

Zoroastrianism

(part 1 of 2): Fire worshippers or monotheists?



Zoroastrianism is defined by the Merriam Webster^[1] online dictionary as a Persian religion founded in the sixth century B.C.E. by the prophet Zoroaster, promulgated in the Avesta, and characterized by worship of a supreme god, Ahura Mazda, who requires good deeds for help in his cosmic struggle against the evil spirit Ahriman. This is a rather limited definition that actually tells us very little about Zoroastrianism or Zoroaster (also known as Zarathustra). Let us take a journey into the religion of Zoroastrianism and find out just what it is all about and how it compares to the religion of Islam.

From approximately 6th century B.C.E until the 7th century CE Zoroastrianism was the religion of the Persian Empire, however today their numbers are believed to be fewer than 200,000. Most Zoroastrians live in and around the city of Mumbai, India, after a mass migration in the 10th century C.E. The number of Zoroastrians in present day Iran (previously part of the Persian Empire) is believed to be as few as 18,000, most living in Tehran, Yazd and Kernan.

The number of Zoroastrians (Parsees) in India is declining at about 10% per decade. The Canadian web site Religious Tolerance believes this is due to Zoroastrian mobility and adaptability. "They assimilate and intermarry, virtually disappearing into their adopted cultures."^[2]

It is believed that Zoroastrianism is conceptually and historically associated with the other predominantly Indian religions, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. In approximately 225 C.E. the Sasanian Persian Empire unified Zoroastrianism and established rules about what the religion was and was not. A high priest was given authority exceeded only by the Emperor himself and Zoroastrianism was made the state religion. At this time conversions were made to counteract Christian missionary zeal in the area.^[3]

Who was Zoroaster?

Zoroaster is also known as Zarathustra, from the Greek word meaning shining light. Academics differ about when he is believed to have been born. Estimates range from 6350 BCE to 600 BCE, there is also significant disagreement as to his birth place. Suggestions are as diverse as, eastern Iran, Azerbaijan (south of the Caspian Sea), Balkh (the capital of Bactria, in present day Afghanistan), Chorasmia and Sogdia in Tajikistan, or near the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan.

Zoroaster was born within the borders of the Persian Empire, his family name was Spitama. He preached a message of cosmic strife between Ahura Mazda, the God of Light, and Ahriman, the principle of evil. Zoroaster taught that the end of the world will come when the forces of light triumph, and that the saved souls will rejoice in their victory.^[4]

What do Zoroastrian's believe?

Zoroaster preached that there is only One God. He is, according to Zoroaster's teachings, the creator of heaven and earth. He is the source of the alternation of light and darkness, the sovereign lawgiver, and the originator of the moral order and judge of the entire world.

The dualism of Zoroastrianism is both cosmic and moral. There is the ongoing spiritual battle between good and evil, Ahura Mazda vs. Ahriman, and the mind's moral battle between righteous and sinful behaviours. Zoroastrianism views the world as having been created by Ahura Mazda but meant to evolve according to the divine law or plan, known as Asha. Asha is the principle of righteousness or "rightness" by which all things are exactly as they should be.

In their most basic prayer, repeated every day, Zoroastrians affirm this law of Asha. Via the law of Asha, Zoroastrians are guided by three main principles: Humata - Good thoughts, the intention or moral resolution to abide by Asha, the right order of things. Hukhata - Good words, the communication of that intention. Havarashta - Good deeds, the realization in action of that intention.

Zoroastrians believe in an afterlife, they believe the human soul is judged by God, (Ahura Mazda) and that those who chose good in this earthly life will go to the best existence while those who chose evil would go to the worst existence – heaven or hell.

Fire does play a symbolic central role in religious ceremonies. It is the symbol of Ahura Mazda, along with the sun, stars and light and is also a physical representation of an illuminated mind. Zoroastrian's worship in places known as fire temples and it is there that an eternal flame is kept burning with sandalwood and frankincense oils.

The Zoroastrian scriptures are called the Avesta, and they are written in an ancient language Avestan, that is closely related to the Sanskrit of the Hindu ancient Vedic hymns.

So far we can see that Zoroastrianism contains a mixture of beliefs, on one hand it embraces some of the monotheism of Islam, and the dualism of Christianity, and that the Zoroastrian concept of heaven and hell has moral elements in common with Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In part 2 we will discuss whether or not Zoroastrians, are the Magian's mentioned in Quran; do they, because of their symbolic use of the sun and stars have any links to the Sabians or the religion of Prophet Abraham's ancestors. We will also look more closely at whether or not Islamic concepts are inherent in Zoroastrianism.

Footnotes:

[1] www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/zoroastrianism

[2] (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/zoroastr3.htm>)

[3] (www.theosophical.org/publications/quest-magazine/1231)

[4] (http://www.hyperhistory.com/online_n2/people_n2/persons1_n2/zoroaster.html)

(part 2 of 2): Monotheism – the original religion

As Muslims we believe that all people are born with the natural inclination to worship God; One God, nor a plethora of gods and demi gods. Therefore it makes perfect sense that in the ancient world, including the Persian Empire there were people who worshipped One God. Islam completes and purifies such monotheism.

It has been said that Zoroaster was pious, noble and compassionate. He preached that a moral life paved the way to eternal bliss. He encouraged his followers to love the righteous and have compassion for the distressed.

Like Islam, Zoroastrianism does not discriminate between men and women, both sexes are treated equally in the religious texts. There is no preferential treatment of male children and children are advised to honour both father and mother equally.

What exactly does Quran have to say about these monotheistic religions that pre date the Islam we know today? Who are the people mentioned along with Jews and Christians?

Verily, those who believe (in God and in His Messenger Muhammad), and those who are Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians, and the Magians, and those who worship others besides God, truly, God will judge between

them on the Day of Resurrection. Verily! God is over all things a Witness. (Quran 22:17)

Zoroaster had a great reputation as a scholar and physician.. He established many fire temples and suppressed the worship of demons, and the use of magic, witchcraft and sorcery.[1] Zoroastrians were indeed the people mentioned in Quran as Magians

Although the ancient Greeks viewed Zoroaster to be the founder of the religion of the Persians, they embellished his story to such an extent that a new and novel existence was created for Zoroaster. He was placed in an impossibly ancient past, some 6 or 7 millennia before the Common Era and was invariably cast as either a King and or a sage. Zoroaster began to be portrayed not only as a sorcerer and astrologer but as the inventor of magic. The Greek love of exotic wisdom and the evolution of the word mage from learned one to practitioner of magic were combined to incorrectly define Zoroaster as a magician and the Zoroastrian's as Magians (def. magicians).

The origin of the word magi in Persian sources is unclear but its use in Zoroastrian scriptures seems to refer to a member of a tribe or group, possibly leading to the word magian coming to denote Zoroastrians. In Christian literature the three men who travel from the East to meet the new born Jesus are referred to as the magi or wise men.

The origin and meaning of the word Sabian (mentioned in Quran with the word magian) is also shrouded in mystery however we can be certain that Magians and Sabians were two distinctly different religious groups

The original Sabians did not worship either the angels or the stars but are said to have followed the teachings of Prophet Abraham. In short their beliefs and monotheism was similar to that of the Jews, however they came before the Jews possibly as far back as the time of Prophet Noah. Sabians are sometimes referred to as the people of Prophet Abraham just as the Jews are called the people of Prophet Moses[2]. The four religious groups mentioned in Quran, Jews, Sabians, Christians and Magians all practised forms of monotheism, sometimes adulterated, thus not always the pure monotheism of Islam.

Thus, in conclusion we find that the Zoroastrians were never fire worshippers, magicians, sorcerers or astrologists. At one time Zoroastrianism dominated an area stretching from what is now Rome and Greece to India and Russia.[3] Their numbers dropped when the Persian Empire was conquered in the 7th century C.E.

Zoroastrians do not preach their religion; in fact, many modern Zoroastrians claim that conversion to their religion is impossible. While there are priests there is no hierarchy and no intermediaries between the people and God. The basic doctrine of Zoroastrianism revolves around good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.[4]

Footnotes:

[1] <http://www.dlshq.org/saints/zoroaster.htm>

[2] Ibnul Qayyim in Ahkaam Ahl al-Dhimmah, 1/92-98

[3] (<http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F40E16FB3D550C758CDDA00894DE404482>)

[4] <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/06/world/americas/06iht-faith.2713551.html?pagewanted=all>