

Zoroastrian Worldview Traditions

In-Depth Subject Knowledge Essay



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Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority

Basic beliefs

The central belief of Zoroastrianism is that God, Ahura Mazda (The Wise Lord), is all good and he created the world which is therefore also good. All misery, disease, suffering and death are the assault of the evil one, Angra Mainyu. The history of the world is the arena for the conflict of good and evil.

Ahura Mazda appeared to the Prophet Zoroaster (dated somewhere 1500-1200 BCE) in visions and taught him that the good religion of Zoroastrianism will ultimately overcome evil.

All people have free will but after death their good thoughts, words and deeds will be weighed; if the good outweighs the evil then the individual will pass safely across the bridge of judgment (the Chinvat Bridge) to dwell in heaven. However, if the evil overshadows the good, the soul will fall into hell where it will be punished according to its sins. This is not however, the final judgment, as at the end of history (frashgird) a saviour (Soshyant) will come. At this time, evil forces will be destroyed and everyone will be raised from the dead to face a second judgment.

The first judgement was clearly one of the soul because the body can be seen to remain on earth. But Ahura Mazda created both body and soul so after the resurrection everyone will be judged again for their deeds in the body and will return to heaven or hell for appropriate reward and punishment. Once wholly purified, all human beings will go to heaven to dwell with God for eternity.

The scriptures and authority

The sacred text of Zoroastrians is the Avesta. It was preserved orally for some time and then written down in a specially designed alphabet. It is known from summaries in later texts (the Pahlavior Middle Persian literature) that we have only about a quarter of the original. It was collected in the third century CE and was preserved because it was liturgical material in a ritual setting.

For Zoroastrians religious authority rests fundamentally on the vision of the Prophet Zoroaster contained in his hymns, known as the Gathas. These are found in the Avesta.

Some of the books in the Avesta, notably the Yasna, are the text of the liturgy of that name. At the heart of the Yasna, the Gathas (the original 17 hymns of the prophet Zoroaster), are preserved. In these, Zoroaster recounts, in poetic form, his visions of Ahura Mazda and the teaching he was given. He declares that there are two contrasting forces of good and evil in the world, and sets forth his belief in the Seven Bounteous Immortals (Amesha Spentas). These are the creative spirit, qualities of Ahura Mazda in which humans can and should share, for example Good Mind (Vohu Manah) and Righteousness (Asha). Other books in the

Avesta give ritual directions, for example, on purity. Avestan is the sacred language of prayer for Zoroastrians; it is the language of visions thus making them spiritually powerful.

The Middle Persian texts were produced after the Islamic invasion of Iran in the 7th century. Some of them are basically collections or summaries of Avestan material in translation on a set theme. One, the Bundahishn, meaning creation, tells the story from the creation right to the last days. Zoroastrians do not call this the end of the world, as its end would be the defeat of Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd in Pahlavi). They refer instead to the Renovation, (Frashegird) as creation is restored to its original perfect state once evil has been defeated and all people are raised from the dead. After this second judgment all will be punished or rewarded before finally dwelling with Ahura Mazda. The soul is judged at the bridge of judgment, the Chinvat Bridge, after death, when everyone's good and evil thoughts, words and deeds are weighed in the balances.

Other books include exhortations to be faithful to the religion in the face of persecution, and theological expositions of key doctrinal issues such as human nature and duty. The Pahlavi (or Middle Persian) texts are taken as authoritative by most Parsi but Iranian Zoroastrians tend to look past them and turn only to the Gathas, viewing these as the word of the prophet.

It is widely thought that Zoroastrianism influenced Christianity and Judaism with the beliefs in angels, demons, heaven, hell and the resurrection of the dead.

Priestly authority

Human religious authority rests primarily with the dasturs (high priests), although some is with the mobeds (priests). Dasturs are usually (although not exclusively) sons of dasturs, although mobeds must be sons of mobeds.

The authority of a mobed is essentially restricted to the temple, and that of the dasturs is said to 'lie within the walls' of their Atash Bahram ('Cathedral' fire temples). Both mobeds and dasturs wear white caps and long flowing robes as a sign of purity. Prayers (manthras) are recited in the Avestan language whilst standing, and are said aloud in order to remain 'alive'; with this in mind, there is little tradition of silent prayer.

In theory Parsis see the dasturs in India as the senior religious authority; however, the Diaspora is beginning to question this, arguing that the dasturs do not fully understand life in the West. This view is more common in America than in Britain where the dasturs are still viewed with great respect.

The founder of faith

The key figure in Zoroastrianism is the Prophet Zoroaster (the Greek form of the Iranian Zarathushtra). He lived somewhere between 1500 and 1200 BCE in north east Iran. He was a priest, had visions of God (Ahura Mazda meaning 'Wise Lord') and believed he had been set

apart 'from the beginning' to work as a prophet to his people. His teaching is contained in 17 hymns known as the Gathas which are located at the heart of the Yasna, liturgical writing found in the sacred book, the Avesta.

Zoroaster taught that Ahura Mazda created the world, but that at the centre of existence there are opposing twin spirits, the most holy of whom created life. He believed that both his message and his followers would transform the world, as humanity will choose the best above the worst.

His exhortation to practise Good Thoughts, Words and Deeds is seen as a clear moral guidance that can be followed in any age. It is the duty to care for the good and oppose all that is evil, with the source of inspiration being the visions of Ahura Mazda.

Myths and legends have grown up about him. He is said to have laughed at birth; while offering worship at the age of 30, a radiant being appeared to him and led him to heaven where he saw Ahura Mazda. His teaching was at first rejected, and jealous rival priests had him imprisoned. However, following a miracle of healing the king's favourite horse, the religion spread through the realm.

Zoroaster is considered to be human not divine although he is more than simply a role model. He was chosen by Ahura Mazda to be the divinely inspired teacher of 'the Good Religion'.

Zoroaster's life came to an end at the age of 70, when he was murdered by his enemies.

There have been no other prophets as Zoroaster was unique, although later Middle Persian texts foretell the coming of other saviours as the end of history approaches.

Exemplars of faith

The contemporary leaders of the community are the high priests (Dasturs) in Iran and India whose directives are followed by most in the global Zoroastrian Diaspora. There have been some mystic occult figures who command a following in India and to some extent in the Diaspora, but they are seen as interpreters of Zoroaster's message, not as replicating him.

A popular modern leader is Behramshah N. Shroff (1858-1927). When he was 18 he had a row with his mother and left home. He moved north from Gujarat and met a group of Zoroastrians who travelled secretly and led him to an unknown paradise deep in the sacred mountain in Iran called Demavand. Once there, he was instructed into the occult mysteries of the religion and in Ayurvedic medicine. He began teaching in 1907 and moved to Bombay in 1909 where he started his group known as Ilm-i Khshnoom, 'Path of Knowledge'. His teaching can be described as a Zoroastrian version of Theosophy and includes vegetarianism, a belief in reincarnation, the importance of occult powers and praying in the ancient sacred language of Avestan. He and his followers continued to use the existing temples and religious calendar, and his teaching continues to be popular today.

A very different inspirational modern Zoroastrian teacher is Dastur (meaning 'Very Reverend') Maneckji N. Dhalla (1875-1956). He was brought up in poverty in Karachi before working as a journalist, expressing strong orthodox views. Some religious leaders took him to Bombay and paid for him to study ancient Zoroastrian languages and texts. He met Prof A.V.W. Jackson from Columbia University, New York who was so impressed he took him to study in America in 1905 first for an M.A. then a Ph.D. He described himself as "arriving as an orthodox but departing America in 1909 as a reformist". On his return, he became High Priest in Karachi. He wrote several books on the history of Zoroastrianism, and a book of devotions, both of which are widely used to. Personally, he was a quiet and devout man, and by all accounts, popular with those who met him. However, he was rejected by the orthodox with followers of Shroff accusing him of teaching a Protestant Christian version of Zoroastrianism. In America and Pakistan he continues to be revered for his life and teaching.

Ways of Living

Guidance for life

Zoroastrians are not required to accept specific creeds, but broadly to follow the Prophet Zoroaster, who taught a code of 'good thoughts, good words and good deeds'.

Zoroastrians believe that people were created by Ahura Mazda (God – the Wise Lord) to be his fellow workers (hamkar) in the fight against evil. The world is the battleground between good and evil and therefore it is their duty to fight against all manifestations of evil, both in the spiritual world (seen as cruelty, violence and greed), and the material world (for example, suffering, disease and decay). Equally it is each person's duty to care for the Good Creation (Bundahishn) whether in the form of the environment, ensuring justice or care for other people.

Religious duties and practice

There is no tradition of monasticism in Zoroastrianism; to retreat from the world would be to spurn Ahura Mazda's creation. People have a duty to get married, have children and to expand the army of Ahura Mazda.

Zoroastrians believe in the importance of charitable giving, notably in educational ventures and medicine, and this has long been a characteristic Zoroastrian duty with charity viewed as inter-communal across all faiths.

The key religious practice for Zoroastrians is to recite the sudrekusti prayers with which each Zoroastrian is invested at initiation (naujote). The sudre is a white cotton garment worn next to the skin and a lamb's wool cord tied around the waist (similar to a Brahmin's cord except in Zoroastrianism this is the symbol for all believers). These are spoken of as the 'armour of the religion in the war against evil'. When the Zoroastrian goes to temple they stand and

pray before the perpetually burning sacred fire (atash), in which they believe God is physically present.

The fire temple will also have a ritual room, urvisgah, where the higher ceremonies are performed by the priests on behalf of the laity, for example in memory of the deceased. Laity may attend these ceremonies but rarely do.

Reading and interpreting the scriptures

The Zoroastrian scripture is a book known as the Vestal. From latter texts we know that only about a quarter of the original has survived. The surviving portion is concerned with priestly rituals and is believed to be spiritually powerful and authoritative.

Inevitably, in a religion as old as this one, there are many shades of belief and various interpretations of the faith. There are orthodox and reform groups who interpret the tradition differently, with some emphasizing the mythology and others not.

In India some Parsi have been influenced by Hindu beliefs regarding rebirth, an influence not felt in Iran. In the western Diaspora there is a greater emphasis on understanding the meaning of prayers and knowing the doctrinal teachings, whereas in India the emphasis is on identity and being a member of the community rather than on teachings. There are, of course, exceptions to this, most notably a movement called 'Zoroastrian Studies' led by an Oxford graduate based in Mumbai. However, the core teachings supporting the myths of creation and the end of time (Frashegird), the conflict between good and evil, care for the world, and the belief that one will be judged by the balance of good and evil thoughts, words and deeds, have continued to hold firm.

All the leading figures who followed Prophet Zoroaster in ancient and modern times have claimed only to interpret the poetic hymns of the prophet. His teaching is seen as showing the path of Righteousness to Heaven (called the House of Song).

The journey of life

There are no rites associated with the child at birth, though new babies are often given a special strengthening drink made from water, fermented hom tree juice and pomegranate leaves.

The first major stage in life is initiation (naujote = new birth) which should take place just before puberty when the child of Zoroastrian parents chooses to join the army of Ahura Mazda and undertake the obligations of the religion. The ceremony involves the investiture by the priest with the sacred shirt and cord (sudre and kusti) which all Zoroastrians, male or female wear next to the skin like a vest throughout life (except when bathing).

Marriage is a religious duty in order to have children and expand the Good Creation of Ahura Mazda. Not even a High Priest (Dastur) can perform the higher liturgical ceremonies until he

has married, because he is not a full man. The wedding ceremony is performed by priests. Initially, the couple sit facing each other with a curtain between them; when this is lowered it is popularly thought that the first person to shower rice (a sign of fertility) over the other will dominate the marriage. A cord is passed several times round them both symbolising the marriage bond. After this the couple sit side by side, affirm that they wish to get married and are blessed by the priest(s). Parsis have their own marriage laws in India. Divorce is more common than in much of Indian society but far less than in the West. It can be instituted by women as much as men, for example for adultery, cruelty or infertility.

Death is believed to be ultimately unnatural as Ahura Mazda created the first human being immortal. The death of a righteous person is a greater victory for evil than that of a wicked person and so the corpse is more polluting, though all dead bodies are regarded as unclean. The body, therefore, has to be treated in a special manner. It is taken to the funeral ground where professionals wash it. The corpse is then laid on a slab and a circle is drawn around it. No-one except the corpse bearers should enter the circle. A priest prays beside the body until the time of the funeral which should be the same day if possible.

At the time of the funeral the body is taken into a Tower of Silence (dokhma) and exposed to be consumed by vultures which dispose of the body in half an hour during which time the bereaved pray in a nearby hall. After the bones have dried in the sun they are then cast into a central pit where acid is poured. There are strong religious reasons for this mode of disposal. Zoroastrians believe that the earth, waters and fire are sacred so the body cannot be buried, cast into the sea or cremated. Ahura Mazda created everything for a purpose and the purpose of vultures is to consume dead matter to stop it polluting creation. Parsis also argue that it is the most hygienic form of funeral as it does not waste land. Everyone is treated in this manner, whether they are rich or poor, man or woman. Where there is no dokhma the dead may be buried in a stone coffin to save polluting the earth or, as in the western Diaspora, they are cremated and the ashes buried in their own cemeteries. The family prays either in the temple or at home to aid the soul on its way to judgment. On the 4th day after death there is the uthumna ceremony when charitable gifts are announced which Zoroastrians see as a better memorial than an elaborate tomb or gravestone.

Holy Days and celebrations (life cycle)

Ceremonies are a time for people to gather; jashans can be celebrations with the wording changed to suit the occasion. These include, a blessing for a new home (in which case it is held in the home), to celebrate an important event or as a petition, for example, for rain. For these there should be at least 4 priests with any number of devotees from few to several hundred. However, worship remains individual as worshippers gain spiritual sustenance through watching the priestly rituals.

The main Zoroastrian liturgy is the Yasna, which may be attended only by Zoroastrian initiates. The Yasna, which consists of 72 chapters of text, is performed as the sun rises in order to symbolise the fire of asha (the empowering force of Ahura Mazda) scattering light and heat over creation and dispelling the darkness of ignorance and evil.

There are six seasonal festivals which probably predate Prophet Zoroaster which are known as the gahambars when it is customary for Zoroastrians to gather in worship (celebrate a rite known as the jashan, with many layers of symbolism including the priestly exchange of flowers symbolising the passage of the soul (urvan) from one life to the next) and in joyous fellowship over food. These were originally agricultural festivals but have acquired a very Zoroastrian symbolism representing together with No Ruz the seven creations sky, water, earth, plants, cattle, man and No Ruz celebrating fire (see symbols).

No Ruz is the Iranian New Year (Jamshedi No Ruz March 21st) celebrated by all Iranians, Zoroastrian or Muslim and is observed by many Parsis.

The gahambars have been celebrated in Iran for centuries as obligatory festivals but they largely died out among the Parsis in India as the community became highly urbanised in Bombay/Mumbai thereby losing the agricultural roots. In the diaspora, however, under Iranian Zoroastrian influence, they have again become important and popular community festivals, though there are three different calendars among Zoroastrians. Shenshai, is the most common in India (their No Ruz is in August), Kadmi, the minority reformed calendar, and the twentieth-century Fasli which seeks harmony with the Gregorian calendar.

A popular festival is Khordad Sal, the birthday of Zoroaster (mid-August for the Shenshai); Zartusht-no-diso remembers the death of Zoroaster (Shenshai late May) and particularly holy are what the Iranians know as Farvardigan (Parsis Muktdad, Shenshai mid August) the last 10 days of the year when the souls of the departed are welcomed and entertained and during which time the Gathas of Zoroaster are recited.

Zoroastrians recite their prayers in the sacred language of Avestan believing that the words have spiritual power, that is true of the festival prayers but they are also joyous times of coming together as a community be that in Iran or the Diaspora.

Ways of Expressing Meaning

Stories of faith

The key stories for Zoroastrians are the myths surrounding the life of the prophet Zoroaster. Zoroastrians highlight his visions, his call by Ahura Mazda, the fact that he could perform miracles due to divine support and his mortality because he was murdered.

An epic work both in literary nature and size, is the Shah Nama, translating as the Book of the Kings. It was written by an Iranian poet under the pseudonym 'Firdausi' (the paradisa) in Persian in the 11th century CE, but drew extensively on much earlier Zoroastrian texts. It tells the story of Iran from creation until the Islamic conquest of the country, by transforming ancient Zoroastrian myths into legends, and relating the bravery and prowess of heroes and the evil deeds of tyrants and enemies. These provide stories enjoyed by adults and used for bed time reading by young Zoroastrians. Many Zoroastrian first or personal names are from

figures in the Shah Nama, for example Rustam, a legendary hero, who fought many Iranian enemies and has become a role model for many.

Among Parsis, a much loved story is the Qesse ye Sanjan, The Tale of Sanjan. It was written in Persian couplets in 1599 by a Parsi priest and relates the story of the arrival of the Parsis as refugees from Islamic persecution in the Iranian homeland. It tells of how their ship was threatened by a storm at sea and, following prayer, a gentle breeze and guidance of priests with knowledge of astrology, they were brought safely to the port of Sanjan on the west coast of India. This is interpreted as the settlement in India being an answer to prayer, and 'written in the stars' as their destiny. The tale continues to tell the story of the consecration of the first Atash Bahram (a 'cathedral' or royal fire temple) and the travails of the Parsis as they protected the Atash Bahran when they were attacked by Muslim invaders of India. Woven into the story are historical details behind customs with the whole reflecting positively the Parsi attitude to India, a land where the Parsis have gained religious freedom and security.

Symbols of faith

For many Zoroastrians, the living flame of the sacred fire (Atash) is the greatest symbol of 'He who is pure undefiled light'. However, orthodox Parsi believe that Ahura Mazda is physically present in the sacred flame, and therefore take a more sacramental interpretation. Therefore, if a Zoroastrian cannot pray before a flame he may pray before a light, ideally the sun.

Other important symbols include the sudre and kusti (sacred shirt and cord respectively), which represent the spiritual 'armour' of the religion, and a portrait of the Prophet Zoroaster often found with a lighted oil lamp in front of it to symbolise the sacred fire.

There are no anthropomorphic symbols of Ahura Mazda. A symbol of Ahura Mazda that decorates many Zoroastrian religious buildings, homes and worn as a brooch or necklace is what is known as the winged symbol. It was historically derived from Babylonian art but was used as a common motif in the magnificent Achaemenid dynasty (6th to 4th century BCE) palace.

Other motifs and figures from the sculptures at Persepolis decorate the walls of temples to express the great antiquity of the religion of which all Zoroastrians are proud.

An ancient and common symbol of evil is the fly as it is associated with rotting, decaying and dead matter and therefore seen as a pollutant. Other animals are viewed as natural killers and thought to represent evil, for example, snakes and scorpions, lions and wolves. The ancient texts say these were invisible forces of evil created by Ahriman (the evil one) but Ohrmazd made them visible so that humans could see them and thus avoid their deadly work.

Other creatures represent the Good Creation, with the cow being a particularly good example as it is peaceable and gives of itself through its milk, its hide, its dung (used like coal for fires) and its body as food. Traditionally, the most holy animal is the dog as it embodies the virtues of loyalty, devotion and obedience. Zoroastrians see the animal world as powerful symbols of, and participants in, the conflict between the bounty of the Good Creation and the destructive forces of evil.

The common Zoroastrian emblems and their expression in art and architecture are sometimes reflected in language, with, for example, Zoroastrian references to the living flame within all good living things. Similarly, the military connotations of the sudre and kusti (the sacred shirt and cord worn next to the skin by all Zoroastrians after initiation) have led to these being regarded as the 'armour' of the religion, with Zoroastrians often describing themselves as the 'army of Ahura Mazda' in the war with the forces of evil'.

Expressing faith through worship

Zoroastrians worship, in the sense of praying, anywhere facing Ahura Mazda's creation, fire, light or water. The sudrekusti prayers are the key form of daily worship. There is no compulsion to visit the fire temple (Dar-i Mihr, Persian for Court of Mithra, or Agiary, Gujarati for House of Fire), nor any special day of the week.

In practice most Parsi in India visit the temple often as part of their daily routine, calling on the way to work. At the entrance to the temple there is a place to wash the exposed parts of the body and say the sudrekusti prayers to cleanse themselves physically and spiritually. Outside shoes are removed.

In India, only Parsis or Iranian Zoroastrians may enter, whereas in Iran there is more open access. There is usually a hall inside the entrance with pictures of the heroes of the faith such as the Prophet Zoroaster, the benefactor who built the temple and revered priests of former times. These meant to inspire the worshipper. The prayer room is oblong in shape with one wall forming the sanctuary and surrounded by other walls, and including a doorway through which the officiating priest (Mobed) enters. The Mobed feeds the fire with sweet smelling sandalwood five times a day. The priest wears clothes with a cap and a mask over his mouth (padan) and nose in order to ensure he does not defile the fire with his impure breath. The worshipper kneels and bows his or her head before the fire, having previously left an offering of sandalwood in the doorway for the priest to lie on the fire. The worshipper takes a pinch of ash from a metal 'spoon' and puts it on his forehead in order to unite himself with the fire. (S)he then stands reciting prayers before the sacred fire (Atash) in which Ahura Mazda is thought to be physically present. Prayer is individual, and not congregational, with the worshipper approaching Ahura Mazda alone even when in the company of others.

Temples and pilgrimage

There are two grades of fire temple according to the category of fire within (there is also a third grade of fire which can be set by any Zoroastrian at home). The grade is determined by the type of consecration.

The highest grade of temple is the Atash Bahram sometimes referred to as 'Cathedral' Fire Temples. These are often the foci of pilgrimage. The Fire Temple in the small Indian village of Udwada contains a fire which continues to burn following its consecration after the Parsis arrived in India (probably eighth century CE) and which has been tended by teams of priests ever since. It is popularly known as Iranshah- the King of Iran.

In recent times, a custom has developed of trying to visit all eight Indian Atash Bahrams in one day (all located in Mumbai and Gujarat) to derive spiritual power from all the most sacred fires.

The 'ordinary' Dar-i Mihrs or agiaris have the second grade of fire – Adaran. They might aptly be called spiritual power houses as one stands in the presence of the divine. There is no set architectural style although most are decorated with motifs from the ancient royal Iranian palace of Persepolis dating from the sixth century BCE.

Identity, Diversity and Belonging

Foundations of identity and belonging

Zoroastrians believe that people are made by God (Ahura Mazda) as his fellow workers (hamkars) in the fight against evil. Humans possess five faculties: (i) mind / spirit (man), (ii) desire / discernment, (iii) conscience (daena), (iv) insight / intuition and (v) wisdom (which depends on the application of insight). There are variations of the five, but Zoroastrians believe they should all be moving in the direction of full use of these faculties. Some believe that perfection is possible in this life.

God has assigned each person a task in life (xwarr). Individuals have complete free will and may refuse to carry out that task. The soul is judged after death according to the balance of its own good and evil thoughts, words and deeds and rewarded or punished as appropriate in heaven or hell.

There is no doctrine of rebirth in the traditional religion although some Parsi in India do now believe in it. This visit to heaven or hell is temporary because there is a strong sense that the purpose of punishment (in hell) must be corrective. Therefore, at the renovation, all people are resurrected; while the resurrected body is on earth, individuals are judged both physically and spiritually ahead of reward or punishment before ultimately dwelling with God in eternal heaven.

Religious/spiritual identity

In Zoroastrianism a young person is initiated (naujote – meaning new birth) just before the onset of puberty not in infancy, as it is believed this must be a voluntary act.

The naujote is the same for male and female and consists of the formal investiture, by the priest, of a sacred shirt (sudre) and cord (kusti). The sudre is a white cotton garment worn at all times except when bathing. It has a small pocket at the 'v' of the neck interpreted as the spiritual purse in which one keeps good thoughts, words and deeds. The kusti is made of 72 threads of lamb's wool, symbolising the 72 chapters of the sacred text. It is tied around the waist with knots at the back and front, and is regarded as a 'sword belt of the faith'. The kusti comes from ancient Indo-Iranian practices like the Brahmin's cord, only in Zoroastrianism it is worn by all members of the religion.

After initiation the kusti should be tied and untied 5 times each day to the accompaniment of prayers confirming commitment to God and rejecting evil. The sudre and kusti are thought to protect individuals from evil influences and, as such, are a symbol of community membership.

Only the offspring of a Zoroastrian male may be initiated. Among the Parsis in India only the offspring of two Zoroastrian parents is initiated in order to ensure gender equality. Conversion is forbidden, as conversion is associated with proselytizing which is regarded as causing more oppression and persecution than almost any other human activity. Faith is believed to be part of a person's fundamental identity therefore conversion is viewed as psychologically dangerous. Furthermore, they believe conversion is unnecessary because the good people of any religion will go to heaven and the evil of any religion will go to hell; one should remain within the religious tradition into which one is born. One exception to this is a small California-based branch where conversion is acceptable.

Initiation is therefore into a tightly knit clearly defined, community. Inter-marriage and conversion are seen as ways of diluting Zoroastrian identity. In India, for example, a low birth rate and high mortality have led to declining numbers of Zoroastrians. However, this is seen as preferable if it ensures the Zoroastrian faith remains undiluted. The Zoroastrian aim is to preserve the identity of one of the world's oldest prophetic religions.

Zoroastrians are not required to go to a fire temple (atash), though in India where there are many temples, most Parsis choose to go regularly. Traditionally, especially in Iran, participation in the festivals is obligatory (see under 'Celebrations'). In their daily life they are expected to practise Good Thoughts, Words and Deeds, to care for the world and for others, act honestly at all times and to reject evil in all its forms. For Parsis, more than for Iranian Zoroastrians, commitment is identified and recognised by the wearing of the sudre and kusti.

Family and community

For most Parsi Zoroastrianism is not strictly a 'faith tradition'; rather it is membership of a community of people who have descended from Zoroastrians and have been initiated into the faith through the naujote ceremony.

Each person is unique but has a responsibility to care for others within the family and outside. As the whole of the physical creation is the work of God each person has a duty to care for it and is to refrain from polluting earth, air, fire, water and other living creatures. To harm another person or good creature is to support the destructive work of evil.

Traditionally it is thought that cleaning the home is part of the fight against evil. Each morning the traditional Zoroastrian carries a small portable fire altar through the house to purify the air with its sweet smell. Basic prayers, the sudrekusti prayers are said on rising and a further four times during the day, as well as after ablutions. These can said both in the home and in the temple. As with most Asian communities, extended family ties are strong, even in the Diaspora.

Among Parsis in India or Zoroastrians in modern Iran, there is a very strong sense of community, partly as a minority people. In Iran they are subject to harsh treatment being seen by Muslims as unclean infidels. People are expected to marry within the community; in India for example, marriage outside of the community often means being ostracized. In the Diaspora, intermarriage happens more often but retaining community networks is still viewed as extremely important.

Until the 19th century Zoroastrians considered the home as the place where the religious rituals were carried out. It was not until the 19th century, when Parsis became wealthy and had non-Zoroastrian servants in their homes that a large temple building program was undertaken.

Zoroastrian diversity

There are different schools of thought with very different interpretations of Zoroaster's teaching. Generally speaking these can be classified into two distinct groups. First, the orthodox, who accept the authority not just of the holy book the Avesta, but also the later priestly Pahlavior Middle Persian literature, vigorously oppose intermarriage and emphasize the importance of keeping the body and spirit pure. A second group is the more liberal or reforming Parsi who emphasize the words of the prophet while rejecting much of the later material, put less emphasis on physical purity, are more open to intermarriage and argue that conversion should be allowed. Iranian predominantly urbanized, Zoroastrians emphasise the teaching of Zoroaster as promoted in the Gathas and reject teaching in the later priestly Pahlavi literature.

Indian and Iranian faith communities are naturally different from those in the Diaspora. Iranian and Indian Zoroastrians continue to live in close-knit neighbourhoods (baugs) built by Parsis for Parsis, physically enhancing the sense of community. However, for the Diaspora this is less true as they are scattered around the big cities of America, Australia, Britain and Canada, making social networking more difficult. These communities arrange numerous

religious and social events in order to bring followers together. By belonging to the community members inspire each other to live up to the ideals of the religion with each providing support for the other in the contemporary world.

Some of those who have migrated west have been influenced by western thought so for example, American Zoroastrians accept converts whereas in India, they do not.

Other religions and beliefs

When Zoroastrians first migrated to Britain they avoided interfaith activity fearing a Christian influence and conversion from its own followers. However, since the late 1980s, Zoroastrians have been actively involved in inter-faith dialogue. This has not been without its difficulties as, due to its lack of widespread knowledge, Zoroastrians became vulnerable to mockery in the media. For example, on one occasion a Sunday newspaper produced a glossy supplement on new religious cults and, despite the fact it is one of the world's oldest prophetic religions, Zoroastrianism was included. However, the 21st century has led to greater understanding of religion as a whole, with Zoroastrians now regarded as one of the main nine 'official' religions in Britain. Members are invited to a diverse range of functions alongside other leaders of faith communities, including the faith area of the Millennium Dome and Commonwealth Services at Westminster Abbey. This recognition of, and active engagement in, interfaith dialogue, has ensured the identity of Zoroastrianism remains strong.

Meaning, Purpose and Truth

Religious and spiritual experience

For most Zoroastrians the deepest spiritual experience is to pray before the temple fire. They believe that here, they stand in the presence of Ahura Mazda, where the sounds and power of the Avestan prayers induce a trance like state. As the prayers are believed to give spiritual protection Zoroastrians find them comforting.

A fundamental Zoroastrian belief is Ahura Mazda created the world, and created it perfect (all suffering, misery, disease and death are external assaults by the cosmic force of evil Angra Mainyu). They naturally have a sense of awe and reverence before the wonders of nature. As they believe the world is the Good Creation of Ahura Mazda, there is a religious obligation to enjoy it and misery that could be avoided is a sin. This means that community gatherings are invariably happy (and usually noisy) occasions.

Many educated Iranian and Parsi Zoroastrians reject much of the later priestly literature emphasising their belief in, and practice of, good thoughts, words and deeds. The ritual fire is therefore of less symbolic importance but remains spiritually uplifting.

Ultimate questions

Traditional Zoroastrianism does not believe in rebirth (although some modern Parsi do under Hindu influence). Zoroastrians believe that every person is created to fight evil and expand the Good Creation. Humanity was created perfect, immortal, sinless, without need and happy. All misery, suffering, disease and death are afflictions of an independent force of evil (Ahriman). Each individual has free will and so can choose to practice Righteousness (Asha) or follow the path of evil, but will be judged according to their thoughts, words and deeds in this life.

Iranian Zoroastrians and more liberal Parsis stress the rationality and logical nature of the religion, and find support for their views in the Gathas (Hymns of Zoroaster). Traditionally, the religion talks about the creation of the universe and views history as the battle ground between good and evil. It looks forward to the renovation (frashegird or frashokereti), when good will ultimately triumph over evil, when the saviour (Soshyant) will come, the dead will be raised and the final judgment will take place. At this point good will be rewarded and evil punished, before passing into the ideal existence where heaven and earth come together in what is literally, the best of both worlds.

Fundamentally, it is personal identity that is most important to individual Zoroastrians, alongside the link between their race and their religion.

Religion and science

Many Zoroastrians, both in India and the West, are scientists, and find no conflict between their scientific knowledge and their religion. Zoroastrian Scientists believe the Hymns of Zoroaster do not contradict scientific law, (the only exception to this being his teaching on creation and judgement after death at the Chinvat Bridge). Some of the myths in the later Middle Persian (Pahlavi) literature are accepted as figurative and therefore are not seen to disagree with current scientific thinking.

This more abstract interpretation of belief finds no difficulty with science but the more traditional Parsis nevertheless believe that science is concerned with different issues from their religious belief and so the two are not in conflict.

Because of the belief in the Good Creation everyone has a religious obligation to care for it and many Zoroastrians claim they were the first environmentalists and put a religious value on the world. A number of American Parsis are scientists who declare their work is to bring about a greater appreciation of creation. However, it is still uncommon for Zoroastrians to discuss links between religion and science. The rare exception to this was in the early 20th century following the publication of *A Modern Zoroastrian* by Samuel Laing. In 1890 Laing argued that, with the discovery of electricity and the recognition of the positive and negative forces associated with this, Zoroastrian beliefs of dualism of good and evil had been vindicated. For Zoroastrians, it is this conflict between good and evil that causes the most thought. Therefore, the discovery of positive and negative forces in association with

electricity's powerful magnetism led to discussion among Zoroastrians of the link between science and religion.

Values and Commitments

Rules and ethical guidelines

The primary ethical value which Zoroastrians is to practice good thoughts, words and deeds. However, this clearly raises the question, what makes something good or evil? Good is considered to be anything which is life supporting conducive to order, harmony (asha) and peace. Anger, lust and greed are emotions regarded as evil because they threaten this order. That which is good is how Ahura Mazda created it and is each individual's duty to care for. This Good Creation encompasses the environment, the animal world and other people, and Zoroastrians believe it their duty to fight evil in all its forms, both physical and spiritual.

The fundamental feature of the Zoroastrian moral code is to be good and to do good, and the community is expected to practice these virtues in every-day life. One who follows the way of asha is an ashavan, leading as righteous and virtuous life as he or she is able.

Thus, Zoroastrians aim to be caring, generous, truthful (a term for evil is 'the Lie') and trustworthy. For believers, untruthfulness is a form of evil.

Zoroastrians aim to identify with the personified qualities of the Divine:

With holy spirit and best thought, with action and word in accordance with truth, they shall offer Him integrity and immortality. The Ahura (Lord) is Mazda (wisdom) though (His) power (and) holy devotion (Yasna.47:1).

Zoroastrians adopted Aristotle's idea of the Golden Mean. This is the idea that virtue is the mid-point between opposing vices, thus extremes of asceticism and debauchery are to be avoided.

Many Zoroastrians are doctors because they believe that by keeping people healthy they are better able to do the work of Ahura Mazda. However, working as a doctor often involves making difficult decisions, for example, the ethical, moral and sinful implications of euthanasia and abortion. Sin for Zoroastrians is thinking, saying or doing anything which adversely affects any part of the Good Creation.

Individual and social responsibility

Zoroastrians regard their religious duty as practicing good thoughts, words and deeds. At the time of judgment, after death, the good will be balanced against evil thoughts, words and deeds. If the good outweighs the evil the soul passes across a bridge of judgment (Chinvat Bridge) to heaven; if the evil outweighs the good then the soul falls into hell where

it is punished until the day of resurrection. Thus it is an individual's deeds and not beliefs that determine their fate in the afterlife. Ultimately, all people are equal, from the same initiation ceremony (Naujote) for males and females, to the rituals after death where everyone regardless on social or religious status are exposed in the same Tower of Silence (Dokhma).

Zoroastrians believe that idleness is a sin. A word for evil is 'the Lie' so being truthful is very important. Charity is an important virtue for Zoroastrians with many becoming significant benefactors within their community. For example, Bombay's first western-style hospital, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and the National Centre for the Performing Arts were all established through Zoroastrian philanthropy.

In Zoroastrianism, beliefs in human rights and social justice flow continuously from religious beliefs. Humans are individually created as fellow workers (hamkars) of God in the fight against evil. Humans should care for other human beings and the creation, as all are part of the Good Creation. All human beings are born with free will and so can choose to reject their religious duty. However, any rejection of religious or social responsibilities will be punished in the afterlife.

While not all are born equal, all people are equally called, created and cared for by Ahura Mazda. Historical Zoroastrian Iran identifies people being born into distinct classes – royalty, priests, nobles and workers. However, even during ancient times, everyone had the same religious duties and underwent the same religious rites at birth, initiation before adolescence and after death. Among Parsi in India all, rich and poor alike, priest and lay, are exposed in the same Tower of Silence (dokhma). Even where there is no dokhma everyone's funeral is the same.

Citizenship

Citizenship is a more complicated, and perhaps a more western concept. In ancient Iran there was a strong sense of being Iranian and, apart from the royal harem, marriage between Iranians was expected to reinforce the sense of being a distinct people, all of whom were members of a nation created by Ahura Mazda. In the modern Diaspora, be that in India, Pakistan or the West, there is a clear expectation of loyalty to the country of residence. For example, in the Indo-Pakistan war there were Parsi generals on both sides.

There is therefore no sense of there being any conflict between being Zoroastrian and being British. As Zoroaster lived around 1500 and 1200 BCE, terms such as human rights, social justice and citizenship were unknown. Zoroaster converted the local monarch resulting in Zoroastrianism becoming the religion of the kingdom.

Citizenship would therefore not have been conflicted with Zoroaster's example or his teaching on individual responsibility and gender equality, and modern Zoroastrian teachers

explicitly support such concepts. Being a Zoroastrian involves resolving to fight evil in all its forms as well caring for the Good Creation and practising good thoughts, words and deeds.

Crime and punishment

In Zoroastrianism a person is rewarded and punished according to their thoughts, words and deeds, with rewards and punishments made to fit the crime. In medieval times, the Book of Arda Viraf (Righteous Viraf) told the story of a priest, who had visions of heaven and hell. The text gives an idea of what are seen as virtues and vices. For example, an agriculturalist occupies a high place in heaven for he helps the Good Creation to grow. In contrast, a wicked king who killed and tortured people is himself flogged.

While Zoroastrians believe perpetrators of crimes will be punished in the afterlife, they also accept that in a law abiding society punishment may be necessary for the overall benefit of the community.

Euthanasia and abortion

Zoroastrians consider euthanasia and abortion to be wrong as they involve the taking of life, and by implication, the destruction of Ahuru Mazda's creation.

Health

Zoroastrians believe that good health is the state which Ahura Mazda wishes for everyone and is the natural condition in which the first human was created. All suffering is therefore an affliction of the force of evil Angra Mainyu (Middle Persian, Ahriman). Since the world is the Good Creation of Ahura Mazda (Middle Persian, Ohrmazd) humans have a duty to care for it and expand it through having children, caring for animals and by agriculture. In modern times this attitude has been applied to industry also.

War

War is destructive of the Good Creation, so is seen as undesirable, although may be necessary to ensure a peaceful existence. With this in mind, a number of Zoroastrian people have held important positions in the army, navy and air force of their home country.

As Zoroastrians in India and in the Iranian homeland have for over a thousand years been a minority, war has never been a realistic option. However, when Muslims invaded the Gujarat in the 13th century Parsi fought alongside the Hindus to repel the invader.

In the days of the ancient Zoroastrian Persian Empire (6th century BCE to the 7th century CE) the kings went to battle and took priests (magi) with them to lead prayers before going into battle. Rock reliefs dating from the Sasanian era (3rd to 7th centuries) show the king triumphantly trampling his enemies underfoot just as Ohrmazd will one day trample

Ahriman. It appears that the Iranian monarchs saw themselves as expanding order (Asha) throughout the world to overthrow the evil chaos wrought by enemies, such as when Cyrus the Great conquered the Babylonians and set the Jews free from their exile.

Wealth and poverty

In a world where poverty and wealth co-exist wealth is viewed as honourable providing it has been gained honestly and is shared through charitable giving. However, there is little to demonstrate much discussion of this as an issue in Zoroastrianism as sharing ones wealth is an expectation rather than an option.

The environment

Zoroastrians believe Ahura Mazda created the world so people, therefore, have a duty to care for it. This, they claim, makes them the first environmentalists. Although creation (Bundahishn) is assaulted by the forces of evil causing suffering, decay and death, it nevertheless remains 'the Good Creation' and people have a duty to enjoy it.

Traditionally Zoroastrians have eaten meat, although some Parsi have at least avoided beef and others become vegetarians as a mark of respect to the Hindu culture in which they lived. However, this is a recent development as it was believed that Ohrmazd created everything for a purpose, with the purpose of cattle being to feed humans.