



# Zoroastrianism

## Faith Guide

A short introduction to Zoroastrianism, its origins and population in the UK

# A Short Introduction to Zoroastrianism

## Origins of Zoroastrianism

The word Zoroastrianism is derived from the name of Zoroaster, the Greek form of the prophet Zarathushtra's name. Zoroastrianism is also known as Zarathushtrianism and as Mazdayasni Zarthushti/ Zartoshti.

The founder of Zoroastrianism was the prophet Zarathushtra who lived in North Eastern Iran, according to some in the community around 6,000BCE, whilst other Zoroastrians and many external academics argue for a period around 1,200BCE.

Zarathushtra was a zaotar, or priest, within his country's traditional religion. But at the age of thirty he received a vision which led to his proclamation of a prophetic message based on ethical imperatives and experiential religion.

Zoroastrianism became the religion of the Iranian empires of the Achaemenids (559-331BCE), the Parthians (mid second century BCE – 224CE) and the Sasanians (224-652CE).

## Central Aspects of Zoroastrianism

### The Divine

Zarathushtra proclaimed the worship of Ahura Mazda (the Wise Lord or the Lord of Wisdom) who is believed to have created a good world consisting of seven elements of creation: the sky, waters, earth, plants, cattle, humans, and fire.

Because fire (Atar or Adur/Adar) is used in many Zoroastrian ceremonies, some people have erroneously described Zoroastrians as "fire worshippers". However, fire is not worshipped, but is seen as sacred force which is the source of all energy and the symbol of truth and righteousness.



## The Creation

Zoroastrians believe the elements of creation to be guarded by the Amesha Spentas (Bounteous Immortals), who are, as follows:

1. Vohu Manah or Bahman (Good Mind), the guardian of cattle
2. Asha Vahishta or Ardibehesht (Best Order/Truth and Righteousness), the guardian of fire
3. Kshathra Vairya or Shahrevar (Divine Kingdom/ Dominion), the guardian of sky
4. Spenta Armaiti or Aspandarmad (Bounteous Devotion), the guardian of earth
5. Haurvatat or Khordad (Wholeness), the guardian of water
6. Ameretat or Amardad (Immortality), the guardian of plants.

The Amesha Spentas, in turn, brought forth the yazatas or Adorable Ones, three or four of which assist each of the Amesha Spentas in guarding the well-being of the seven good creations.

Evil is seen as the work of Angra Mainyu (the Destructive Spirit) which is characterised by the operation of anger, greed, jealousy and destruction in the world.

Classical Zoroastrian belief awaited the coming the Saoshyant (Saviour) to raise the dead ready for judgement, following which the world would return to its original perfection. This is known by Zoroastrians as the Frasho-keriti (Making Wonderful).

## Initiation

The initiation ceremony for the children of Zoroastrian parents is known as Navjote (Gujarati meaning “new birth”) or Sedreh-Pushi (Farsi meaning “wearing sedreh”) which usually takes place prior to puberty, between the age of seven and eleven.

Those who are initiated are given the sudreh, which is a sacred shirt, worn to symbolise purity and vohumanah or good purpose; and the kushti or koshti, a sacred cord which is worn over the sudreh. Both are seen as protection in the struggle against evil.

## Ethics

Ahura Mazda is seen as the source of asha (truth, righteousness, order, justice) and vohu manah (good mind) and Zarathushtra called people to live by a tripartite ethic, consisting of:

- humata (good thoughts)
- hukhta (good words)
- hvarshta (good deeds)

Human beings are called upon to participate in the life of the creation which is seen as fundamentally good. They are seen as having freedom in, and accountability for, their actions in this life, and thus as contributors to the cosmic struggle between good and evil.

## Worship

The Fravarane is a key prayer of Zoroastrianism and commences with the words: “Come to my aid, O Mazda! I profess myself a worshipper of Mazda, I am a Zoroastrian worshipper of Mazda.”

For regular devotions, the day is divided into five Gah or Geh (times), as follows:

1. Havan (from sunrise to noon)
2. Rapithwan (from noon till 3.00pm)
3. Uziren (from 3.00pm to sunset)
4. Aiwisruthrem (from sunset to midnight)
5. Ushahen (from midnight to sunrise).

## Scriptures

The main Zoroastrian scriptures are known as the Avesta. This is based on an orally transmitted tradition eventually written down in the fifth or sixth century CE, which exists today exist as only about a quarter of their original material. The Avesta has five parts:

1. The Yasna Includes seventeen Gathas, or hymns of Zarathushtra.
2. The Yashts Compositions addressed to the yazatas/yazads.
3. The Vendidad (or Videvdat) A book of rules and laws.
4. The Visperad Supplements the Yasna and is used in the gahanbar festivals of Zoroastrianism which celebrate the powers of creation.
5. The Khordeh Avesta. An extract from the Avesta.

## Diversity within Zoroastrianism

The Parsis or Parsees settled in Gujarat, in India, from 936CE onwards, following the Arab conquest of parts of north-eastern Iran.

Whilst the basic tenets of Zoroastrianism are shared among both Iranian Zoroastrians and Parsis, some differences of both practice and interpretation have also developed as, for example, in respect of the Zoroastrian religious calendar and festivals.



# Zoroastrian Origins

The majority of early Zoroastrian migrants were of Indian origin and known as Parsees or Parsis.

The first three Members of Parliament of Asian ethnic origin were all Parsis, the first of which was (in 1892) Dadabhai Naoroji, elected as a Member of Parliament for the Liberal Party.

In more recent years an Iranian Zoroastrian presence has also developed as a result of refugee movement and migration following the Iranian revolution.

Parsis form the majority of Zoroastrians in the UK, with Iranis in a minority. While there are many things that are shared, there are also a number of differences between the two groups.

The Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe (Incorporated), established in 1861, is the oldest Zoroastrian organisation in the UK (known since 1978 under its present name).

The Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe (Incorporated) has a centre in West Hampstead, London and has recently opened a new Centre in which it is hoped to have a fire temple.

The World Zoroastrian Organisation is also based in London.

# Zoroastrians in the UK

## Zoroastrian Populations

|                         |            |
|-------------------------|------------|
| <b>Global</b>           | c. 197,000 |
| <b>UK</b>               | 4206       |
| <b>England</b>          | 4,055      |
| <b>Wales</b>            | 50         |
| <b>Scotland</b>         | 86         |
| <b>Northern Ireland</b> | 15         |



## Zoroastrian Organisations

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| <b>Local</b>    | 2 |
| <b>Regional</b> | 7 |
| <b>UK</b>       | 2 |

## Zoroastrian Places of Worship

There are currently no Zoroastrian fire temples in the UK, but Zoroastrian House in London has a room that is used for worship.

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| <b>UK</b>               | 1 |
| <b>England</b>          | 1 |
| <b>Wales</b>            | 0 |
| <b>Scotland</b>         | 0 |
| <b>Northern Ireland</b> | 0 |

## Acknowledgement of Sources

'Zoroastrian' was not one of the categories for response offered in the 2011 Census questions on religious affiliation. However, figures have been derived from an analysis of the write-in responses offered to the 'Any Other Religion' category that was provided. These can be found in the [Office for National Statistics' Table QS210EW](#) (Census 2011: Religion [Detailed], Local Authorities in England & Wales, Crown Copyright 2012), the [Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency's Table QS218NI](#) (Census 2011: Religion – Full Detail), and the [National Records of Scotland's Table AT\\_001\\_2011](#) (Census 2011: Religion [Detailed], Crown Copyright 2013). Crown copyright material is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of HMSO.

Estimates for the global Zoroastrian population are taken from Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim (eds.), *World Religion Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2012).

Estimates for the numbers of Zoroastrian organisations and places of worship are taken from P. Weller (ed.), *Religions in the UK: A Directory, 2007-10* (Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, 2007). The section on 'A Short Introduction to Zoroastrianism' summarises and abstracts from the same publication's

chapter on 'Introducing Zoroastrians in the UK' (pp. 265-282), which was developed with input from a range of consultants (pp. 329-337).

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