

HISTORY

The origins of Zoroastrianism are lost in antiquity, but it has left a timeless legacy to world religious thought that is as relevant today as when it was revealed over three millennia ago. Zarathushtra (Zoroaster), prophet of the world's oldest revealed religion, lived in remote antiquity, circa 1,800 – 1,100 BCE in Central Asia, near the Aral Sea. In his thirtieth year, Zarathushtra received the revelation and started on his mission to bring His message to mankind.

One of Zarathushtra's earliest disciples was King Vishtaspa, ruler of Bactria. Thereafter, the religion spread far and wide. For a thousand years (559 BCE to 651 CE) it was the dominant religion during three mighty Persian empires, that stretched west towards Rome and Greece, east into India, north into Russia and south into Egypt, with followers in the millions.

It was the State religion of the Persian Achaemenian Empire founded by Cyrus the Great in 559 BCE, but suffered a setback with the conquest of Persia in 334 BCE by Alexander of Macedonia, when the magnificent Persepolis, seat of the Persian empire, was destroyed, libraries and religious texts burned, and the treasury plundered. The Persian Empire of the Parthians (250 BCE to 227 CE) witnessed the birth of Christ and the rise of Christianity. Zoroastrianism was rejuvenated as the Imperial religion of the Sasanian Persian Empire (226 to 651 CE) but reeled once again with the advent of Islam. After a crucial battle with the Arabs in 641 CE, sovereignty passed into the hands of the Islamic Caliphs.

Over the ensuing dispiriting years, a large number of Zoroastrians accepted Islam, some continued to practice their faith under oppressive conditions, while a few fled in sailing vessels, landing on the western shores of India in the 10th century, and were given refuge by the native Hindu ruler. Their descendants, the Parsis, still keep their faith alive in India.

ZOROASTRIANS IN IRAN

For centuries after the Arab invasion, Zoroastrians in Iran practiced their faith in quiet seclusion, in the face of extreme persecution. As opportunities presented themselves in the 20th century, they excelled in all walks of life – government, business, industry, arts and sciences, and built an impeccable reputation for honesty and philanthropy.

ZOROASTRIANS IN INDIA – THE PARSIS

A miniscule minority in India (less than .01% of the population), the Parsis have influenced the country well out of proportion to their numbers. Enterprising, highly literate and reputed for their honesty, philanthropy and pioneering spirit, the Parsis have led the shipbuilding, aviation, steel, textiles, chemicals, and nuclear industries; and excelled in arts and sciences. They founded hospitals, schools, libraries and other institutions, liberally extending their philanthropy beyond their own community.

INTERACTIONS WITH THE GREEKS AND ROMANS

The Greeks studied the philosophy of the Persian prophet, dating him “5,000 years before the Siege of Troy” [Plutarch]. His doctrine is mentioned by Plato, Socrates and Aristotle, who studied under the Magi.

In Roman times the image of Persia was a land of mystery, wisdom and learning. Its religious teachings, in the form of ‘Mithraism’ appealed to the conquering Roman soldiers, who spread it through the Empire, until the rise of Christianity in the 4th century CE. Hundreds of Mithraic temples have been discovered across Europe, the latest one unearthed in London in the 1970s.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The survival of the Zoroastrian religion over 3,500 years, is remarkable when one considers the devastations it has suffered in conquests, destruction of scriptures, annihilation of priests, persecution of believers and forced conversions, and more recent doctrinal disputes, threat of declining numbers and cultural and religious assimilation --compounded by the fact that Zoroastrianism is traditionally a non-proselytizing faith.

But the religion is not ready to be relegated to the history books just yet. It is perhaps its core beliefs that impel its followers to excel in all arenas of human endeavor and contribute for the benefit of humankind.

Despite the vicissitudes of time and history, the essence of Zarathushtra's timeless and universal message has been preserved and perpetuated, as new generations recognize the remarkable relevance of this ancient faith in today's world.



© 2018 Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America.
All rights reserved

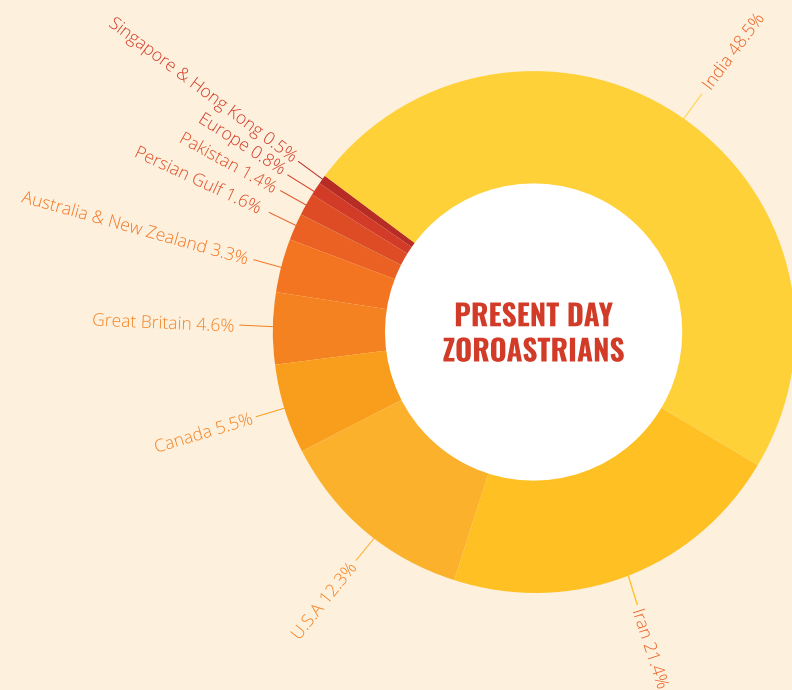
Text abbreviated from original, Rohinton M. Rivetna (1st edition 1983).
Design and Layout: Anaheez Karbhari

www.fezana.org



ZOROASTRIANS

Followers of an Ancient Faith Relevant in the Modern World



THE ZOROASTRIAN ETHIC

Zarathushtra preached the monotheistic religion of one supreme God, Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord). His message is a positive, life-affirming 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. Zarathushtra asked his listeners to think with a clear mind, and choose a life of intelligent reflection and active benevolence.

A Zoroastrian is taught to lead an industrious, honest and 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 good and charitable purposes.

The quintessence of his teachings is embodied in the triad:

HUMATA
Good Thoughts

HUKHTA
Good Words

HUVARESHTA
Good Deeds

VOHU MANAH - The Good Mind
ASHA VAHISHTA - Divine Law
KSHATHRA VAIRYA - Divine Strength
SPENTA ARMAITI - Benevolent Spirit
HAURVATAT - Perfection
AMERATAT - Immortality

THE AMESHA SPENTAS
(Attributes of Ahura Mazda)

ZOROASTRIAN VIEW OF THE WORLD

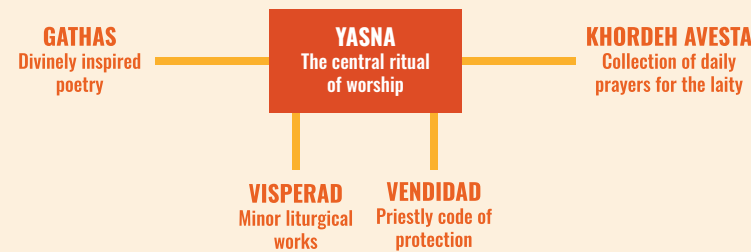
Zarathushtra presents a view of the world in which Ahura Mazda originally creates an ideal existence in accordance with the Law of Asha. As the world progresses there is conflict between good (Spenta Mainyu) and evil (Angra Mainyu). In this cosmic drama, man is the prime agent through whose actions the ultimate triumph of good over evil is assured. Ahura Mazda gives man not only the freedom to choose between good and evil, but also the responsibility to actively promote good and vanquish evil. Through the collective good acts of humanity, the world evolves towards final resurrection (frashokereti), when all will be in a state of perfection (Haurvatat) and immortality (Ameratata).

STEWARDSHIP OF NATURE

Harmony between man and nature, respect for all of Creation – Fire, Sun, Earth and Water, 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 corpus of Zoroastrian sacred literature is known as the Avesta, written in the ancient Avestan language. It comprises of:



THE FAROHAR SYMBOL

The farohar (or fravashi) represents the 'Divinity within Humanity,' the essence of God that dwells in every human being and in all of Creation, a guardian spirit leading the soul on its journey towards the ultimate triumph of good over evil.



THE ROLE OF FIRE

Zoroastrian rituals are solemnized in the presence of a Fire, which is scrupulously tended with sandalwood and frankincense and kept burning in a silver urn in the inner sanctum of Zoroastrian 'fire-temples' also called a 'Dar-e-Mehr' (Door of Devotion) or 'Atash Kadeh' (House of Fire).

Fire is revered as a visible symbol of the Inner Light, the divine spark, that burns in each and every heart; a physical representation of the Illumined Mind, Enlightenment and Truth. It is important to note that Zoroastrians do not "worship fire" -- the religion denounces the worship of idols or deities.

NAVJOTE – SUDREH PUSHI (INITIATION) CEREMONY

A child is officially initiated into the Zoroastrian faith with the Navjote ceremony, where he or she is invested with the sacred *Sudreh* (a white muslin shirt) and the *Kushti* (a woolen cord). The child pledges to steadfastly follow the teachings and principles of Zarathushtra.

MARRIAGE – THE WEDDING CEREMONY

Marriage is a pious duty, a religious sacrament based on sharing, devotion, faithfulness and self-sacrifice, a holy union of two souls. A wedding is a time of great rejoicing, with feasting and dancing. At the ceremony, the priests recite passages from the Avesta, offering affirmations, admonitions and benedictions, while showering the couple with rice and rose petals.

DEATH AND THE FUNERAL CEREMONY

Upon death, extensive prayers and rituals are performed, to ensure a safe passage of the soul into the spiritual realm. It is one's soul that chooses between good and evil in this life; and it is the soul that is responsible for these actions and gets rewarded (in heaven) or retribution (in hell) after death. Ultimately, evil shall be vanquished by good, and all souls will be raised in a blissful state (*frashokereti*). In India, the ancient tradition of disposal of the dead in 'Towers of Silence' open to the elements and birds of prey is still practiced. Elsewhere, cremation, and to a lesser extent burial, are practiced.

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 God.
- Heaven and Hell, and individual judgment.
- Ultimate triumph of good over evil.
- Strict moral and ethical code.
- The Messiah to come for the final restoration.
- Concepts of resurrection, final judgment and life everlasting.
- The words *satan*, *paradise* and *amen* are of Zoroastrian origin.

The interchange of Zoroastrian thought with 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 in the Bible [Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1-3]. The Old Testament is replete with references to the Persian emperors Darius, Cyrus and Xerxes. Zoroastrians had a belief in the coming of a savior, born of a virgin mother, who would bring the revelation from God. It is interesting to note that the Three Wise Men (magi) who heralded the infant Christ, were Zoroastrian priests. To this day, frankincense and myrrh are offered at the altars of Zoroastrian fire temples. The commemoration of December 25th as the birthday of Christ has its origins in Mithraic observances. Around 336 CE, the church in Rome proclaimed Christmas be celebrated on the day of "natalis solis invicti", the "birthday of the unconquered Sun," which, following the winter solstice, once again begins to show an increase in light.