designation of 'the anointed of the Lord.' In the Old Testament, in the Book of Isaiah, he is hailed as the Shepherd of the Lord.

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