

Zoroastrianism

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Founder: Zoroaster (aka Zarathustra)

Founded: Approximately 600 BC

Texts: Zend-Avesta

Other Names: Zarathustrism, Mazdaism, Parsism, Parsis, the Good Religion

HISTORY

Zoroastrianism (**Zo-ro-as-tri-an-ism**) claims to be the oldest monotheistic¹ religion dating back to approximately 600 BC; though some historians believe that it began as early as 1500 BC.² It was the state religion of the Persian Empire in the fifth century BC until the Muslim invasion of 637 AD. The religion flourished during this period and spread as far east as China. After the Muslim invasion the remaining adherents scattered to remote areas of Iran but most found freedom in India where the religion continues to be practiced to the present day.³

The founder of Zoroastrianism is a man by the name of Zoroaster, a Greek rendering of Zarathustra, who was born in Persia (modern day Iran) around the sixth century BC.⁴ However, the exact date or even century of his birth is not certain. Some scholars have estimated his birth as early as 1000 BC or earlier. Zoroaster claimed to be a prophet who, at the age of 30, received visions of God. He believed that there was one true God whom he called Ahura Mazda. This was a departure from the polytheistic⁵ religions of the region and made him the first non-biblical monotheist. He opposed animal sacrifices and the use of hallucinogens in rituals; which were common practices for most religions from that period. Much of what is known about Zoroaster comes from the Gathas which are hymns in the Avesta (Zoroastrianism scriptures). Some Zoroastrians refer to Zoroaster as “more of a reformer of than a founder of an ancient Iranian religion which had deviated from its path.”⁶ The thought is that the teachings and doctrine of Zoroastrianism predates Zoroaster because of ancient writings that have been found that predate his believed birthdate. Thus, it is believed by some that Zoroaster reformed the ancient Persian religion into what is known as Zoroastrianism.

Currently the total population of Zoroastrians is in debate. One source estimates the population to be between 2.5 and 3 million people worldwide.⁷ Since September 11, 2001 Zoroastrians have faced less persecution. Also, they have become reluctant about identifying themselves in regions where persecution is more prominent, which has been credited as a factor for a higher number of adherents. This along with an increased respect and interest in the religion has caused a spike in the population.⁸ However; publications such as the *Fezana Journal*, the quarterly journal of the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America; have reported a decreasing population that numbers around 190,000 worldwide.⁹ In the 1990's Zoroastrianism was listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the major religion nearest to extinction.¹⁰ There are a couple of factors cited for the declining population. One such factor is that traditional Zoroastrians do not proselytize or accept converts; therefore, to be in the religion one must be born into the religion. Ramiyar P. Karanjia, principal of Dadar Athornan Madressa in Mumbai, India explained; “Conversion is not part of our religion...we have always been small but steady in numbers and there's no need to allow conversion.”¹¹ An additional factor is the increase of inter-faith marriages. Reformist Zoroastrians do accept converts but none of the schools engage in missionary work.

DOCTRINE

Zoroastrianism is said to have an impact on the three major religions and that many of the teachings found in the Bible have direct ties to the Avesta. While there may be debate over which religion borrowed from the other, Zoroastrianism does establish for itself some beliefs that run parallel

with Judaism, Christianity and Islam.¹² The foundation of the doctrine is for the adherents to follow the three commandments: good thought (*humata*), good word (*hukhta*) and good deed (*havarshata*). The main focus for the Zoroastrian is to keep one's mind free from impurity because good thoughts are the source that directly relate to good words and good deeds. Some of the major components of Zoroastrianism include:

Dualism: Zoroastrians believe that good and evil exists and are engaged in a constant battle. The belief is that good will ultimately triumph over evil. The victory, according to the adherents, will occur as each human realizes their responsibility to avoid evil and live a life of purity. Humans should avoid all forms of evil and look to increase the good within one's self. People can enhance the good in this world through the religious practices, observances, and teachings of Zoroaster.¹³

God: Some scholars believe Zoroastrianism to be the oldest monotheistic religion. Zoroastrians were unique in that it was one of the few ancient religions to believe that there was only one supreme god. Zoroaster identified the supreme god by the name of Ahura Mazda (Lord Wisdom). He, according to Zoroaster, is the creator of the universe and is the only one to be praised.

However, within the religion there are other lesser divinities or entities that assist Ahura Mazda in the battle over evil. There are six total entities, referred to as *Amesha Spentas*, which represent or describe personal attributes of Ahura Mazda. This teaching is known as **the doctrine of holy immortals**. The six lesser deities, three male and the other three female, are:

- Asha Vahista, a male entity that represents the highest righteousness or truth. He is responsible for the lawful order of the cosmos. His greatest responsibility is to preside over fire, which is also his earthly symbol. Fire is sacred to Zoroastrians and is the inner nature of reality. For the strict adherents he holds the path of justice and spiritual knowledge.
- Vohu Manah, a male entity that represents good thought. Zoroastrians believe that he is the spirit of love, illumination, and divine wisdom. His responsibilities include welcoming the blessed souls in paradise and it is taught that he guided Zoroaster's soul before the throne in heaven. He is also said to preside over domestic animals and his earthly symbol is cattle.
- Khshathra Vairya, a male entity, which represents the divine kingdom or desirable dominion. His earthly symbol is metal.
- Armaiti, a female entity, which demonstrates pious devotion. It is believed that she presides over, and is symbolized by, the Earth.
- Haurvatat (wholeness or perfection) and Ameretat (immortality) are often mentioned together; both are female and considered to be sisters; representing health and long life. Their earthly symbols are water and plants, respectively.

Vohu Manah and Asha Vahista are considered the most important.¹⁴ These six entities manifest the attributes of Ahura Mazda and can be bestowed upon righteous humans. The names of the six are also the names of the six months in the modern Persian calendar.

Evil: Angra Mainyu represents evil and is the counter part to Ahura Mazda. He is characterized as emotionally unstable and subjects people, who are under his influence, to torment. He has a female partner named Jeh who instigates him to continue his work against God. Angra Mainyu is determined to overpower God and is willing to use whatever tactics available to infiltrate the world and draw people away from Ahura Mazda.

Sin: Sin is clearly defined in Zoroastrianism; a text called Menog-i-khard (chapter 36) gives a list of 30 grievous sins. Another text called the Denkard provides an additional yet similar list of sins that men should avoid. There are a number of capital offences in the religion that range from murder to eating or drinking without the *Vaj* (asking a blessing).

Reconciliation/Forgiveness: When a person commits sin they are to repent which includes: confession to God, offering prayers and practicing the three commandments. The penalty for a mortal sin could constitute death. When this type of sin is committed the mortal sinner has to confess his sin to the high priests. A simple confession is not enough; he must offer up his wealth and body to them. The high priests would then make their decision as to duty and good works he had committed. If they decided to cut off his head he would be declared righteous, and the three nights ceremony would be celebrated for him. The three nights ceremony is part of the afterlife ritual for righteous Zoroastrians. However, if he were unrepentant he would be sentenced to death and his soul would go to hell until the future existence; at which point he would be resurrected only to have his head cut off again. This cycle of resurrection and punishment would continue for every mortal sin he had committed.

Afterlife: Zoroastrians believe that there is life after death. Death is believed to be the result of the work of Angra Mainyu in the world. They believe he brought death and decay to the world. Ahura Mazda and his forces will not enter death, which is Angra Mainyu's domain. When a person dies, it is believed, that their spirit leaves the body but remains around the body for three days. This is where the surviving Zoroastrians hold a three-day ceremony for the deceased. Vohu Manah¹⁵ and Mithra¹⁶ prepare an account of one's good works and sins; which are used to determine one's fate in the spiritual world. On the third night, after a person dies, the soul is led across the *Chinawad* or *Chinvat* (accountant's) Bridge; good souls go to Paradise while evil souls go to Hell (also called: the world of punishment). If the good and bad deeds balance the soul is placed in *Hammistagan* (region of the mixed), which is neither paradise nor torment where they wait until the final apocalypse.¹⁷ For those who have committed bad deeds and are sent to Hell; they can expect punishments linked to the kind of sin they have committed. There is an anthropomorphic aspect to the punishment. For example the soul of a liar would have worms gnawing its tongue or a woman who did not respect the menstrual taboos would be forced to swallow bowls of excrement.¹⁸ Later texts personify good deeds as a beautiful maiden and evil deeds as an ugly hag who leads the deceased to their destination.¹⁹ The sum of the after life teaching is akin to the Law of Asha or the Law of Harmony. According to the Law of Asha there is a dualism between the *menok* (heavenly) and *getik* (earthly) state; which is also associated with Zoroastrian eschatological beliefs.²⁰

Fire Temples: Fire Temples are the place of worship for Zoroastrians. The temples are where many of the rituals and practices take place. There are three fires that burn inside the temple and it is believed that each is derived directly from Ahura Mazda. There are three types/grades of fire in the temple. The lowest grade is Atash Dedgah, which is present in all fire temples. This fire only takes two mobeds (Zoroastrian priest) a few hours to consecrate and a layperson may tend to the fire if a service is not in progress. Atash Adaran or the "fire of fires" is the second highest grade of fire and it requires eight mobeds, with the assistance four professional groups, two to three weeks to consecrate. The highest grade of fire is Atash Behram also called "fire of victory." This is by far the most elaborate requiring 32 mobeds, 16 fires from various sources (e.g. lightning, cremation pyre) and the ritual consecration of this fire can take a year to complete. Not all fire temples host all three fires.²¹ The fires are perpetually burnt to symbolize Ahura Mazda's eternal power. Visitors to the fire temple bring offerings of wood, which is placed, on the fire by a masked²² mobed. In appreciation for the offering the visitor is anointed with ash from the fire. The fires are used by mobeds to carry out many of the rituals/practices of the faith.

Practices/Rituals: Within Zoroastrianism are various practices or rituals that replicate the universal struggle between good and evil.²³ One such practice is the daily reciting of the Zoroastrian Creed.²⁴ This ritual is for the purpose of keeping one's mind focused on good thoughts, which will lead to good words and good deeds.

Among the various practices and rituals in the religion one of the most important rituals concerns the handling and disposal of a human corpse. When a person dies the body is to be disposed of immediately and even accidental touching of a corpse is considered a mortal sin and in ancient times warranted a death penalty. Therefore, Zoroastrians use a system of the Dakhma (tower of silence), which is a stone surfaced tower located outside of town. The corpse is placed on this surface and vultures come and devour the body. Any bones that remain are collected and either buried or placed in a drain beneath the Dakhma where chemicals are used to destroy the bones. Beginning in 1937 Iranian Zoroastrians started using a burial system along with the use of Dakhma and in the West, the burial system and cremation are most common. Prior to the disposal of the corpse there is a preparation process that includes the body being washed in gomez²⁵ and water. Once the body is prepared, it is delivered to corpse-bearers, who are now the only people who can touch the body. Within one day of death the body is prepared and even number of bearers travel in pairs to mourn the dead, each carrying a *paiwand* (cloth) between them.

Pious Zoroastrians have a daily ritual that includes wearing a cord around their waist. This ritual cord is called a *kusti* (or *kushti*), which is constructed of 72 white threads woven by women of the priestly class and consecrated by a mobed. Each end of the *kusti* is divided in three equal tassels, which together represent the six Gahambar seasonal festivals. Each of the tassels are equal meaning they contain 24 threads and each of these threads represent a section of a liturgical prayer called the Visparad. The ritual associated with the *kusti* is the tying and retying several times a day. The act of tying the cord is to reinforce the adherent's connection with Ahura Mazda and their faith and

traditions. Zoroastrians always face light when tying the cord, as light is reminiscent of fire and Ahura Mazda's power.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

There are some similarities in beliefs between Zoroastrianism and Christianity. For example Christians are monotheists who believe that God is the creator and sustainer of the world, heaven and hell exists, a resurrection will occur, a Savior is coming and there is a future day of judgment. However, these are only general areas of agreement. For example in just one area of belief: Christians believe that there is a Savior and that Savior is specifically Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who paid the price of sin as atonement for mankind (Romans 5:8). The work of Christ provides an individual a way to heaven and a relationship with God (John 3:16). The only way to salvation comes directly through Him (John 14:6). While some beliefs may coincide the specifics of these beliefs vary greatly.

An assertion of Zoroastrians is that their religion is, at least, one of the oldest monotheistic religions and that Christianity has borrowed from Zoroastrianism. Scholarly research has been unsuccessful in providing any proof that Christianity, Islam or even Judaism has borrowed from Zoroastrianism. Some scholars even assert that Zoroastrianism may have borrowed from Judaism.²⁶

The assertion that Christianity borrowed from Zoroastrianism has serious issues. First, Christianity is based on the teachings of the Old Testament that date back prior to the beginning of Zoroastrianism. Second, Zoroaster was born in the sixth century BC, long after the establishment of the Judaism. Third, if he revised an ancient Persian religion then it would be possible that he could have borrowed from Judaism. Finally, while there are certain similarities that exist between the two there is no evidence that Christianity is indebted in anyway to Zoroastrianism.

Notes

- ¹ Monotheism is the belief that there is one supreme deity.
- ² "Zoroaster's Vision," accessed June 12, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian/history/zoroaster_1.shtml
- ³ "What is Zoroastrianism," accessed June 12, 2014, <http://www.religionfacts.com/zoroastrianism/index.htm>
- ⁴ "Zoroastrianism," accessed June 4, 2014.
- ⁵ Polytheism is the belief that there are multiple deities.
- ⁶ Jafarey, Ali A. "The Good Religion and The Institutionalized Zoroastrianism." The Zarathushtrian Assembly, 2007. http://www.zoroastrian.org/articles/The_Good_Religion_and_Zoroastrianism.htm. (accessed June 16, 2014).
- ⁷ "Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents" accessed June 15, 2014, http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Goodstein, Laurie. "Zoroastrians Keep the Faith, and Keep Dwindling," *New York Times*, September 6, 2006. <http://select.nytimes.com/> (accessed June 16, 2014).
- ¹⁰ "Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents" accessed June 15, 2014.
- ¹¹ Goodstein, "Zoroastrians Keep the Faith and Keep Dwindling"
- ¹² Gerstenberger, Erhard S. "Zoroastrianism and the Bible: monotheism by coincidence?." *Religion Compass* 5, no. 4 (April 1, 2011): *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 2, 2014). <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001836223&site=ehost-live>
- ¹³ Boyd, James W., and Donald A. Crosby. "Is Zoroastrianism dualistic or monotheistic." *Journal Of The American Academy Of Religion* 47, no. 4 (December 1, 1979): 557-588. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 2, 2014). <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000775408&site=ehost-live>
- ¹⁴ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: their religious beliefs and practices*. (New York: Psychology Press, 2001).
- ¹⁵ Vohu Manah – described by some as an archangel.
- ¹⁶ Mithras is known as an ancient Aryan deity who has 1,000 ears and 10,000 eyes and is considered the lord of truth and loyalty. Mithras is known as Mithra the sun god in Roman and Greek mythology.
- ¹⁷ Stausberg, Michael. "Hell in Zoroastrian history." *Numen* 56, no. 2-3 (January 1, 2009): 217-253. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 2, 2014). <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001719545&site=ehost-live>
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Farnáz Ma'sumián, *Life After Death: A Study of the Afterlife in World Religions*. (Los Angeles, CA: Kalimat Press, 2002).
- ²⁰ Vescei, Uma Marina. "Suffering in Zoroastrianism and its way out." *Numen* 15, no. 3 (November 1, 1968): 222-232. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 2, 2014).
- ²¹ Mary Boyce, "On the Zoroastrian Temple Cult of Fire," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95, No. 3 (1975). <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000713310&site=ehost-live>
- ²² Mobeds wear a mask to keep their breath from contaminating the fire.
- ²³ Choksy, Jamsheed k. "The Zoroastrian Nahn purification rituals." *Journal of Ritual Studies* 1 no 2 Sum 1987, 59-74, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 24, 2014). <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000803876&site=ehost-live>
- ²⁴ Boyce, 2001, 35-36. The Zoroastrian Creed can also be found at: <http://www.avesta.org/yasna/y12j.htm> (accessed July 15, 2014)
- ²⁵ Gomez is unconsecrated bull's urine
- ²⁶ Rennie, Bryan S. "Zoroastrianism: the Iranian roots of Christianity?." *Council Of Societies For The Study Of Religion Bulletin* 36, no. 1 (2006): 3-7. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 2, 2014). <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001649676&site=ehost-live>



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