

CIS Bulletin: Zoroastrianism

A Publication of the Center for Interfaith Studies, Inc.

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Zoroastrianism arose in ancient Persia (modern Iran) from the Indo-Iranian, or Aryan, faith. Its numbers once were in the millions. Today, there are probably no more than 100,000-200,000 Zoroastrians in the world, most of whom live in India (70,000) with the largest concentration living in Mumbai (formerly Bombay).

The number of Zoroastrians in the U.S. is estimated to be 18,000.

The Federation of Zoroastrians Associations of North America (FEZANA), in the Chicago suburb of Burr Ridge, coordinates communications among the various North American associations. It published the *FESANA Journal* quarterly.

The California Zoroastrian Center in Westminster is the largest Zoroastrian center outside India, Iran and Pakistan. The California center publishes *The Zoroastrian Journal* quarterly.

Some followers prefer the name Zarathushti, rather than Zoroastrian to describe themselves. Others use the name Parsee or Parsi.

The religion was founded by Zardusht or Zarathushtra. His complete name is Zarathushtra Haechataspa Spitama. "Zoroaster" is most common of several Greek forms of his name. According to Zoroastrians, he was born around 1738 B.C. in northeastern part of the Iranian Plateau. Although other scholars believe he lived around the time of the Rig Veda, the oldest of the Hindu scriptures. That is usually dated between 1500-1260 B.C. Still, others believe he lived as recently as 600 B.C.

Little is known about Zoroaster or Zarathushtra. He trained to become a priest. When he was 20, against his parents' wishes, he left his guardian's house and spent 10 years on a mountain in a cave, during which time he devoted himself to meditation and religious understanding. He devoted himself to complete devotion to a Supreme God named Ahura Mazda and was enlightened with spiritual knowledge. The religious world in which he grew up was decidedly animistic.

He began to teach about the righteousness and guidance of Ahura Mazda or Divine Wisdom, the Supreme Being. None accepted his teachings; he was ridiculed, then imprisoned.

He escaped and cured the king's horse. The king became a follower and gave Zoroaster his daughter in marriage.

He is called a prophet and is not worshipped.

Zoroastrians believe the Persian king, Cyrus the Great, who allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian

Captivity, was a Zoroastrian.

Some scholars believe the Wise Men were Zoroastrian priests.

Zoroastrianism was widespread from Persia to China before the 6th century.

Zoroastrians fled to India in large numbers in the 8th century in the face of Muslim persecution. They were welcomed in India as long as they married within their faith and did not seek converts. In India, they became known as Parsis or Parsees (perhaps after a city in Persia called Pars). A few Zoroastrians (10-18,000) still live in Iran, but are periodically persecuted by the Shia Muslims.

Beliefs

- **Monotheistic religion** (mono meaning one), hence a belief in one God.
- **Supreme Being:** Ahura Mazda (Divine Wisdom). He is creator of everything seen and unseen. All devotion belongs to him.
- **Dualism:** Spenta Mainyu ("Holy Spirit")
Angra Mainyu or Ahriman ("Evil Spirit")

These two are in constant battle, but good will prevail by the power of Ahura Mazda. Ahura Mazda is the only deity worthy of being worshipped. Lesser divine powers are venerated.

This cosmic conflict involves the entire universe, including humanity who are required to choose which to follow. Some he argued were "truth followers," others were "evil followers." Each human has to make a choice.

Evil, and the Evil Spirit, will be completely destroyed at the end of time. Dualism will come to an end and Goodness will be all in all.

Origin of Angra Mainyu is debated. Could Ahura Mazda be truly good if he created an evil spirit? Some answer no. Others say humans are capable of evil, and they are created by Ahura Mazda, so he has created something evil.

- **Ethics:** Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds.
- Teaches many tenets of the **major Abrahamic faiths:** heaven, hell, day of judgment, Satan, prophecy, coming of a Messiah, angels and evil spirits. Human are free and responsible beings. Predestination is rejected. Reward, punishment, happiness and grief all depend on how the individual lives his life. Some scholars believe Jews during the Babylonian Captivity learned of Zoroastrian beliefs. However, others believe the Persians/Zoroastrians got ideas from Jewish writers such as Ezekiel.
- After death, the **urvan** (soul) is allowed three days to meditate on his/her past life. The soul is then judged by a troika **Mithra**, **Sraosha** and **Rashnu** and walks across a bridge. If the good thoughts, words and deeds outweigh the bad, crosses the bridge and the soul is taken into heaven. If the bad outweigh the good, the bridge turns on its side to present a footing like the edge of a sword, and the soul plunges into hell.
- The universe will go through three eras:

Web photo



Dr. Dolly Dastoor speaking at the dedication of the FEZANA office in Burr Ridge, Ill. 31 August 2008.

- creation;
- the present world where good and evil are mixed. People's good works are seen as gradually transforming the world towards its heavenly ideal. We are in this period now; it began with the birth of Zoroaster. This period will end with a finale great battle. The dead will be resurrected and judged;
- and a final state after this renovation when good and evil will be separated
- Eventually, everything will be purified. Even the occupants of hell will be released
- A **Saoshyant** (savior) will be born of a virgin, but of the lineage of the Prophet Zoroaster who will raise the dead and judge everyone in a final judgment.

Scriptures

- **Holy Book:** The sacred Scriptures are known as the *Avesta* and consist of four parts. The Yasna are a collection of prayers and liturgical formulas, and contains the Gathas, which are attributed to Zoroaster himself. The Visparat are invocations to the celestial lords. The Vendidad are concerned with ritual purification. The "Smaller Avesta" includes daily prayers, a collection of hymns to various deities and epics concerning kings and heroes.

Zoroastrian Practices

- Their worship includes prayers and symbolic ceremonies.
- The rituals are conducted before a sacred fire. Some believe that they actually worship fire. This is not true. They regard fire as a symbol of their God.
- Nau Rooz, March 21, is the Zarathushti New Year Day and Zarathustra's birthday. It is also New Year Day for Baha'is, another religion begun in Persia.
- Festival of Mehregan (in Persian: Jashn-e Mehregan) is a celebration dedicated in honor of Mithra (Mitra) or Mehr, the Persian god of Light, Love, Knowledge, and Commitment. This ancient Iranian autumn festival, observed in early October (in 2008, it was held on October 4), corresponds to Mehr day or the 16th of Mehr, the seventh month of the Iranian Calendar. Similar to Thanksgiving in America, Mehregan is also a harvest festival and is often held outside, weather permitting.

In the Zoroastrian tradition, a special table is laid with the fire vase or an incense burner, a copy of the holy Avesta, a mirror for self-reflection, water as the source of life, various grains for prosperity, fruits and flowers, sweets, wine, coins, and candles. A Zoroastrian religious leader (in Persian: Mobed) recites appropriate prayers, especially Mehr Niyایش, a short prayer in the Avestan language in praise of Mithra. A talk is given to signify the occasion, and food is consumed. A poem is read to glorify the festival and the participants of the party dance to the tune of music until late at night.

- Zoroastrians do not generally accept converts and so do not proselytize. One has to be born into the religion. This belief is disputed by some members.
- The traditional wing of Zoroastrianism discourages and does not recognize interfaith marriages. It is generally thought in the Parsi traditions that the only way to become a Zoroastrian is to be born within a Zoroastrian family and while some Iranian Zoroastrians would agree with this position, others would not. This tradition is also debated quite often. In recent years Zoroastrianism has seen the rise of western converts within a "Gathas only" tradition. As in many other faiths, Zoroastrians are strongly encouraged to marry others of the same faith.

However, in India, as a result of historical needs not to proselytize, there have emerged "rules" that say that women (and their children) who marry followers of other religions are no longer considered Zoroastrians (although men and their children are). These rules are not officially recognised by the clergy as they go against one of the main principles of Zoroastrianism, equality amongst sexes. In Iran, because of still-existing discrimination, inter-faith marriage is officially not encouraged by the government. With the globalization of modern society and the dwindling number of Zoroastrians, these rules are being enforced increasingly less often, especially in the diaspora.

- Zoroaster taught, "Struggle for good against Evil with Humata (good thoughts), Hukta (good words) and Havarshta (good deeds)."

Major Zoroastrian Concepts

- Equality of sex. Men and women are equal in all manners within society.
- Cleanliness of the environment. Nature is central to the practice of Zoroastrianism and many important Zoroastrian annual festivals are in celebration of nature: new year on the first day of spring, the water festival in summer, the autumn festival at the end of the season, and the mid-winter fire festival.
- Hard work and charity. Laziness and sloth are frowned on. Charity is regarded as a good deed, where Zoroastrians part with a little of what would otherwise be their own.
- Condemnation of oppression toward human beings, cruelty against animals and sacrifice of animals. Equality of all humans regardless of race or religion and respect of everything on Earth and in the world is central to the religion.
- The symbol of fire. The energy of the creator is represented in Zoroastrianism by fire and the sun which are both enduring, radiant, pure and life sustaining. Zoroastrians usually pray in front of a lighted incense burner, a candle or a lamp. It's important to note that fire is not worshipped by Zoroastrians, but is used simply as symbol and a point of focus, much like the wooden cross in Christianity.
- Death and burial. Religious rituals related to death are all concerned with the person's soul and not the body. Upon death, a person's soul leaves the body after three days and the body becomes just an empty shell.

Traditionally, Zoroastrians have not buried their dead because the earth is sacred. Bodies may not be cremated because fire is sacred. So, bodies are wrapped in muslim and left atop open-topped enclosures, called Towers of Silence. Vultures and the weather clean the flesh of the bones, which are then placed in an ossuary at the center of the Tower.

However, over the past two decades, as many as 90 percent of the vultures in India have died from eating dead cattle containing painkiller and other poisons. So, there are not enough vultures to eat the 3-4 Zoroastrians who die daily in Mumbai (formerly Bombay). Even though bodies are covered with lime, scattered complaints are heard about smells coming from the towers because the bodies take so long to decompose. In addition, many Zoroastrians do not like to think of their loved ones rotting away for months. Zoroastrians elders are trying solar panels to hasten decomposition, however, the monsoon season last six months which works against decomposition.

In India, some reformers are calling for burial and/or cremation as alternatives.