**Title**: Perspectives of Hinduism and Zoroastrianism on Abortion: A Comparative Study between Two Pro-Life Ancient Sisters

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**Abstract**

Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, respectively, are two religions with common historical roots. In Zoroastrianism, abortion is killing an innocent person and causes the dirt of the dead body. In Hinduism, abortion as deliberately disrupting the process of reincarnation and violating the concept of ahimsa and has serious karmic burden for its agent. The most noteworthy similarity between Zoroastrianism and Hinduism is their pro-life approach and reverence for life. Both Zoroastrianism and Hinduism ban abortion except for the cases in which the mothers’ lives are endangered, but with different bioethical bases. In Zoroastrianism, abortion is not considered as depriving a person from a cycle of human life, but it is considered as depriving a person from his or her only chance of birth and enjoying a life.The concept of *Karma* has no room in Zoroastrianism. In Zoroastrianism, *Ahura Mazda* can punish of forgive the sins.

1. **Introduction**

In the history of human civilization, religions have always been major sources of values with huge impacts on the life decisions of their followers. Although there have always been people and even communities who prefer to rely on the independent reason as the basis for their value judgments, most people and communities, especially before the modern age and in the Global East, have always relied on their own believed religions to find out their norms and values and enlighten their life decisions. Originated in the dawn of human civilization; Zoroastrianism and Hinduism are two ancient traditions/religions both adopted a pro-life approach with an emphasis on the reverence for life. Although these two sisters are not compatible in term of the number of followers (see below), their approaches and perspectives are important and influential in the life decisions of countless people and families around the world.

Abortion is one of the first topics appeared in the texts and scriptures related to medical ethics from the very beginning days of developing this field in the ancient times and still is one of the most debated and divisive issues in the field of bioethics. Followers of religions always ask their questions about issues like abortion from their believed religion and make their own and their families’ life decisions based on their religious normative approaches.

Zoroastrianism and Hinduism are two ancient inter-related traditions/religions with strong historical bond, which have adopted, developed, and took shape in neighbor countries and societies. Studying the similarities and differences of these two religious traditions in regard to an important life-related issue, shows the divergent paths of traditions and religions who have the same origins but develop and take shape in different societies and locations.

The aim of this paper is sketching and comparing the perspectives of Zoroastrianism and Hinduism on abortion in the light of unique specifics and characteristics of these two religious traditions, their moral teachings and their bioethical approaches. This aim requires explaining these perspectives through exploring the main sources of Zoroastrian and Hindu bioethics. These sources can be divided into the theoretical/conceptual teachings in one hand and their practical approaches in the real word, which shaped their own traditions in the other hand. By paying attention to the very pro-life nature of these two religious traditions one can obviously see that despite some major differences in the bases of moral thoughts, both oppose abortion except for some cases under very distinct conditions.

1. **Two Pro-Life Traditions and a Life Issue**

Zoroastrianism and Hinduism both originated among Aryans after their immigration to the Middle East and south Asia. Although before and at the time of great migration there had been a lot of interconnectedness between these two religious traditions, after they were settled in different geographic areas, they took different passes through the history. Regardless of the causes of this divergence, nowadays, these two religious traditions have a lot of differences in addition to the original similarities they have had from the very beginning.

For assessing, understanding, and then comparing their perspectives towards any applied ethical issue, including abortion, one should know about the fundamental concepts and beliefs that shape the major sources and methods of moral thoughts in each of these to religious traditions. It is especially crucial to know the conceptual and methodological bases of their values norms and moral principles (as far as they are related to their moral thoughts on biomedical issues) and how they use these bases to elaborate their value judgments on practical life issues in biomedical ethics.

**2.1. Zoroastrianism:**

Zoroastrianism is and ancient Persian religion that was the official religion of the Persian Empire from 600 BCE to 650CE[[1]](#endnote-1). Estimations on the lifetime of the prophet of this religion, Zoroaster or Zarathustra (Zartosht in current Persia dialect), vary between 8000 to 700 BCE.[[2]](#endnote-2) However, Moubed Dr. Jahangir Ashidari argues that according to historical facts and coincidences, the most realistic estimate of the year of his birth may be 1768 BCE.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Zoroaster was born in the place which is now located in the Azarbaijan Province in Iran. He moved to Khorasan and city of Balkh and declared his prophecy and was successful in establishing a new religion. The king of Balkh was among his followers at that time.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The most prominent source of Zoroastrian moral thoughts is this religion’s holy book named *Avesta*.*[[5]](#endnote-5)* Only a small part of the current *Avesta* is attributed to Zoroaster, himself, as a scripture he brought and left among his people. This part is named *Gatha* and consists of some mystical praying and no jurisprudential or ethical concrete debate.[[6]](#endnote-6) The other parts of *Avesta* are as follow:

1. *Yasna*: The oldest and most important part of *Avesta* is *Yasna*. *Gatha* is a part of *Yasna*. It has been argued that this part of *Avesta* has been compiled at the same time as *RigVeda* (see the Hinduism part below) and has linguistic similarities with it.[[7]](#endnote-7)
2. *Yashtha*: This part of Avesta is mostly poetic and includes worships to *Ahura Mazda* and *Amshaspandan* (see below). This part is mostly poetic and epic and does not include moral or jurisprudential elements or teachings.[[8]](#endnote-8)
3. *Visparad*: *Visparad* means lords and leaders. This part of *Avesta* includes cosmological and ontological teachings. It also contains some general moral teachings for people describing the best behavioral models for men and women.[[9]](#endnote-9)
4. *Vandidad*: This part of *Avesta* is the jurisprudential part of this Holy book.[[10]](#endnote-10) This part was compiled centuries after the death of Zoroaster and mostly explains how Zoroastrian clergies thought or acted in issuing jurisprudential decrees. Part of this book is related to medical issues like abortion. [[11]](#endnote-11) (see below)
5. *Kohrdeh Avesta*: In 400 CE, Moubed Azarbad MehrAspand compiled this part of *Avesta* to teach Zoroastrian rituals to people. At that time, Zoroastrianism was the official religion of Sassanids who were the last dynasty before Islam and ruled in the Persian Empire for more than 200 years.[[12]](#endnote-12)

In addition to the *Vandidad* part of *Avesta* there are other holy scriptures like *Ardaviraf Nameh* and *Shayast-Nashayast*, which are rich in ethical and jurisprudential teachings, have been compiled in the centuries after the lifetime of Zoroaster. These scriptures mostly have been compiled during the time of dominance and prevalence of Zoroastrianism in the Persian Empire from about 5th century BCE to Seventh century CE.[[13]](#endnote-13)

After the invasion of Muslim Arabs, after a long chaotic period of wars and battles, Persia gradually joined the Muslim world and the dominance of Zoroastrianism ended, nevertheless, the cultural influence of this religion declined but persisted until now.[[14]](#endnote-14) Nowadays, the followers of Zoroastrianism mostly live in Iran, India (the Parsis) and Western countries.[[15]](#endnote-15) Estimations of the present population of Zoroastrians worldwide differ between 145,000 and 2.6 million.[[16]](#endnote-16) Beyond the community of its formal believers, the current and historic influence of Zoroastrianism on the Iranian culture and even the Iranian version of Shiite Islam have been significant. It has been argued that the Iranian/Persian culture is a mixture of three cultural paradigms: the Islamic/Shia religion/culture, the heritage of the ancient Persian/Zoroastrian culture and the Impact of Western/Modern culture in the recent centuries.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Some foundational features of Zoroastrianism which are very important in understanding the spirit of this religion and its bioethical perspectives are as follow: 1- Monism vs. Dualism: Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion, the dualism of *Ahura Mazda* vs. *Ahriman* in the Zoroastrian cosmology has been translated to a dualistic view in the theology and moral perspectives.[[18]](#endnote-18) Therefore, the Zoroastrian morality is largely based on a dualistic view, which believes in the timeless and everlasting combat between good (*Ahura Mazda/Sepand Minu/Ashuns*) and bad (*Ahriman, Angra Minu, Druj*). This is noteworthy that Zoroastrianism in its dualistic moral view is more similar to the Abrahamic religions than to Hinduism and other Asian religions.[[19]](#endnote-19)

According to the Zoroastrian dualistic view, *Ahura Mazda* has created all the goods in the universe. On the other hand, *Ahriman* has created all the evil.[[20]](#endnote-20) Human being is among the parts whose creation is attributed to *Ahura Mazda*, therefore, human being is considered intrinsically good. Human beings, however, have the ability and autonomy to choose between the good, which is in concordance with their nature or evil, which is suggested and promoted by *Ahriman*. The former groups who follow *Asha* as the divine rule of existence are called *Ashuns*, while the latter group who choose evil (*Doruj*) are named *Dorvand* (followers of *Doruj*/evil/lie).[[21]](#endnote-21)

According to the aforementioned beliefs and perspective, which consider every unborn human being as a creature of and a future soldier for *Ahura Mazda*, Zoroastrianism is a pro-life religion. Some parts of the newer parts of *Avesta*, explain some punishments and some difficult steps for cleaning the person who have committed abortion.[[22]](#endnote-22)

2- *Amshaspandan* and *Asha*: Before Zoroaster, Aryans, like the groups of them who moved to India and are called Hindus, used to worship multiple gods and goddesses. Zoroaster introduced a single God named *Ahura Mazda*. Other previously gods of Aryans then became the various reflections or faculties of that single God, inseparable from Him, named *Amshaspandan.[[23]](#endnote-23)* *Amshaspand* means immortal pure and *Amshaspandan* is the plural form of *Amshaspand.[[24]](#endnote-24)* This word is constituted from two parts: (i) Amesha: Means immortal, everlasting and indestructible. This word also specifies the things that are everlasting and beneficent like the four elements and sun and *Houm* (healing plant); And (ii) *Sepanta*: Means generous, merciful, creator and pure.[[25]](#endnote-25)

According to the Zoroastrian teachings, *Amshaspandan* are as follow:

1. *Asha*: This is a very important concept in Zoroastrianism and is very similar to the concept of *Dharma* in Hinduism (see below).[[26]](#endnote-26) *Asha* means the eternal law, righteousness, and the eternal rules of the universe and humanity. The former groups who follow *Asha* as the divine rule of existence are called *Ashuns*, while the latter group who choose evil (*Doruj*) are named *Dorvand* (followers of *Doruj*/evil/lie).[[27]](#endnote-27)
2. *Vahumana*: Good behavior, character, and intend.[[28]](#endnote-28)
3. *Xashtra*: God city, God power, and God faculty.[[29]](#endnote-29)
4. *Armeity*: Love, deviation, and purity.[[30]](#endnote-30)
5. *Heorutat*: Growth, Developing, and Happiness.[[31]](#endnote-31)
6. *Amortat*: Immortality, and indestructibility.[[32]](#endnote-32)
7. *Nasush*: Being clean and pure is very important in Zoroastrian teachings and rituals.[[33]](#endnote-33) *Nasush* is uncleanliness/demon with is mainly attributed to dead bodies.[[34]](#endnote-34) Any person who was contaminated with *Nasush* should be cleaned through a set of sophisticated rituals including washing by a liquid prepared by cow’s urine.[[35]](#endnote-35) Zoroastrians don’t bury the bodies of the dead because they believe that this practice contaminates the soil. Instead they leave these deal bodies in certain places named *dakhma* to be eaten by wild animals and degraded by natural forces.[[36]](#endnote-36) An aborted fetus in also considered a dead body. Therefore, abortion is intended contaminating mother’s body with *nashu, which* is a great sin (see below for further discussion).[[37]](#endnote-37)

**2.2. Hinduism:**

Claimed to be the oldest living religion in the world, Hinduism is a huge network of concepts, beliefs and rituals initiated thousand years ago in the ancient India. Today, Hinduism has about 900 million followers all around the world.[[38]](#endnote-38) Most of Hindus live in India and Nepal but they also shape large populations in other Asian countries like Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and Indonesia. In addition, in developed countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, Hindus are among sizeable minorities.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Spiritual teachings of Hinduism and its sages and spiritual masters have had a great deal of influence in the Western cultures in recent decades. Hindu spirituality in many direct and indirect forms has changed the culture, spirituality, and lifestyle in Western societies. As an example, one can mention Yuga, which is originated in Hindu traditions, and has become very popular in western countries in recent century, although many of its practitioners may be unaware of its Hindu origin. In fact, the influence of Hinduism does not emerge as converting people to Hindu religion, but it shows itself in changing the way of life of people who are still being considered as followers of other religions or people who lack any specific religious attribute.[[40]](#endnote-40)

It is interesting to explore the origin of the word “Hindu”. As a huge cultural network, Hinduism was born in ancient India but acquired its name “Hindu” in the medieval centuries for differentiating itself from other traditions like Islam.[[41]](#endnote-41) As a matter of fact, this name came from the Persian literature. Persian geographers coined the name “hindu” for people who lived beyond the river Indus (Sindhu).[[42]](#endnote-42) Addition of an “ism” is a legacy of the British colonialism in 19th century.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Traditionally, back to the ancient India, Hinduism was called “*Sanatana Dharma*”. This name, which connotes the most central concept in this tradition, cannot be fully translated into English. However, some interpreters have translated it as “eternal law”.[[44]](#endnote-44)

It is a difficult and even impossible mission to try to find a set of essentials for all the sects, groups, and denominations within the circle of Hinduism. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to specify a concept, belief, ritual or other element as the common – or defining- feature of this religion. In fact, features like revere for Vedas (the ancient Scripture of Hinduism), believing in a system of values named *Dharma*, and even belonging to the Indian nation has been mentioned as unifying feature of Hinduism but none of them is common among all Hindus.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Therefore, Hinduism can be understood as a network of inter-related ideas without any single unifying feature. In fact, instead of a single or a few essential common and all-embracing features, one can speak about a wide network with a series of overlapping similarities that reminds the “family resemblance” as explicated by Ludwig Wittgenstein and has been previously used for defining other phenomena like art.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Some scholars, however, argue that the very concept of family resemblance cannot solve the problem of lack of common feature in one’s search for Hindu moral principles. By the way, although the above-mentioned “family resemblance” means that no single unifying essential feature can be found for Hinduism, but some major characteristics can be derived which are:

1. Common among most of sects and branches of Hinduism,
2. Essential and showing the nature and main directions, teachings, key concepts, and values of this tradition.

A non-inclusive list of these characteristics is presented below.

1- *Unity in the midst of plurality*: One of the characteristics of Hinduism is the existence of numerous forms of the supreme beings, which shows itself in enormous number of Deities. These Deities like *Shiva*, *Shakti*, *Vishnu*, *Ganapati*, *Surya*, and *Subrahmanya* worshiped by different sects of Hinduism, can be considered different manifestations of a single supreme being. This interpretation of Hindu tradition, which makes it close to monotheistic religions, is compatible with this famous verse of Rigveda: “Reality is one; sages call it by different names.” And this verse of Bhagvad Gita: “Even those who are devoted to other gods and worship them in full faith, even they, O Kaunteya, worship none but Me.”[[47]](#endnote-47)

This plurality is not confined to Deities. Hinduism also does not have a single founder in its history. Rather, it seems that this tradition has been resulted and formed by accumulation of teachings and revelations of numerous sages, gurus and spiritual masters in the ancient India.[[48]](#endnote-48)

This characteristic provides Hinduism with an inimitable flexibility and respect for plurality and diversity, which (besides other specifics like the central concept of non-violence, *Ahimsa*) was very important in the history of this religion and in the history of India. For example, one can mention the historical acceptance of Jewish and Zoroastrian immigrants whose lands had been invaded by Romans and Muslim Arabs respectively, and the specifics of the democracy founded by Mahatma Gandhi in this huge subcontinent which this unique variety in cultures, religions, and ways of life.[[49]](#endnote-49)

*2- The Concept of Dharma: Dharma* holds the human community and the entire world together. As explained above, this concept is very similar to the concept of *Asha* in Zoroastrianism. At the same time, in Hinduism, *Dharma* illuminates humans’ responsibilities and way of life. As mentioned above, in the ancient Indian subcontinent, the followers of Hinduism called their religion/tradition *Sanatana Dharma* in which the word *Sanatana* means eternal.[[50]](#endnote-50) Also in Zoroastrianism the people who are true followers of Zoroaster are called *Ashun.* Therefore, it seems that attributing followers to the eternal law in a common concept between Zoroastrianism and Hinduism.

*3- Concepts of Karma, Samsara, and Reincarnation:* Karma is one of the most important concepts in Hindu ethics and morality. This concept denotes that a law of cause and effect rules the world of human deeds, either mental or physical. Each action produces its own reaction in the world. Accordingly, a good action has a good reaction for the human agent in her current life or next lives, while a bad action will certainly brings about its own bad subsequences which, again, can take place in the current of subsequent lives of the human agent. This continuous cycle of action, reaction, birth, death, and rebirth is called *Samsara*. This cycle is not endless. One can break the cycle of *Samsara* by good deeds that ends to salvation and getting out of this cycle. This salvation, called *Muksha* (or *Nirvana* in Buddhism and Jainism) is the ultimate goal of life. Therefor, the ultimate goal of Hindu ethics is salvation that shows itself in breaking the cycle of *Samsara* and entering the eternal salvation, sometimes named as *Muksha.[[51]](#endnote-51)*

There are seriousControversies among scholars on the Existence of the Hindu Bioethics.Like other ancient civilizations, Indian subcontinent had its own medicine and healing tradition. This tradition namely *Ayurveda* (the science of life) was in part, sort of humoral medicine.[[52]](#endnote-52)The existence of this medicine and its rich literature, which was mixed with Hindu teachings and thoughts about humanity and morality, led some scholars to try to derive kind of Hindu biomedical ethics from them. For example, the ancient Hindu stories about gods with human bodies and animal heads were used to conclude the permissibility of Xenotransplantation in Hindu bioethics.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Some scholars, however, don’t agree with this method of constructing Hindu bioethics.[[54]](#endnote-54) They argue that merely existence of these traditional schools of medicine in the mostly Hindu ancient Indian subcontinent does not imply that their literature mirrors Hindu bioethics.[[55]](#endnote-55)

The key point in this regard is that there is no consensus among Hindus on each of the concepts and principles attributed to this religion. This vast diversity, as mentioned above, is one of the most important characteristics of Hinduism. This characteristic reflects itself in Hindu ethics, applied ethics, and bioethics.[[56]](#endnote-56)

The main question is that how these many groups of sects and branches of Hinduism which such a diverse variety of beliefs, and without any common feature – like a prophet or a holy book as exist in Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism- can agree upon a set of principles from which, an applied ethics van be constructed? Therefore, the existence of a Hindu bioethics with a distinct set of principles has been a subject of controversy and debate.

Two kind of efforts, however, have been performed to solve this problem:

1. Some scholars tried to pose some common concepts, like *Karma*, as the core and unifying concept of Hinduism and Hindu ethics. By doing so, however, they broadened the scope of Hinduism in a way that even Buddhism and Jainism can be considered some sorts of Hinduism. This is obvious that this is too wide-ranging.[[57]](#endnote-57)

2. Some other scholars tried to choose just one sect or group inside the wide spectrum of Hinduism and describe the Hindu ethics just based on the values and beliefs of that sect or group. They have been successful in finding a set of principles but the results cannot be called “Hindu Bioethics” because of being too narrow in range.[[58]](#endnote-58)

The aforementioned endeavors, however, show a very historically obvious fact. This very fact is that the impossibility of attributing a set of common and all-encompassing principles and values to Hindu morality and applied ethics does not make it impossible to speak about Hindu bioethics. Three main categories of sources can be used to delineate the content of Hindu bioethics, including its values, principles, teachings, and judgments. These categories are as follow:

1- Every system or set of values and moral principle and ethical deliberations that finds its root in the Hindu religion/tradition, regardless of being shared among how many of Hindu sects and groups, can be considered and named Hindu ethics, and when it comes to value-judgments about medicine, healthcare, and life sciences, it definitely shapes Hindu bioethics. Exactly like what is said about Hinduism above, we can reach to a set of principles, concepts and values, which are not all-encompassing and unifying, but still characterize this very brand of religious bioethics.[[59]](#endnote-59)

2- Sources of Ayurveda and other branches or Indian traditional medicine have been used as a rich source of Hindu reflections on Human life, death, suffering and so on. Ayurvedic classical texts like *Carakasamhita* and *Sustutasamhita* are among rich sources of Hindu reflections about human body and self, which have major implications on bioethics.[[60]](#endnote-60)

3- Deliberations and reflections of Hindu scholars on different sorts of bioethical issues provide another main source for delineation Hindu bioethics. Hindu scholars, sages, and spiritual masters have discussed issues like abortion, futile treatment, organ transplantation, contraception, and mercy killing. What they have written, taught, or told shapes a rich source for studying Hindu bioethics. Also, one can induct methods of Hindu bioethics by observing the ways in which Hindus have approached the above issues and reached to judgments and conclusions about them.

In their bioethical deliberations, Hindu scholars appeal to Hindu concepts like Karma, Dharma (as described above), Ahimsa (non-violence) and respect for life and nature. They also appeal to classic texts and scriptures of the religion/tradition from the oldest existing ones, namely Vedas to other essential ones like *Upanishadha* or *Bhagvad Gita*. One example of such references to classical scripture is described above on the very issue of Xenotransplantation.[[61]](#endnote-61)

Hindu Bioethics should be seen as a Lived Experience**.** From the ancient “Vedic healers” to modern healthcare professionals, numerous generations of physicians and clinical practitioners in the Indian subcontinent, have sought the values and principles governing their practice, from one of the oldest and richest religions and traditions in the world: Hinduism. The very spirit of the subcontinent shaped and determined the nature of this value system throughout this long history. This Indian spirit is what gives the Hindu bioethics a sort of unity in the midst of such a vast and wide diversity.[[62]](#endnote-62)

The unique Hindu has its own perspectives to fundamental aspects of human life. According this perspective the moral energy is preserved in the form of *Karma* (which makes it different from the Abrahamic religions in them the will of God determines the consequences of good or bad deeds, not a natural rule like Karma) and death is not opposite of life, but is opposite of birth.[[63]](#endnote-63) And the utter purpose of human beings is liberation from the circle of birth, death, and rebirth (instead of entering the heaven as it is in the Abrahamic religions).[[64]](#endnote-64)

Obviously, none of the aforementioned features is unique to and common among all the sects of Hinduism. These features, however, all together, are different surfaces of an underlying spirit: the spirit of Hinduism, which is the spirit of the Indian subcontinent. This spirit has been the source of inspiration for subsequent generations of sages, gurus, and spiritual masters.

The very reverence for life in addition to the strong tradition of non-violence (*ahimsa*) has shaped the perspectives of Hindu bioethicists towards key bioethical issues like abortion, euthanasia, and brain death.[[65]](#endnote-65)

The virtue ethics also exist in a part of Hindu ethical teachings. This approach to ethics focuses mainly on the moral agent instead of the act itself or its consequences.[[66]](#endnote-66) Accordingly, going through a process of self-purifying ends up to achieving a moral character that always choose the ethically right options in her deeds.[[67]](#endnote-67)

At the end, the practical results of this virtue ethics are somehow different with that of its counterparts in the West or Middle East. This difference is rooted in the spirit of Hinduism and the Indian subcontinent that has great impact on the final shape and characteristics of the moral character of the virtuous person.

At sum, one can conclude that despite the diversity, which is one of the main characteristics of Hinduism, it is possible to delineate some major concepts that shape the infrastructures of morality in this religion/tradition. In the same way, one can sketch the principal values and directions of Hindu bioethics. In addition, I described three main sources for bioethical endeavors within Hindu tradition/religion:

1. Value judgments and moral deliberations rooted in and performed within Hindu tradition;
2. Textbooks and heritage of ancient Hindu medicine, including Ayurveda;
3. Reflections and deliberation made by Hindu scholars on bioethical issues and accumulated throughout a long history, including the modern era.

Hindu bioethics can be sought and learned as the accumulated lived collective experience of Hindus on the traditional and modern issues of biomedical nature. This lived experience, which has been accumulated as a collective experience of a large tradition in the Indian subcontinent and has made a huge literature, is the very nature and unifying umbrella, which covers a long history of ethical and moral endeavors of a vast array of sects, branches, and groups within the old religion/tradition of Hinduism.

**2.3. The Importance and Reality of Abortion:**

Abortion is intentionally terminating the life of a human unborn embryo or fetus. This act is forbidden and considered as inherently evil in all major religious traditions in the world. As a matter of fact, from the ancient times until almost a hundred years ago, there were no doubts among theologians or philosophers that abortion is an unethical intervention and should be banned.

In the modern era, however, the situation changed. Many factors contributed to bring abortion to the top tier of the fieriest ethical debates among the public and scholars and make some moral and religious thinkers and authorities to rethink and reconsider the absolute evilness of abortion, at least its indirect forms. Some of these contributing factors are:

1. The change of lifestyle especially among women, which made family planning a need for their succeeding in social life.
2. Advances in biomedical diagnostic and therapeutic technologies and interventions which made the prenatal diagnosis of fetal abnormalities possible and also made abortion, especially in the early stages of pregnancy, a safe procedure. Also other discoveries showed that some potentially fatal maternal diseases can be treated by immediate termination of the pregnancy. These technologies also made it possible to determine the sex of unborn fetus, using ultrasound devices. Therefore, in some societies some people use abortion to prevent the birth of children with unwanted sex.
3. The very issue of population growth in some societies made some policy makers to think of abortion as a mean for population control and preventing unwanted and unplanned births in the society.

The largest Hindu population in the world lives in the Indian subcontinent. The Indian subcontinent was the birthplace of Hinduism[[68]](#endnote-68). In addition, Hinduism reflects the very spirit of the subcontinent. Therefore, when speaking about abortion in Hinduism, it is important to take a look at the related realities in the Indian subcontinent. In India, according to the law, abortion is permitted until twenty weeks of pregnancy, only for medical and very limited social reasons[[69]](#endnote-69).

Another kind of abortion for social reasons, however, occurs in massive numbers in India. This kind of abortion is aborting fetuses because of their gender. After prenatal sex determination using ultrasound technologies became available, many families killed their unborn daughters, hoping to get rid of the social and economic burdens of having a daughter and sometimes hoping to have baby boys in the next possible pregnancies.[[70]](#endnote-70)

The selective abortion of female fetuses has increased in India over the past few decades. The 2011 census showed 7.1 million fewer girls than boys aged fewer than seven, which showed an increase compared to 6 million in 2001 and from 4.2 million in 1991. The sex ratio in this age group is now 915 girls to 1,000 boys, the lowest since such records began in India in 1961. Parents have little problem with their first daughter but want their second child to be a son. In these families the gender ratio for second births fell from 906 girls per 1,000 boys in 1990 to 836 in 2005, implying between 3.1 million and 6 million female fetuses have been aborted in the past decade[[71]](#endnote-71). It has been claimed that approximately eight million female fetuses may have been aborted in the past decade. It has been called a “national shame”.[[72]](#endnote-72)

This discrepancy between the normative requirements of the religion and the actual behavior of at least parts (of course large parts, considering the statistics) shows that the burdens imposed by cultural/economic realities of the society overweigh its normative emphasis on non-violence. The very nature of normativity in Hinduism, including the lack of hierarchical religious authorities to assert explicit religious bans on issues like abortion, is another factor behind this discrepancy in the Indian subcontinent.

1. **Similarities:**

Abortion has been explicitly mentioned on Zoroastrian Holy Scriptures including *Avesta*, *Shayast-Nashayast* and *Ardaviraf Nameh*. In addition to regarding abortion as evil and ban the followers from committing abortion, there are some revelations in these books explaining some brutal punishments for women who had committer abortion in the afterlife.[[73]](#endnote-73)

In addition to condemning abortion in the Holy Scripture, Zoroastrianism provides moral reasoning, according to its own system of beliefs, for regarding abortion as evil. According to the Zoroastrian moral teachings, abortion is evil for two reasons: killing an innocent and intrinsically good person and the dirt of dead body (*Nashu*)[[74]](#endnote-74).

On the other hand, as described above the main sources of Hindu bioethics, which are its concepts and tradition, shape its approaches to ethical issues at the margins of life, including the one of abortion.

When it comes to the abortion debate, the principal concepts involving the moral deliberations are *ahimsa*, *karma*, and reincarnation. Accordingly, abortion as deliberately disrupting the process of reincarnation and killing an innocent human being is in contrast with the very concept of ahimsa and has serious karmic burden for its agent. In addition, in the major resources of Hinduism one can find very strong condemnation of abortion, which at sum make the approach of this religion/tradition towards abortion a pro-life one. Therefore, the Hindu bioethics condemns abortion and allows it only in the cases in which abortion is necessary for saving the life of mother.

I showed the discrepancies exist between some parts of realities of the Indian society and the teachings of Hinduism. The perspective of Hinduism, however, I argued that is a very pro-life one emphasizing on ahimsa and its intrinsic reverence for life.

In this comparative study, I am going to describe and compare the perspectives of Zoroastrianism and Hinduism toward abortion. At first, the main similarities are explained. It should be mentioned that in addition to the similarities explained below, there are other similarities in the minor aspects like rituals. For example, considering cow as a sacred animal and using its urine for cleaning the body after abortion van be found in both traditions/religions.

* 1. **Dharma vs. Asha:**

The concept of *Asha* in Zoroastrianism is similar to the concept of *Dharma* in Hinduism. Both these concepts refer to a superior law of the universe and the bright pass of life, which should be adopted by the believers.

As explained above, in the Indian subcontinent, before their historical encountering to other religions and traditions, the followers of Hinduism called their religion/tradition *Sanatana Dharma.* The word *Sanatana* means eternal[[75]](#endnote-75). Also in Zoroastrianism, the people who are true followers of Zoroaster are called *Ashun.* Therefore, it seems that attributing followers to the eternal law in a common concept between Zoroastrianism and Hinduism.

The approaches of these two religions to moral issues, like abortion, are consistent with this ontological view to the universe. The entire universe is created and ruled in accordance with Dharma/Asha. All the people should follow these eternal rules. Morality ultimately means consistency and accordance with these higher entities. Abortion, in the both religions is a kind of violating the higher and sacred law of the Universe and the existence. Therefore, abortion, like murder, rubbery, and other kinds of immorality are wrong and unacceptable.

**3.2. Reverence for life:**

The most noteworthy similarity between Zoroastrianism and Hinduism is their pro-life approach. Both these traditions/religions adopt pro-life approaches when dealing with ethical inquiries regarding abortion. Therefore, abortion is considered murder both in Zoroastrianism and in Hinduism and is forbidden.

Sources of Ayurveda and other branches or Indian traditional medicine have been used as a rich source of Hindu reflections on Human life, death, suffering and so on[[76]](#endnote-76). Deliberations and reflections of Hindu scholars on different sorts of bioethical issues provide another main source for delineation Hindu bioethics.

In their bioethical deliberations, Hindu scholars appeal to Hindu concepts like Karma, Dharma (as described above), Ahimsa (non-violence) and respect for life and nature. They also appeal to classic texts and scriptures of the religion/tradition from the oldest existing ones, namely Vedas to other essential ones like *Upanishadha* or *Bhagvad Gita*.[[77]](#endnote-77)

Abortion is mentioned in early Vedic scriptures. For example, in *Brahmanas*, the second major body of Vedic literature, abortion is considered as a crime[[78]](#endnote-78). The same approach is adopted by *Upanishads.[[79]](#endnote-79)* Other classical scriptures of Hinduism, also, expressed their opposition to abortion in several ways, including comparing abortion with killing a priest, considering abortion a worse sin than killing one’s parents, and threatening the mother to loose her caste[[80]](#endnote-80).

In the modern world, Hindu sages and scholars continued their condemn against abortion. For example, Mahatma Gandhi one wrote: “"It seems to me clear as daylight that abortion would be a crime."[[81]](#endnote-81) The very reverence for life in addition to the strong tradition of non-violence (*ahimsa*) has shaped the perspectives of Hindu bioethicists towards key bioethical issues like abortion, euthanasia, and brain death[[82]](#endnote-82). As explained above in this paper, *ahimsa* is a core concept in the Hinduism’s approach to the very issue of abortion. As I mentioned above, ahimsa is based on the sacracy of all creatures as manifestations of the Supreme Being.

The reverence and love granted to all the manifestations of life resulted from the very concept of ahimsa, have made the Hindu religion/tradition a strongly prolife one[[83]](#endnote-83). This pro-life attitude has found it’s way from its Hindu roots to other Asian religious traditions[[84]](#endnote-84).

In Zoroastrianism, abortion is regarded as killing an innocent and intrinsically good person. Concepts like *Ahimsa* do not exist in Zoroastrianism. The reverence for human life, however, exists. As described above, morality in Zoroastrianism is based on a polarized account of the Universe as the everlasting battleground between good and bad, which means between *Ahura Mazda* and *Ahriman[[85]](#endnote-85)*. Since the human being is intrinsically good and created by *Ahura Mazda*, killing an unborn human being is a violation against the forces of *Ahura Mazda* and a help to the forces of *Ahriman.[[86]](#endnote-86)* Therefore, abortion is considered a major sin. Accordingly, it is not surprising that he Holy Scripture of Zoroastrianism equates abortion with murder and rules punishments for any persons who commit abortion[[87]](#endnote-87). Also, in other parts of *Avesta*, some revelations have been described about the brutal punishments of such people in the afterlife[[88]](#endnote-88).

* 1. **Exceptions for the ban:**

When it comes to abortion, in addition to adopting a pro-life approach, both the religions recognize some exceptions for their ban on abortion. In both traditions/religions abortion is permitted when the life of mother is in danger. Therefore, both of them give priority to the life of mother over the life of her unborn child.

As a matter of fact, although both Zoroastrianism and Hinduism ban abortion except for the cases in which the mothers’ lives are endangered, the bioethical bases of this ban in these two religions are different from each other. In Zoroastrianism this ban is based on killing an innocent person and the dirt of dirt of dead body, but in Hinduism it is based of the law of Karma and depriving a person from one cycle of his or her rebirth. However, regardless of the theoretical bases and theological justifications, both these religions consider give priority to the lives of mothers over the lives of their unborn children.

1. **Differences**

A comparative study won’t be complete without describing the differences between two subjects of comparison. Although Zoroastrianism and Hinduism are two ancient sisters and originated among the same group of people (Aryans), after their great ancient immigration, they located in two different neighbor country: Persian and India. Living in two separate contexts and conditions had had its own consequences. As mentioned above, Zoroastrianism in many ways is more similar to Abrahamic religions than to the *Dharmic* ones. The main differences between these two religious traditions on their perspectives toward abortion are described below.

**4.1. Unity vs. diversity:**

One of the main differences between Zoroastrianism and Hinduism is in this very fact that Zoroastrianism is a religion with a God, a prophet, a Holy book, and in long periods of its history a single hierarchical order of clergies. Hinduism, however, lack all these features. There is no single god, prophet, holy book or system of clergies shared among all the groups and sects and communities who call themselves Hindu. Therefore, for finding the normative positions of Zoroastrianism, for example, their perspective toward abortion, one can rely on a single defined set of resources. In Hinduism, however, each expressed viewpoint only belongs to a part of believers and does not reflect the viewpoint of all religion/tradition. Considering this deference between these two religions is important in reading and understanding all the scholarly works that have been published in this regard.

In other words, Zoroastrianism is a typical religion while Hinduism is a mixture of similar and interrelated traditions/religions. However, considering the familiar resemblance, which ties the members of this group to each other, one can consider Hinduism a unique vast tradition, reflecting the spirit of the Indian subcontinent.

* 1. **Afterlife vs. reincarnation:**

One of the most important differences returns to the concept of rebirth and reincarnation. Zoroastrianism, in contrast to Hinduism, does not believe in reincarnation and rebirth. Instead, Zoroastrianism believes in afterlife, similar to Abrahamic religions.

Therefore, in Zoroastrianism, abortion is not considered as depriving a person from a cycle of human life, but it is considered as depriving a person from his or her only chance of birth and enjoying a life on the earth.

**4.3. Karma vs. Omnipotent God:**

In Hinduism, killing a living creature, including a fetus, is regarded as interfering in its spiritual evolution. Such interference has Karmic burden for its agent[[89]](#endnote-89). Therefore, according to the natural law of *karma*, the agent(s) of such a crime will definitely encounter its just punishment/retaliation in her or his current of next lives.

As an example of how the very concept of karma works in regard to abortion, it has been said that abortion is a kind of punishment for meat-eaters. The fetus was a meat eater in his or her previous lives while mother was a cow in her previous lives now taking revenge according to the rules of nature[[90]](#endnote-90). According to this belief, the meat-eaters and other people who kill live entities cannot escape the retribution for slaying set by the laws of karma, thus, in their next lives they will have to undergo the misfortunes, one of them can be the recurrently being aborted[[91]](#endnote-91).

As it is obvious, the karmic maleficence of abortion is in close relation with the belief to reincarnation. This very belief that human embryo is essentially a human person underlines the karmic effect attributed to abortion in Hinduism[[92]](#endnote-92). The very concept of Caraka (Caraka’s theory of casualty) shows that how the karmic burden/heritage of the past lives is transferred to the unborn fetus[[93]](#endnote-93). Therefore, killing the unborn child results in the disruption of this process of transferring of the karma which, in turn, has karmic burden for its agent who by his/her act of abortion has deprived the unborn baby from one step of his or her pursuing salvation in a human life.

Cleanliness, in the other hand, is a very major concept and an emphasized duty for believers in Zoroastrianism. One of the most serious filths, which can deteriorate the cleanliness of human body, is a dead body. Accordingly, in Zoroastrianism specific burial rituals have been explained to prevent contamination of the soil, fire, and living bodies by the dead body. According to Zoroastrian teachings, abortion exposes the body of the woman to the dirt of the dead body of the aborted fetus. Therefore, in addition to forbidding abortion, explain a multi-step ritual for cleaning the body of the woman, one step being washing her womb by a liquid made from the urine of cow[[94]](#endnote-94).

The concept of *Karma*, as exists in the Hinduism, has no room in Zoroastrianism. In Zoroastrianism, *Ahura Mazda* can punish of forgive the sins. Therefore, the punishment – or forgiveness- of bad deeds do not occur as a result of a natural law, but is attributed to *Ahura Mazda* who can either punish or forgive the sinner[[95]](#endnote-95). As a matter of fact, belief to an omnipotent God is not consistent with the concept of Karma. Because accepting inviolability of this concept as a natural low, ties the hands of God.

In Zoroastrianism, like Abrahamic religions, the badness of abortion and its punishment – or forgiveness- is attributed to God who is omnipotent and defines what is good and what is bad and punish or forgive anyone He wants.

1. **Conclusions**

Zoroastrianism and Hinduism, as two sister ancient religious traditions, are similar to each other in adopting a strong pro-life approach to issues like abortion. Although with different theoretical bases, both these religious traditions ban abortion and allow it just if the life of the mother is threaten by the continuing of the pregnancy. Although some similarities exist in the basic concepts of these two religious traditions, however, they are fundamentally different in the conceptual and theological bases of their moral approaches.

Abortion has been explicitly mentioned in Zoroastrian Holy Scriptures. Also, Zoroastrianism provides moral reasoning, according to its own system of beliefs, for regarding abortion as evil. On the other hand, in Hindu bioethics, when it comes to the abortion debate, the principal concepts involving the moral deliberations are *ahimsa*, *karma*, and reincarnation. Accordingly, abortion as deliberately disrupting the process of reincarnation and killing an innocent human being is in contrast with the very concept of *ahimsa* and has serious karmic burden for its agent. The Hindu bioethics condemns abortion and allows it only in the cases in which abortion is necessary for saving the life of mother.

The concept of *Asha* in Zoroastrianism is similar to the concept of *Dharma* in Hinduism. Both these concepts refer to a superior law of the universe and the bright pass of life, which should be adopted by the believers. The most noteworthy similarity between Zoroastrianism and Hinduism is their pro-life approach. Both these traditions/religions adopt pro-life approaches when dealing with ethical inquiries regarding abortion. Therefore, abortion is considered murder both in Zoroastrianism and in Hinduism and is forbidden.

The very reverence for life in addition to the strong tradition of non-violence (*ahimsa*) has shaped the perspectives of Hindu bioethicists towards key bioethical issues like abortion. *Ahimsa* is a core concept in the Hinduism’s approach to the very issue of abortion and is based on the sacracy of all creatures as manifestations of the Supreme Being. In Zoroastrianism, abortion is regarded as killing an innocent and intrinsically good person. Since the human being is intrinsically good and created by *Ahura Mazda*, killing an unborn human being is a violation against the forces of *Ahura Mazda* and a help to the forces of *Ahriman and* abortion is considered a major sin. Therefore, both these two religions have adopted a pro-life approach toward the abortion debate.

In addition to adopting a pro-life approach, both the religions recognize some exceptions for their ban on abortion. In both traditions/religions abortion is permitted when the life of mother is in danger. Therefore, both give priority to the life of mother over the life of her unborn child.

One of the main differences between Zoroastrianism and Hinduism is in this fact that Zoroastrianism is a religion with a God, a prophet, a Holy book, and in long periods of its history a single hierarchical order of clergies. Hinduism, however, lack all these features.

One of the most important differences returns to the concept of rebirth and reincarnation. Zoroastrianism, in contrast to Hinduism, does not believe in reincarnation and rebirth. Instead, Zoroastrianism believes in afterlife, similar to Abrahamic religions. Therefore, in Zoroastrianism, abortion is not considered as depriving a person from a cycle of human life, but it is considered as depriving a person from his or her only chance of birth and enjoying a life on the earth.

In Hinduism, killing a living creature, including a fetus, is regarded as interfering in its spiritual evolution. Such interference has Karmic burden for its agent. Therefore, according to the natural law of *karma*, the agent(s) of such a crime will definitely encounter its just punishment/retaliation in her or his current of next lives.

The concept of *Karma*, as exists in the Hinduism, has no room in Zoroastrianism. In Zoroastrianism, *Ahura Mazda* can punish of forgive the sins. Therefore, the punishment – or forgiveness- of bad deeds do not occur as a result of a natural law, but is attributed to *Ahura Mazda* who can either punish or forgive the sinner.

At sum, one can conclude that Zoroastrians in its approach to abortion is similar to Abrahamic religions and it makes all the differences between this religion and its *Dharmic* sister, Hinduism.

perspectives of Zoroastrianism and Hinduism toward abortion and showed that although both these two ancient sisters have adopted pro-life approaches they are very different in many aspects and features. Analyzing the historical course and reasons of emerging these differences can be a subject for further studies in the future.

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