

Zoroastrians (Zarathushtis)
Followers of an Ancient Faith that is Relevant to the Modern World

History

The History of Zoroastrian religion begins on the ancient Iranian homelands of the Steppes of Central Asia with the advent of the Prophet Zarathushtra (or Zoroaster, as he was called in the Greek literature). Scholars place Zarathushtra at 1768 BCE i.e. the time he revealed his divine message.

The faith flourished through the rise and fall of many civilizations. For a thousand years (558 BCE to 652 CE) it was the court religion of three Iranian Empires, those of the Achaemenians, the Parthians and the Sasanians, and stretched across Asia from Greece in the west to the Hindu Kush in the east, up into Southern Russia, and down into Egypt. Its followers numbered in the millions.

One of Zarathushtra's first disciples was Iranian King Vistashpa, ruler of Bactria. The religion then spread through Persia, and became the State religion of the Achaemenian Empire founded by Cyrus the Great in 558 BCE. It suffered a setback during the reign of Darius III, when Alexander conquered Persia in 330 BCE. At this time the seat of the Empire at Persepolis was destroyed. After a revival during the Parthian (248 BCE to 224 CE) and Sasanian (224 To 652 CE) periods, it reeled once again with the Muslim invasion of Persia in 652 CE. At this time, a large number accepted Islam but others remained with their old faith going through a lot of troubles. Meanwhile a few shiploads of devotees fled and landed on the western shores of India where the native Hindu ruler gave them refuge. Their descendants, the Parsees, still keep their faith alive, in India.

PRESENT DAY ZOROASTRIANS

Today, the total number of Zoroastrians in the world is about 200,000, with 60,000 in India, 90,000 in Iran, 15,000 in the U.S.A. and Canada,

and smaller pockets in Europe, Pakistan, Africa and Australia. Wherever they have settled, Zoroastrians have served well the countries of their adoption.

Iranian Zoroastrians

For centuries after the Muslim invasion in 652CE Zoroastrians in Iran practiced their faith in quiet seclusion. As opportunities presented themselves in the 20th century, Zoroastrians moved from the rural areas towards business, the professions and industry.

Zoroastrian entrepreneurs were the first to: introduce English and sports in schools; modernize; irrigation and agriculture; found steel aluminium and plastic factories; promote a small scale automobile industry; start large scale construction projects; and endow hospitals and schools. In a short span of 50 years, Zoroastrians excelled in all walks of life-government, business, industry, arts and sciences.

Indian Zoroastrians the Parsees

The Parsees, despite having lived in India for over 12 centuries and marriages with native Indians, they have maintained their religious distinctiveness, possibly because

Zoroastrians do not proselytize. Over the years they have assimilated three separate cultures. The old Persian, Indian and western, or what is really the British heritage. A miniscule minority in India (less than .01% of the population), the Parsees have influenced the country well out of proportion to their numbers. Prosperous, enterprising, literate, they dominate the business community of Bombay. Under British rule in the 19th century, the Parsees became the earliest Indian industrialists and built the first great Indian industrial projects-shipbuilding, aviation, steel, textiles, chemicals and nuclear energy, and have excelled in the arts and sciences. Noted for their integrity, philanthropy and pioneering spirit, they have founded hospitals, schools and other institutions, liberally extending their philanthropy to others as well as their people.

North American Zoroastrians Zoroastrians began migrating to North America in the 1950s and 1960s, seeking higher education and better opportunities. They have settled well and prospered in business and the professions. Possibly the most notable Zoroastrian in the U.S.A. today is Zubin Mehta, former conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. These immigrants brought with them more than their skills and talents, their willingness to work and determination to succeed. They also brought their faith, culture and customs, their language and literature-the legacy of a centuries-old tradition that fits surprisingly well into the modern North American milieu.

THE ZOROASTRIAN ETHIC

Zarathushtra preached the monotheistic religion of the One Supreme God, Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord) His message is a positive, life-affirming, active principled one, which demands not so much belief, as reason and action on the part of every individual. His was not a prescriptive ethic based on obedience, fear or love, but rather, an ethic of personal responsibility. A Zoroastrian is taught to lead an industrious, honest and, above all, charitable life. There is no place for asceticism. The generation of wealth is part of the ethos, as long as it is achieved honestly, and used for charitable purposes. Zarathushtra asked his listeners to attend to his teachings, and with care and clear mind, choose a life of intelligent reflection and active benevolence. The quintessence of Zoroaster's teachings are embodied in the triad:

☸HUMATA-Good Thoughts

☸HUKHTA-Good Words

☸HVARSHTA-Good Deeds

The loftiest ideal for man is to emulate the [Amesha Spentas](#) or attributes of Ahura Mazda, which are The Primal Principle of Life.

ZOROASTRIAN VIEW OF THE WORLD

Zarathushtra presents a view of the world in which Ahura Mazda originally creates an ideal existence in accordance with the Law of Asha. As the world progresses, there is Conflict between the opposing forces of Good (Spenta Mainyu) and Evil (Angra Mainyu). In this ethical drama, Ahura Mazda gives man not only the freedom to Choose between Good and Evil, but also the responsibility to actively promote Good, vanquish evil, and move not only himself, but the whole world towards frashokereti, the final resurrection, When all will be in a state of perfection and everlasting bliss. This commitment to a life of bringing about a happy, harmonious, morally perfect social order, is what the Prophet offered as the Zoroastrian faith.

RESPECT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Veneration of the elements of nature (Fire, the Sun, the Earth and the Waters) and

promoting a mutually beneficial existence with these elements, is central to Zoroastrian thought, placing this ancient religion well ahead of its time.

SACRED TEXTS

The scriptures of Zarathushtra are contained in the ancient texts, The Avesta, written in the [Avestan language](#). Of these, the divine hymns, the Gathas, are the words of Prophet Zarathushtra himself.

THE ETERNAL FLAME

Zoroastrian rituals and prayers are solemnized in the presence of an eternal flame, which is scrupulously tended with sandalwood and frankincense and kept burning in a silver urn in the inner sanctum of every Zoroastrian temple. Fire is revered as a visible symbol of the Inner Light, the inner flame that burns within each person. It is a physical representation of the Illumined Mind, Light and Truth, all highly regarded in the Zoroastrian doctrine. Despite its pre-historic origins, Zoroastrianism has vehemently denounced idolatry in any shape or form.

CEREMONIES

Sedreh-pushhi (Initiation) Ceremony Every Zoroastrian child is officially initiated into the faith with the sedreh-pushhi (navjote) ceremony, at which time he or she is invested with the sacred Sedreh and Koshti, accompanied with recitation from the Avesta. The Sedreh is an undershirt of pure white muslin with a small symbolic pocket in front reminding the wearer to fill it every day with Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds. The Koshti, a woolen cord, signifies that the wearer has girded him- or herself to practice the teachings of Zarathushtra.

Wedding Ceremony

The wedding ceremony is a time of rejoicing. A happily married man and woman with progeny are God's best soldiers on this earth, and held in the highest regard. The wedding is performed by priests who recite passages from the Avesta and bless the couple, showering them with rice and rose petals. The ceremony is followed by a banquet for family and friends.

Funeral Ceremony

The Zoroastrian regards the soul of the dead more important than the physical remains and extensive prayers for the dead are an integral part of Zoroastrian rituals. In India the body, after due reverence, is placed in the "Towers of Silence", located on hilltops open to the sky and given free access to birds of prey. The bones are bleached and crumble to dust over time. No monument is erected for it is hoped that the departed will live on in the hearts and prayers of their loved ones. In other parts of the world, burial or cremation is the norm.

ZOROASTER AND THE GREEKS

The name "Zoroaster" was given to Zarathushtra by the Greeks, who venerated the Persian "philosopher" dating him "5,000 years before the Siege of Troy" (Plutarch, 46 - 120 A.C.). Zoroastrian doctrine is mentioned by Greek writers Plato, Socrates and Aristotle, who studied under the Magi of their times. During the Achaemenian period, a number of books circulated through the Greek world in the name of Zoroaster to lend

them authority. The long saga of the wars between the Greeks and Iranians is recorded in Herodotus's History, (5th century BCE).

ZOROASTER AND THE ROMANS

In Hellenistic and Roman times the image of Iran was a land of mystery, wisdom and learning. Its religious teachings appealed to the conquering Roman soldiers, who then transferred it across the empire in the form of Mithraism, an offshoot of Zoroastrianism. Woven around the Aryan (Iranian) deity Mithra, God of Light, Mithraism arose about the same time as Christianity. It quickly spread as far west as England and as far east as India, until the spread of Christianity. Hundreds of Mithraic temples have been discovered across Europe, the latest one unearthed by construction workers in London a few years ago.

INTERACTIONS WITH JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Zoroastrian ideas have played a vital role in the development of western religious thought. Some theological concepts shared by Zoroastrianism with Judaism and Christianity are:

- Belief in one supreme and loving God.
- Heaven and Hell, and individual judgement.
- Ultimate triumph of good over evil.
- Strict moral and ethical code.
- The Messiah to come for the final restoration.
- The concepts of resurrection, final judgement and life everlasting.
- The words "Satan", "paradise" and "amen" are of Zoroastrian origin.

The interchange of Zoroastrian thought with the Judeo-Christian ideology first took place when Cyrus the Great defeated the Assyrians and released the Jews from Babylonian captivity. They heralded Cyrus as their Messiah, as prophesied two centuries earlier in Isaiah 45:1-3. The Old Testament is replete with references to the Persian emperors Darius, Cyrus and Xerxes.

The commemoration of December 25th as the birthday of Christ has its origins in early Mithraic observances. This was the date of a festival in Rome, chosen by the Roman Emperor Aurelian in 274CE to celebrate natalis solis invicti, the birthday of the unconquered sun, which, following the winter solstice, once again begins to show an increase in light. At some time prior to 336CE the church in Rome established the commemoration of the birthday of Christ on this same date. It is of interest to note that the three Wise Men (Magi) that heralded the infant Christ, were Zoroastrians. To this day, frankincense and myrrh are offered at the altars of Zoroastrian temples.

As Dr. Mary Boyce (Zoroastrians, 1979) writes: "So it was out of a Judaism enriched by five centuries of contact with Zoroastrianism that Christianity arose in the Parthian period, a new religion with roots thus in two ancient faiths, one Semitic, the other Persian. Doctrines taught perhaps a millennium and a half earlier by Zoroaster began in this way to reach fresh hearers."