



Short Introductions to the World Religions - Zoroastrianism

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1. The estimated number of Zoroastrians in the world is around 200,000. The homeland of Zoroastrianism is Persia, now Iran. More than half of the Zoroastrians live in India, where they are known as "Parsees" (people of Persia). About 2,000 reside in Canada.

2. The ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, also known as

Parseeism, is based on the teachings of Zoroaster, which is the Latin name of the Persian Prophet Zarathustra, "the Golden Light". He lived probably between three to four thousand years ago, in the second millennium B.C.E., among tribes around the Caspian Sea who had a common belief system based on myths that were related to Greek, Roman and Celtic religions. Early in his life he became concerned about the lack of morality, about poverty and the mistreatment of animals and nature, as well as about the oppressive rule of the priests. At approximately age twenty he left home and dedicated his life to serve the poor and to meditate. At age thirty he received divine revelation. He composed the content of his revelation into holy songs, the "Gathas". Zarathustra travelled the country, preached and taught. In the beginning he faced much resistance and threats of death, but when he died at the age of seventy-seven his teachings had

become the accepted religion of a large region of ancient Persia.

3. The teachings of Zarathustra caused a revolutionary transformation, because it overcame the saRÙV+entalism and prescriptivism of his time (communications with spirits, fertility rites, rituals for protection from natural disasters etc. and rules that regulate the relations between humans and divinities and their demands etc.). He taught religion as purely reflective, as a view of the world and a way of life, as metaphysics and ethics joined together.

4. "Ahura Mazda" is the voice of Wisdom, "the Wise Lord". God is incomprehensible, without form, infinite, all-knowing, all-seeing and all-loving. Ahura Mazda created the World in two phases: the creation of spirit (idea, truth) was realized in the creation of the physical world.

5. The good world that God created became contaminated. Good

and evil are ingrained attitudes, mentalities. The evil attitude or opposition to God was later personified as an evil spirit, "Ahriman".

6. The earth is the battlefield between the force that promotes "Asha" (Truth) and the force that resists Asha. Through the three truths, "Manasmi", "Gavasmi" and "Kunisni", Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds, humans fight on God's side and win eternal life in heaven. Those who do evil deeds support Ahriman and are awaited by an eternal hell of many levels, which include a purgatory where a soul can cleanse itself.

7. The six divine attributes:

- (1) Truth or the natural and moral laws of God;
- (2) Good thinking or God's good mind;
- (3) The spirit of benevolence or the divine power to do good;
- (4) Transformation of the social order or love of all creation;
- (5) Wholeness or the total integrity of

the person;
(6) Eternal bliss or
the immortality of
the soul.

The divine Truth
can be understood
and accepted,
realized in every
day life through the
selfless use of
divine power, to
transform all God's
creation to spiritual
and physical
wholeness, which
holds out eternal
reward. These six
attributes were, at a
later date,
personified as
archangels. Also
strict rules about
purifications and
separations
between clean and
unclean, rituals and
liturgies were
established after
Zarathustra.

8. The Gathas are
the oldest and the
most revered of the
many sacred
scriptures of
Zoroastrianism.
They are the only
scripture written in
the vernacular
spoken by
Zarathustra. They
are hymns of
service to God,
because it is service
- good thoughts,
good words and
good deeds - that
overcomes evil.
Many other
scriptures,
originating in the
two millennia
B.C.E., were written

when the Gathas were not available and are sometimes at variance in their message from the early hymns. These scriptures are also written in other dialects and languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit. All the preserved and gathered scriptures form the "Avesta".

9. Zoroastrians worship in temples, where fire is the central symbol of purity, transformation, victory over darkness and yearning for the higher life. The human torso clothed in a pair of wings (see the picture above) symbolizes the "Farohar", the divine spark that is present everywhere, enabling the soul to evolve.

10. Zoroastrians do not missionize or proselytize. Children are initiated into the faith between the age of seven and nine at the "Navjote" ceremony by reading a Charter of Faith and making a covenant with Ahura Mazda. Zoroastrians pray five times a day and study the scriptures. They expect a saviour who will banish evil forever

and transform the earth into a paradise.

11. The two Persian kings, Cyrus and Darius, who are mentioned in the Bible, were probably Zoroastrians. And so, probably, were the three wise men in the Gospel story of the birth of Jesus. Zoroastrianism has had a strong influence on Judaism and thereby on Christianity, as seen in the concepts of heaven and hell, angels, archangels and Satan.

12. Zoroastrians have been called "fire worshippers" because of the centrality of the symbol of fire in the act of worship. This description is as incorrect as calling Christians "cross worshippers".

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