

**Archbishop of Canterbury's address to the Zoroastrian community
Friday 1st October 2010**

President Malcolm Deboo, Lord Bilimoria, Honoured Guests and friends:

My first very pleasant duty is to say what a great pleasure and privilege it's been to be welcomed as I have been welcomed this afternoon by this community. I must say a special word of thanks first to all those who made presentations this afternoon to educate us so very successfully and so very attractively about Zoroastrianism.

Second my thanks to the young people who presented us with such a magnificent performance of the 'sweetening of the milk'. I had expected to meet some new friends today, but I hadn't expected to meet prophets, priests and kings.

One of my dearest friends came from a Zoroastrian family - the late, much lamented and much loved Nadir Dinshaw, who although he had grown up as a Christian spoke to me time and time again of how important in his life had been the heritage of the Zoroastrian community and Zoroastrian faith. Almost every time we met and that was quite frequently over many years, he would speak about his beloved grandmother and about how most of what he understood about God had come from his grandmother. I think it is possibly something that grandmothers do the world over, to pass on the knowledge of God, but that's a matter for another session.

But I remember what he said because it brought alive for me the way in which some religious communities seem to be destined by their history to be interpreters of different worlds. Very often these are communities that have been through deep trauma, that have been uprooted, displaced, that have a history of suffering, and yet somehow through all that have been given the great gift of spreading reconciliation because they have had to inhabit so many different worlds and speak so many different languages. They have a role in bringing strangers together; and this is one such community. It is a community whose history going back over thousands of years now is a history of displacement, after that long period of which we have been reminded today, when Zoroastrianism was the faith of one of the world's greatest civilisations and one of the great empires of the ancient world. From that came centuries of wandering and of creating new life in alien environments. Lord Bilimoria spoke a little while ago about the way in which loss and suffering brings you close to the edge of despair and yet generates somehow a strange energy and perhaps a new depth. That is certainly, once again, the history of this community.

Years ago when I was first doing my academic research I focused on the life of the Russian émigrés; in Paris and there once again you see a small group of people dispersed, uprooted and traumatised, stripped of the power and influence they once had. And yet, when they arrived in Western Europe they became an extraordinary catalyst for new thinking, new discoveries, new

spiritual depths. That kind of community shows some kind of analogy to what's happened in Zoroastrian communities century after century.

Of course it is one of those many areas in which the experience of the Zoroastrians and the experience of the Jewish people comes so close together. I spoke earlier this afternoon in my introductory remarks about the way in which the Zoroastrian faith and the Zoroastrian heritage had fed into the mainstream of so many of the great religions. When I first began to study the Bible seriously and began looking at the footnotes (not always a good idea but sometimes it has to be done) again and again there would be references to "the influence of Iranian ideas". And most of those who have read the Jewish scriptures with care and attention will realise that, yet again, the experience of uprootedness and exile for the Jewish people, exiles in the Persian culture, meant that they too became carriers and interpreters of new ideas. When they returned from exile they brought with them a new vision of angelic protectors, of a battle between good and evil forces in the universe, a sense of the impending end of things when we would stand before our maker, even the hope of a saviour.

Through that Jewish absorption of Iranian ideas, Christians themselves took on many of the most characteristic features of their faith. And when the Muslim faith begins centuries later there is once again a sense of the deep penetration of the imagery and thinking and poetry of that faith by some of these ancient traditions and insights. When we speak of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we might speak of three religions deeply saturated with Iranian ideas and religious traditions also.

But that's not all, because the Zoroastrian community, displaced into the great Indian sub-continent, that astonishing, fertile, hospitable environment where so many religions have rubbed up against each other for so many centuries or even millennia, that transposition to India meant that the Zoroastrian community became yet again an interpreter, a mediator between different worlds. It carried with it an understanding of the complex religious environment of India, the Hindu & Sikh traditions, Jainism and Buddhism, as if this community through its history and its geography was destined to be one carrying all these histories, all these legacies, all these understandings of God, befriending them all, threatening none of them. That is a very great gift of God, a very great gift to the rest of us through this community.

But there is a little more to say and Lord Bilimoria has once again given me the cue to say it: 'Industry and integrity'. Integrity is something we all long to grow into in our own lives and is something that we long to see in our society. When there is a bit of a famine of integrity we all feel it - and we have all felt it at times, sadly, in this country in the last few years. We know what we're missing: integrity, the word itself, comes from the Latin for 'wholeness'. Integrity is the ability to hold your life together, not to let it be fragmented, broken up, with parts of it hidden and parts of it revealed, but rather to be able to stand in the light, in the truth without fear. That's integrity, but for that to be real we need a sense of the living truth, of a living light to which we are answerable, which pours out strength and benefit upon us; a reality that we're

responsible to and yet a reality that is a caring environment for us, the reality ultimately of God.

We Christians read in our Scriptures that 'our God is a consuming fire'. We recognise that that image of painful purification fire suggests is one which tells us that integrity, that wholeness, is costly. It's hard work letting go of our lives and our self protections and that is why the call to integrity is something which will never be simple, yet is always attractive, because we *want* wholeness.

So this faith, this religious tradition and this community, for which the concept of integrity standing before a purifying fire, is so central, is a tradition and a language which has a very great deal to say to all of us in this country and in our world at the moment. Integrity is vital for us, integrity is hard work - but it can be done when we believe that the light, strength and life in whose presence we stand, the God in whose presence we sit, is a God whose will is for our wholeness and our welfare.

So let me say thank you not only for hospitality but for inspiration. Thank you for witness to that fiery integrity which many centuries, many millennia of your history shows us. Thank you for that contribution to the world of religious dialogue which you represent and which you have inhabited in so many different places and in so many different languages, and in all of them shown the same honesty and welcome. Thank you for the gifts you have given all of us, the gifts God has given through you; thank you once again for making me so much at home in this unforgettable environment and this unforgettable community

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