

WHO ARE THE ZOROASTRIANS?



Sometimes known as 'Parsees', meaning Persians, the Zoroastrians look to Zarathushtra, whom the Greeks called Zoroaster, as the founder of their faith. With relatively few adherents today, about 150,000 worldwide (7000 in Great Britain), Zoroastrianism, also known as Mazdaism, is rightly acknowledged as a World Religion. It predates great religions like Christianity and Islam and has, in some ways, influenced them. Zoroastrianism has been the State religion of what is now Iran, through three dynasties over a span of a thousand years (550 BCE - 652 CE). Alexander the Great is known by the Zoroastrians as Alexander the Cursed and with good reason. He banned

Zoroastrianism as the State religion of the Persian Empire, and killed many of its priests who were the oral transmitters of the sacred texts.

The Zoroastrian scriptures today, are known as the *Avesta*, a massive compilation of books written in a specially invented alphabet - Avestan, as late as the fifth century CE. Apart from the *Gathas*, seventeen sacred hymns, written in the first person and generally regarded as utterances of the prophet Zarathushtra, the rest of the *Avesta* is anonymous - composed presumably by priests and sacred writers.

Origins

Considerable controversy surrounds the details of Zarathushtra's place and date of birth. He was born probably around the region of what is now Afghanistan or just inside the present Iranian border. Zoroastrianism moved from North East Iran westwards to the rest of Iran. Zarathushtra lived some time before 600 BCE. There is a rough consensus that he lived around 1000 BCE and arguably even as early as 1400 BCE.

In the Gathas, Zarathushtra describes himself as a *Zaotar*, a priest of an ancient order. As a priest, he was required to chant hymns praising and invoking a plurality of gods. But in due course he began to experience what he perceived as a series of divine revelations, which led him to preach the new faith. Zarathushtra became aware that God had chosen him to communicate the Truth to mankind. Contemplating God's holiness, Zarathushtra freely chose to be 'the Friend of Truth' and a follower of His Holy Path. His mission was to call people from the worship of many deities, involving bloody sacrifices, to the worship of the Wise Lord *Ahura Mazda*.

Basic Teachings

Zarathushtra recognized *Ahura Mazda* as the only one eternal God, wholly wise, good and just. In the beginning, the twin-Spirits, the Good Spirit (*Spenta Mainyu*), and the Evil Spirit (*Angra Mainyu*, later called *Ahriman*), made a primordial choice, the former for good and the latter for evil. This choice seems to serve as an example for humans eventually to choose freely between good and evil.

Through *Spenta Mainyu* and six other *Holy Immortals* (*Amesha Spenta*), God fashioned

each of the seven creations: the sky, water, earth, plants, cattle, human beings and fire. God is transcendent but through *Spenta Mainyu* can be immanent in his special creation – humanity. Other lesser Immortals the *Yazatas*, are evoked by the good spirits to help in the battle against evil. *Angra Mainyu* in turn draws on his side the evil spirits - 'Daevas', and so the battle rages. Human beings are the battleground wherein the struggle between good and evil takes place. They overcome evil and are saved through their good thoughts, words and deeds. At death each person is judged. If one's good thoughts, words and deeds outweigh the evil ones, the soul crosses a broad bridge and ascends to heaven. If not, the bridge contracts and the condemned person falls into hell. The world's last days will be marked by cosmic upheavals and disasters. It is then that the World Saviour, the *Saoshyant*, will come in glory. There will then be the formal battle between the *Yazatas* and the *Daevas* ending with the victory of good over evil. The bodies of those who had died earlier will be resurrected and will be reunited with their souls. This will be the last judgement. Earlier writings of Zoroastrianism describe the wicked as being destroyed by a fiery flood of molten metal. Later writings (9th. century CE?) describe how the wicked, purified by the ordeal, will survive and join the blessed. A final everlasting period then begins when all, in a state of resurrection will rejoice forever in the Kingdom of *Ahura Mazda*.

Rituals and Feasts

Fire is at the heart of the Zoroastrian religious life. It is the last creation of *Ahura Mazda*. All rituals take place before a burning fire. Fire symbolizes Truth. Although there were no Fire Temples in Zarathushtra's time, it is said that the oldest fires in Iran have been burning continuously for 2500 years. An important ceremony is the *Navjote*, wherein a young initiate becomes directly answerable to *Ahura*

Mazda for his thoughts, words and deeds - a responsible Zoroastrian and is enjoined to wear the *sudre* (white undershirt) and *rusti* (sacred thread) around the waist. Another ritual is the '*Jashan*', a thanksgiving ceremony to God for all the goodness in the world.

The Zoroastrian calendar is also dense with festivals such as the *No-Ruj*, New Year's Day, when Zoroastrians commemorate the creation of the world and look hopefully to the time when the world will be made perfect.



The Importance of Zoroastrianism

The small size of a religion, just as, for that matter, divisions within it, can in no way be a proof that such a religion is not authentic or important. Indeed, Zoroastrianism, though small in size today, has an important place in world religions, both for the contribution it has made to the development of other world

faiths as well as for its intrinsic worth as a faith in its own right. Zoroastrianism seems to have served as a bridge between the mystic religions of the East, particularly early Hinduism as well as northern Buddhism, and the prophetic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Before Moses and Mohammed, Zoroaster called people to a purer faith, from polytheism to monotheism. Though many Jews and Christians might not be aware of it, ideas like the resurrection of the body, the last judgement, the final transformation of the world as well as the struggle between good and evil, are Zoroastrian. The Jews would seem to have picked them up, possibly during their exile in Babylon (587-539 BCE).

Perhaps, the greatest merit of Zoroastrianism, as a faith in its own right, is the fact that it has held the loyalty of its followers over three thousand years, in spite of harsh persecutions.

Questions for discussion:

1. In what ways does Zoroastrianism foreshadow Christianity?
2. How do the following points in the Zoroastrian faith compare with the Christian view on (a) monotheism, (b) the struggle between good and evil (c) free will?

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The Committee is grateful to the Reverend Alfred Agius SJ for this contribution.

**+ Charles Henderson
Chairman**

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