



# CONVERSION VII. TO THE ZOROASTRIAN FAITH IN THE MODERN PERIOD

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## CONVERSION

### vii. To the Zoroastrian faith in the modern period

Modern Zoroastrians disagree on whether it is permissible for outsiders to enter their religion. Now scattered in small minority communities in Persia, India, Europe, and North America and without a religious hierarchy, the Zoroastrians are governed by councils and high priests whose authority is only local. Even within a community an individual may choose not to accept the ruling of the council or high priest. Zoroastrian communities and individuals thus have differing views on conversion. They tend to cluster around two general tendencies, reformist and traditionalist, but even within these groups the variation is considerable. Reformist liberals generally urge acceptance of any individual who chooses of his or her own free will to practice Zoroastrianism. They distinguish between “acceptance,” which implies complete free will, and conversion and proselytism, which carry connotations of coercion or pressure. Nevertheless, there are those who believe in the missionary nature of Zoroastrianism and go so far as to encourage active proselytism. On the traditionalist side some moderates permit the acceptance of spouses and the offspring of mixed marriages, but



the strict constructionists refuse to accept as coreligionists even Zoroastrians who marry outside the faith and consider children born of such unions illegitimate. This controversy has become exacerbated in this century, as the scattered Zoroastrian communities are shrinking and experiencing increasing intermarriage. Opponents of conversion argue that, precisely because the community is so fragile, the acceptance of converts will dilute the ethnic strength of the religion and lead to its complete annihilation. The issue is of practical importance, for it affects admission to fire temples (Boyce, 1984, p. 153) and “towers of silence,” as well as the legal privileges attached to membership in the community.

The Gathas (the part of the Avesta attributed to Zoroaster), as well as other Avestan and Pahlavi texts, are cited by both sides to justify their positions (see i, above). The passage quoted most often by those who favor accepting converts is *Yasna* 31.3 (*yā jvantō vīspə́ng vāurayā* “by which I might convert all the living”; Insler, p. 182), cited as proof of the universal character of Zoroaster’s message. Several other verses of the Gathas, especially *Yasna* 46.12, in which a non-Iranian family (the Turanian Fryāna; Taraporewala, p. 251 n.; Pūr-e Dāwūd, p. 104 n.) is named among the followers of Zoroaster, have furnished liberals with a textual basis for their argument against confinement of Zoroastrianism to a specific race or nationality (letter from Kankāš-e Mūbadān-e Tehran, published in *Māh-nāma Markaz-e Zartoštīān-e Kāliforniā* [Monthly newsletter of the California Zoroastrian Center], Westminster, 1/5, *Ḳordād* 1362 Š./June 1983, p. 2). Moreover, liberals hold that the intrinsically nonritualistic doctrine of the Gathas degenerated into an Iranian ideology as a result of language and other barriers (Antia, pp. 7-9) and of such alterations as the incorporation of stringent purity rituals (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 295) entailed by the establishment of an organized religion.

Traditionalists, on the other hand, accuse proponents of conversion of heretical distortion of scripture and maintain that blood and faith are a linked heritage. They suggest that the term *mazdāyasna* (Mazda worshiping) in scriptural sources—especially in the prayer *Yasna* 12, in which one declares “I am a Mazda worshiper” before declaring “I am a Zoroastrian”—refers to the religion into which Zoroaster and all his early followers were born (Irani, pp. 6-8). The mission of Zoroaster was thus to purify the *mazdāyasna* religion from alien doctrines, and there was no question, even at the beginning, of forcing or convincing people to abandon their ancestral religion or of accepting people not born into the *mazdāyasna* religion (Mirza et al., n.d., p. 7). Therefore only a



child born of Zoroastrian parents is *mazdāyasna* by birth, and only such a child may be properly admitted into the Zoroastrian fold through receiving the traditional authorization to wear the outward symbols of the faith—the sacred undershirt (*šodra*) and the girdle (*koštī*)—at the Nowjat (lit., “new birth”) ceremony (Irani, p. 8).

The divergence in interpretation also extends to history. Traditionalists cite the general tolerance of other religious populations by the Achaemenid and Parthian dynasties as evidence that Zoroastrianism was intended to be the religion of a single ethnic group (Irani, pp. 29-31). Those liberals who hold that the individual must accept the religion of his or her own free will maintain that Zoroaster’s message could have provided no impetus to aggressive proselytizing. On the other hand, those favoring active proselytism cite such incidents as Xerxes’ destruction of the *daivadānas* (XPh, ll. 37-41; Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 151: “I destroyed that sanctuary of the demons . . . . Where previously the demons were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahuramazda”) as evidence that Zoroastrianism had been imposed by force and thus that the early Zoroastrian kings considered conversion of non-Zoroastrians both permissible and desirable (Antia, p. 30). Sasanian history provides ample evidence for use of both force and persuasion to win over non-Zoroastrians, but traditionalists argue that such instances as the endeavors of the Sasanian high priest Kerdīr recorded in the inscription on Ka’ba-ye Zardošt (“And there were many who had held the religion of the dēvs, and by my act they abandoned the religion of the dēvs and accepted the religion of the yazads”; Boyce, 1984, p. 113; interview with a member of the California Zoroastrian Center, November 1990) and the forced reconversion by Yazdegerd II (438-57) of Zoroastrian Armenians who had converted to Christianity took place primarily for political reasons (Antia, p. 13; Mirza et al., n.d., p. 7).

After the Arab conquest of Persia in the 7th century and the establishment of Islam as the religion of the new rulers, some Zoroastrians emigrated to India (the Parsis). Whereas the Zoroastrians who remained in Persia were not permitted to proselytize under Muslim rule and the conversion of a Muslim could result in persecution of the entire community, liberals point out that the Zoroastrian literature from after the conquest does include discussions of the possibility that a non-Zoroastrian might seek admission to the faith (*Rivayat-i Hemit*, pp. 184-88). They also cite the response of the Persian priests to a Parsi inquiry about the conversion of Hindu servant boys and girls (*Persian Rivayats*, tr. Dhabhar, p. 276), arguing that conversion to Zoroastrianism was



certainly considered possible, at least in theory, and that the guidelines stipulated in such medieval sources reflect faithfully the Zoroastrian practice that prevailed in Sasanian times and thus conform to orthodox Zoroastrian beliefs.

Whereas the Persian Zoroastrian communities never explicitly opposed the acceptance of converts, since the 18th century Indian Parsi councils have generally refused to accept as Zoroastrians persons other than children of Parsi parents, though there have been sporadic rulings allowing acceptance of the children of mixed marriages. This rigor may be ascribed to the pressures of the caste structure in India, reinforced by the growing prosperity of the Parsi social-welfare system, a possible incentive for seeking admission to the Zoroastrian fold.

In Persia the majority of Zoroastrians lived in extreme poverty and suffered intermittent persecution up to the beginning of the 20th century. The question of conversion to Zoroastrianism would scarcely have arisen there. After the intervention of the Parsis on behalf of their Persian coreligionists, as well as changes in attitudes after the [Constitutional Revolution](#), the condition of Persian Zoroastrians gradually improved. Owing partly to the policies of Reżā Shah (1304-20 Š./1925-41), for example, the adoption of Zoroastrian names for months, in the 1930s there was an awakening of interest in pre-Islamic history and religion. The efforts of several Persians to win recognition of the nobility of the Zoroastrian faith through translations of the Avesta contributed to increased respect for the old religion among the educated (Boyce, 1986, pp. 219-20). Nevertheless, only a few Persian Muslims became Zoroastrians: The Muslim dictum against conversion is very strong. In addition, Persian Zoroastrians, though theoretically adhering to the principle of acceptance, deemed it permissible only if it did not result in harm either to the Zoroastrian community or to the religion into which the individual was born (interview with Mrs. Susan Varjavand). Since the Islamic Revolution of 1357 Š./1978 the Persian Zoroastrian community has evidently become even more cautious about accepting converts.

The issue of conversion has been the cause of great disturbance within the new Zoroastrian communities in North America. Only a handful of non-Persians have been officially admitted to the fold. In the two instances in which information is available to the author, the converts were married to Zoroastrians. So far the religious councils in India refuse to acknowledge these initiates as true Zoroastrians (information provided by the California



Zoroastrian Center; Mobad N. Hormuzdiar, who performed the controversial initiation of an American in New Rochelle, N.Y., on 5 March 1983; and Mrs. Susan Varjavand, a recent convert from Christianity).

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