

Zoroastrianism

History and Development

We are told that one of the oldest cultures in the world produced the oldest religion in the world. Or maybe it didn't? The Mesopotamian region, which later becomes the heart of the Persian Empire (modern Iran), is the birthplace of the religion of Zarathustra (Zoroaster in Greek) or Zoroastrianism as it is commonly called. Scholars are completely divided on the time frame for Zarathustra. Some place him between 1500-1100 BC while the only evidence not based on supposition places him in the 7th century (630 B.C.). It seems that a big part of the controversy is contingent on how committed one is to showing that Zoroastrianism was instrumental in shaping incipient Judaism and later Christianity. Those with the older date see the Persian prophet as the earliest Monotheistic religion, who introduced the concepts of Heaven and Hell, a physical resurrection and other doctrines, which later become a part of the Judeo-Christian worldview. Those with the earlier date have more historical data on their side. Either way it is clear that Zarathustra did teach a unique form of monotheism, although not in the sense that Judaism, Christianity and Islam taught.

Most of what we know about the early stages of the religion is based on supposed oral tradition and not reliable. What we do have as documentation from other sources gives us a time frame somewhat similar to the Renouncer age of India, which produced both Gautama Buddha and the Jains. (6th century B.C.) .

The Aryans of Persia had invaded the northern part of India prior to 1200 B.C and the language and religious practices of both areas are quite similar. Zarathustra's

“monotheism” was a huge influence on or was influenced by Darius and other rulers during the Achaemenid reign of Persia. The priests of the religion at the time were called the Magi. Cyrus II later suppressed them and that period of history shows a uneven acceptance and major differences between the religion and the rulers.

Zarathustra was a priest in a culture that was committed to paganism. There were innumerable deities for every conceivable natural phenomenon. In the midst of this Zarathustra taught a single deity as all -powerful creator of the universe. This being he called Ahura Mazda. A theological controversy developed over time as Ahura Mazda was seen by some as the chief of all other deities, which included the Amesha Spentas (Bounteous Immortals), which later are included in the nature of Ahura Mazda as characteristics or attributes of his deity. The other creatures, which were not ultimate but yet still worthy of worship were the Yazatas – which are often perceived as angels. Another persistent issue is the notion of dualism within the deity. Early outside reports talked about the dualism of the religion with Ahura Mazda as the good God who is opposed by Angra Mainyu or Ahriman, who is evil personified. Both are seen as eternal and many believe this dualism laid the foundation for the later development of Manichaeism.

Another key point in development was the invasion of Persia by the Muslims in the 7th century A.D. Through the sharia/dhimmitude process, the majority of the Zoroastrians were either converted or killed. A large group of them went to India (the Parsis) and this has been the center of the Zoroastrian world through the years. While maintaining a presence in their ancient home, it can be seen that the more rigid monotheism of Islam has influenced the Zoroastrian monotheism and the

deities started a slow process of dropping out of the limelight. However ideas like reincarnation and other more overtly Hindu ideas have become a part of the religion for some of the believers.

Zoroastrians have some unique identifying ideas and symbols. There are numerous fire temples, which are sacred, and only the believers are allowed access to them. The priest's role is to keep the flames lit at all times and recite prayers, hymns and mantras to invoke Ahura Mazda's blessing. The believer will wear a "kusti" or cord, which has been knotted three times. The knots symbolize and remind the believer of "Good Words, Good Thoughts and Good Deeds". The believer also wears a "kadre" a sacred garment on the upper body. Since the creation of Ahura Mazda was first spiritual and then material, the elements are seen as sacred and should not be violated. The Towers of Silence, which are used in depositing of dead bodies, symbolize this. The body is full of evil and disease, so to put it in the earth pollutes Ahura Mazda's creation. The same is seen with burning the body. So the body is exposed and left to the ravages of animals and the weather. This is done in the Tower so that the whole process will be seen as sacred.

Who or What is the Religious Authority?

The scriptures of Zoroastrianism are collectively called the Avesta (Book of the Law). The primary section is the Yasna, which includes the Gathas, which are considered to be the only section actually written by Zarathustra himself. The Gathas are primarily hymns and liturgical readings. The other sections are the Yashts, which are hymns to the various deities, the Vendidad which contain a description of the evil deities and other additional collects, the Visparad, Nyaishes,

Siroze and Afringas. Many scholars believe that the current Avesta is perhaps only one fourth of the actual writings, with much of the ancient works destroyed by Alexander's army and later by the Muslim colonizers. The Avestan language of most of the texts is considered a holy language, and the Pahlavi or Middle era Persian language was used for some of the later writings. The oldest manuscripts extant of the Avesta are dated 1288 A.D.

Who is God/Gods?

As mentioned in the development section, this is not a simple question. Zoroastrians today will argue that theirs is the original monotheistic religion. Many will point to a non-Zoroastrian scholar like Boyce, who has helped shape their own self-identity. But the evidence for an evolutionary development of the understanding of who or what God is in the Zoroastrian faith is compelling. Like most cultures in the world, Zoroaster was a priest in a pagan culture, similar to that of their Vedic neighbors in India. Nature was a panoply of gods, representing virtually everything that is, both objects in the universe and or concepts. Zoroaster had a vision given by Ahura Mazda of the true nature of the universe, that there is one Supreme God who created all things. But like their Hindu neighbors the monotheism of early Zoroastrian thought was seeing Ahura Mazda as the Supreme of all the different gods, which one could also see in Greek mythology and elsewhere as well. The Amesha Spentas are seen as stand alone beings and represent differing aspects of creation:

Vohu Manah – Good thought – connected to animals

Asha Vahisthta – Justice and Truth – fire and energy

Kshathra – Dominion – Metal and minerals

Spenta Armaiti – Devotion and Serenity – the earth and land

Haurvatat – Wholeness – waters

Ameretat – Immortality – plants

Spentu Mainyu – Creative Energy – humans.

Later on the Seven, which are opposed by evil and destructive spirits, become incorporated as part of Ahura Mazda's own attributes, but many today would think of them as something like "archangels". The dualism of God is also a debatable point. Many think of Zoroastrianism as two evil "twins" both born of Ahura Mazda – Spenta Mainyus as the good force and Angra Mainyu as the evil force. These spirits are either the cause of ethical dualism in the heart and minds of human beings or they are the cause of cosmic dualism in the universe. The Zoroastrian community seems divided historically. Are the "twins" just aspects of God? Are there really two identically powerful but polarized spirits at war in the universe and or the human heart? The Gathas can support both. Early writings show an antipathy between the daevas (the Sanskrit word for the gods of India) and the Ahuras. But because of normal human syncretistic tendencies some of the gods can be seen in both. In short the majority of Zoroastrians will say that Ahura Mazda is the one ultimate God – but the historical reality seems to lean towards henotheism rather than monotheism. Ahura Mazda is symbolized by Fire, but is not embodied in fire so it is wrong to call Zoroastrians fire worshippers as some have. Ahura Mazda is best seen symbolically in light and heat so believers will direct their prayers towards those icons of Ahura Mazda.

Who are Human Beings?

Unlike their alleged spiritual descendents the Jews and Christians, Zoroastrians see people as having free will and the ability to choose and act without being encumbered by something like sin nature or original sin. Not only that, but humans like all of creation participate in some meaningful way with both the spiritual and physical elements in the universe. This means that they in some way share the very nature of Ahura Mazda and will some day return to that nature. Each people group on the planet was placed in its culture and religious group by Ahura Mazda and therefore conversion in or out is discouraged. The faithful Zoroastrian is enjoined not to reject the world as many of their ascetic neighboring faiths had, but rather to hold up and defend the forces of order and goodness against the tide of disorder and falsehood. One who makes bad choices and helps spread Druj or disorder ends up in Hell. One who makes good choices ends up in Heaven. But these are merely temporary holding places with universal restoration being the ultimate end.

What is the problem with the world/people?

Similar in some way to the Hindu concept of dharma – the word Asha (truth) stands for the right way of seeing the universe. Asha can also mean orderly functioning – so to follow Ahura Mazda is to see the orderly function of good works and thoughts and deeds in the universe and act accordingly. However Asha is opposed by Druj (falsehood) that is perpetually put forth by the evil spirits to disrupt the universe. These are not specifically tied to morality, but also represent the very order of nature and the universe itself. The problem then comes because

the evil spirit, personified in Ahriman and his consort of malevolent deities/angels seek to destroy and impede the nature and goodness of the universe. Human beings become lazy or malevolent and thus do not participate in the active ordering of the universe. Thus the spread and influence of Ahriman's works and ideas continues on.

What is the solution to the problem with the world/people?

Zoroastrians have a savior concept built within the system. The Saoshyant will someday come and will come and bring Asha to the universe. Contrary to popular mis-belief, the Saoshyant was born of Zarathustra's own seed and not of a virgin. People who invoke the threefold mantra of Good works, thoughts and deeds, help this incrementally. In the ultimate sense of things – the entire universe and all within it – even the evil Ahriman and other malevolent deities, will all be restored to the presence and participation in the very nature of Ahura Mazda. Universal salvation and reconciliation is therefore a presumption of the faith and makes the practice of conversion in or out of the religion unnecessary.

Witnessing Tips

There are few Zoroastrians in the world today. Most place their numbers under 200,000. To read their literature is to see both a pride at their longevity and a frustration of the sense that they are losing their community. Much of the literature is filled with raging tirades against conversion (primarily because of new age adherents in the USA), and a bit of syncretism such as the idea of reincarnation or the question of whether Zoroastrianism should be seen as THE universal religion, etc. But the largest issue within the community today seems to be a liberalizing trend towards a lukewarm faith, with a loss of traditional identification, and this is best

exemplified in the practice of marrying outside the faith. Since the Zoroastrians pride themselves as being a non-missionary religion, birth rates and marriages are the primary way of keeping the community quite literally alive. But the syncretistic nature of the postmodern world is undermining the standing of the religion within the community itself. You can hear this complaint among many people from many, many other religious communities as well.

To the Zoroastrian apologist (most likely a non-Zoroastrian atheistic or other anti-Christian skeptic – as seen in the internet movie “Zeitgeist”, etc) the notion that Judaism and Christianity borrowed heavily from and are therefore dependent upon Zoroastrianism is a very controversial notion at best. There is no literature showing this at all. Boyce and others depend on language similarities between the Indo-Aryan languages (Avesta and Sanskrit) and thus date the Avesta within the time frame of the Rg Veda (1500 – 1000 B.C.) but the dating link is weak and there are numerous scholars within the field of Persian religion who disagree. One might also add that the Hindu scriptures are notoriously hard to date as well. So one weak strand being connected to another weak strand does not necessitate a strong cord at all in this case. This view is also contingent upon the late dating of Hebrew accounts of Abraham, Moses, and so on. Most conservative scholars think that Abraham probably lived around 1800 B.C. approximately and therefore Moses would have lived around 1400 B.C. or so. If this were the case then even an earlier date for Zoroaster himself would not be early enough to be an influence upon the Jewish religion. One could make a better case that early Jewish thought influenced Persian

thought. But either way there would have to be an actual fact driven case made and the evidence for Zoroastrian influence on Judaism is non-existent.

But the response to a layperson would not need to dwell upon this, unless it came up. The average layperson believes that there is one God, who created everything, who loves good over evil and order over chaos. These are all good starting points for fruitful discussion. The modern monotheistic belief of the average Zoroastrian is quite helpful here. Both the Zoroastrian and the Christian believe that God desires what is good. Both believe that God has called us to do what is good. Yet the Zoroastrian is stuck with the dilemma of seeing the human capacity of free will as the testing ground for the ultimate war between evil and good. But it is the overwhelming sense of evil and disobedience where the Christian parts company with the Zoroastrian. How is it that we can know what is good and what is right, yet still choose to do what is destructive? This points to something more dramatic than disorder or evil spiritual influence – it points to the failure and rebellion of the human heart and mind. The Zoroastrian like others knows adultery is wrong, knows it is destructive, knows that Ahura Mazda has condemned it – and yet still chooses to do so. This can lead again to a discussion of the need for a Savior. The Savior concept in Zoroastrianism is a rather irrelevant notion. At the end of the age the savior will come and usher in the final reconciliation of Ahura Mazda and its creation. But the concept of personal salvation is missing. If the human will is truly good and free, then it follows that there would be need for a personal savior. Conversely if the problem with the human heart/mind is right at the center of the problem - then the need for a personal savior is paramount. This is where the

Christian can introduce Jesus as the only solution to the problem of the fallen human heart. The atonement of Jesus on the cross is a shining example of the creator God's holiness and love all in the same place and at the same time.

Another potential witnessing point is the concept of ultimate reconciliation. If this is the case then our alleged free will is just an illusion. It means that our choices to do good works, thoughts and deeds are ultimately no different than any contrary actions. The unrepentant murderer is just as reconciled as the one who takes care of the poor. So all the effort the Zoroastrian puts in does not make any real difference in the long run. This undermines what they truly believe about a real difference between good and evil. They know there is a real distinction yet in the end it all washes out. So while not as vacuous as the Hindu notion of Maya which makes the world an illusory dream, the Zoroastrian eschatology amounts to the same end. The Christian can respond by bringing up the eternal nature of God and therefore the eternal characteristic of holiness and sin/rebellion. If good and evil truly are eternal, then they cannot be dismissed but rather are upheld by God's eternal character. This means there must be something different brought in to reconcile the dilemma – which again points us back to the atonement.

As with all the other religions – one must love and prayer for our Zoroastrian friends and neighbors.

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