
UNIT 1 ZOROASTRIANISM

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Zoroastrianism is both a philosophy and a religion, hence we give an overview of the religious aspects of Zoroastrianism. We speak of the prominent deities, the significance of the sacred fire, the priesthood, forms of worship and major religious ceremonies.

By the end of this Unit you should be able to:

- understand the politico-religious context in which Zoroastrianism developed, declined and later reemerged;
- the major languages and texts of Zoroastrian thought;
- the Zoroastrian notion of God, world and w/man as well as w/man's ultimate end; and
- the religious aspects of Zoroastrianism such as, the Zoroastrian pantheon, the significance of the sacred fire, the priesthood, liturgy and religious ceremonies.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Zoroastrianism, is the religion and philosophy of the ancient Iranians based on the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster, after whom the religion is named. It originated in what is now northeast Iran and later spread throughout Iran and beyond influencing the development of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The term 'Zoroastrianism' is synonymous with Mazdaism, i.e. the worship of *Ahura Mazda*, exalted by Zoroaster as the supreme divine authority. The Zoroastrian name of the religion is *Mazdayasna*, which combines *Mazda*- with the Avestan word *yasna*, meaning "worship, devotion". In the English language, an adherent of the faith commonly refers to him- or herself as a Zoroastrian or, less commonly, a Zarathustrian. An older, but still widespread expression is *Behdin*, meaning "follower of *Daena*", for which "Good Religion" is one translation.

1.2 ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ZOROASTRIANISM

Life of Zoroaster

The exact date of the birth of Zoroaster is under dispute. There are six philosophers who bore, at different times, the name of Zoroaster. One is described as Chaldean or Assyrian, another as a Bactrian, a third as a Pamphylian, a fourth as an Armenian, a fifth as a Median, and a sixth as a Persian. Of these the one generally accepted as the founder of Zoroastrianism is one born at Rae in Media and flourished in Bactria. According to the Iranian tradition, he lived “258 years before Alexander” which is understood as Alexander’s conquest of Iran in 330 B.C. He is believed to have had his first vision at the age of 30 and began his preaching at 40 and converted his king Gushtasp two years later. Tradition holds that he lived 77 years and hence scholars believe he must have lived between 630-553, 628-551 or 618-541 B.C. However, Dr. Haug is of the opinion that he lived not later than 1000 B.C. Mr. Kharshedji Rastamji Kama, a well known Oriental scholar among the Parsis holds that Zoroaster lived at least 1300 years before Christ.

Various meanings have been suggested for the name Zoroaster. Dr. Haug suggested that the term ‘Zoroaster’ means ‘old camel keeper’ composed of the two words *zarath* or *zaradh* meaning ‘old’ and *ushtra* meaning ‘camel’

Zoroaster was a member of the family of Spitama, a descendant of Feridun, king of Persia of the Peshadian dynasty. “From the *Dinkard* and *Bundehesh*, two well-known books in *Pahlavi*, it appears that Zoroaster was the great-grandson of one Haechataspa, the fifth in descent from Spitama.” In the *Avesta*, this is spoken of as ‘Spitama Zarathushtra – Zoroaster of the family of Spitama.

The ninth chapter of *Yasna* and the *Aban Yasht* speak of one Pourushaspa, noted for righteous life and piety was selected by God to be the father of the Prophet. In *Pahlavi* works it is said that an angel presented him with a glass of wine. Soon after drinking, his wife Dogdho conceived and bore a son who was destined to usher in a new era in Eastern history. According to *Vendidad* (chapter xix, 4) the town of Rae, the birth place of Zoroaster, was situated on the banks of river named Darji. *Pahlavi* books note that the governor of the province resolved, at the instigation of wicked counselors, to destroy the infant but was prevented by divine agency.

Avesta narrates that as a youth Zoroaster passed his time in the deep study of philosophical questions and in divine meditation on the top of a mountain named ‘Ushidarena’. His teaching is based on the divine inspiration that he received during the solitary study. At the age of thirty he left his native town of Rae and proceeded to Balkh, the capital of Gushtasp, at that time the King of Iran. In the thirteenth year of the reign of Gushtasp, Zoroaster is reported to have entered his court bearing the sacred fire called ‘*Adar Burzin Mehr*’ and a cypress tree. Zoroaster was first persecuted by the courtiers of Gushtasp but the miracles he performed convinced them of his claim.

Gushtasp embraced the religion of Zoroaster, the king’s prime minister, Frashaoshtra, and Jamaspa, the two most learned men of the age, became the prophet’s first disciples. Under the royal patronage the first disciples spread the message of the prophet and converted all the people of Iran to the new religion. Once the king accepted the faith

he preached, Zoroaster produced the sacred books of the *Avesta*, which he had brought with him to court. They were written in the *Avesta*, a language believed to have existed as far back as three or four thousand years.

Fravardin Yasht mentions, besides Frashaoshtra, and Jamaspa, about two hundred persons as his principal disciples of whom Mediomah is given the first rank, and Gushtasp the twentieth; Hutosh, the queen is also mentioned as one of them.

Avesta mentions that Zoroaster had three daughters – Freni, Thriti, and Pouruchisti. And the Pahlavi works state that he had three sons – Isadvastara, Urvvatatnara, and Havareehithra.

Nothing is mentioned in the *Avesta* about the latter days of Zoroaster. But the later Pahlavi and Persian books assert, with regard to his death, that one morning when engaged in prayer he was killed by a sharp instrument thrown at him by Turbaratur, the general of King Arjasp, who hated the new monotheistic religion. Zoroaster is then stated to have flung at Turbaratur his rosary, which killed him on the spot.

Brief History of Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism flourished for a period of 1000 years from the reign of Gushtasp until the conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great. It declined for the next 556 years until it was restored to its pristine glory when Ardeshir Babekan ascended the throne in 226 A.D. He had the sacred texts translated into Pahlavi, the language then current in Persia and built fire-temples for the worship of *Ahura Mazda*. This restoration initiated by Ardeshir Babekan continued for the next four hundred and sixteen years until Arab invaders under Khalif Omar overthrew Yazdezard, the Persian monarch in the year 651 A.D at the battle of Nahavand and destroyed most of the religious books. The Mohammedans offered them the alternative of the Koran or death. Almost all the Zoroastrian population embraced Islam, their fire temples were destroyed or converted into mosques and nearly every trace of Zoroastrianism was obliterated.

However, some of the Zoroastrians abandoned their homes and fled to the mountainous districts of Khorassan and later from there to the Island of Ormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf from where they set sail for the shores of India. They first settled at the small island of Diu in the gulf of Cambay and later moved to Gujarat and landed at Sanjan in the year 716 A.D. Jadi Rana who ruled Sanjan gave them permission to settle there and at Sanjan they built their first fire temple (721 A.D.). (See *Sharma J.B. & Sharma S.P., The Parsees in India*) Waves of migration followed and in the next three hundred years their numbers grew and they moved to other places like Cambay, Anklesvar, Variav, Vankaner, Surat, Thana and Chaul. The term ‘**Parsi** or **Parsee**’ refers to these early emigrants of Iranian Zoroastrians who emigrated to Western India over 1000 years ago. The long presence in the region distinguishes the Parsis from the **Iranis** who are more recent arrivals, and who represent the smaller of the two Indian-Zoroastrian communities.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Who was Zoroaster?

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1.3 ZOROASTRIAN PHILOSOPHY

The Concept of God

Zoroaster combined two words *Ahura* and *Mazda* to refer to God. *Ahura Mazda* is conceived as the great creator and governor of the universe. The entire universe is governed by him so He is called *Ahura* and everything in the world is created by him so He is *Mazda*. Creation and governance are the two principal functions of God. As Creator He is the Good Artificer and as governor of both the visible physical world and the invisible moral world He is the Preserver of the universe. He is also the Destroyer, the increaser as well as the decreaser. As creator He is the father of Reason and so He is '*Vahishta Mananh*' (Best Reason) and as the governor of the universe He is the originator of the Right Law and hence He is '*Ásha Vahishta*' (Righteousness) (See *Socio-Religious System of the Parsis*)

Zoroaster conceived God as supreme among celestial beings. He is beyond space and time, immutable and is the immovable mover of the universe. He is without form, without beginning or end, omnipotent, omniscient, pure and is of the essence of goodness itself.

Evidence from nature is considered the best proof for the existence of God. The harmony, the order, the law, and the system observed in nature leads the Zoroastrians from nature to nature's God. The regularity and harmony in nature led them to conceive God not only as the creator but also as the preserver of the universe.

Ahura Mazda is closely associated with the powers of nature but the Zoroastrian notion of God is not pantheistic since *Ahura Mazda* is distinct and above all mankind and natural powers.

The Two Primeval Principles

In an attempt to account for the presence of good and evil in creation Zoroaster conceived two primeval principles called *Spenta-mainyush* and *Angra-mainyush* which work under Mazda. The history of the world is history of the conflict between these two forces. The former is the creative principle while the latter is the destructive one. The *Spenta-mainyush* is the cause of all that is bright and shining, of all that is good and useful in nature. This beneficent principle appears in the blazing fire and the *Angra-mainyush* appears in the charcoal. The *Spenta-mainyush* is all light, truth, goodness and knowledge while *Angra-mainyush* is all darkness, falsehood, wickedness and ignorance. Those things that lead to the greatest good of the greatest number of mankind are the creations of the Good Principle and those that cause misery and pain are the creation of the Evil Principle. This conception of the twin principles does not lead to dualism since *Angra-mainyush*, also called *Aharman* is not conceived as omniscient or almighty.

Zoroastrian cosmogony deals with three basic moments in the existence of the universe: 1) the creation of the world (*Bundahishn*). 2) the revelation of the Mazdean good religion (*Gumezishn*). 3) the final transformation (*Wizarishn*). Material existence is in a state of 'mixture' due to the aggressive activity of the *Angra-mainyush*. Life and non-life, animate and inanimate beings result from the fusion of the Good and the Evil. However, material existence is not considered negative.

The world was created in six consecutive stages. First the sky was made of stone and rock crystal, then water, earth, vegetation, animal life and human beings were formed. The earth is surrounded by a high mountain range (*Hara Berezaiti*). The earth is divided into seven large areas (*keshwars*). The largest section called *Khvaniratha* alone is inhabited by man. From Mount *Hara* (like mount *Meru* or *Sumeru* of Indian mythology) located at the centre waters descend and flow into the *Vourukasha* sea. Two great rivers *Daitya* and *Ranha* originate in this sea and they mark the eastern and western borders of *Khvaniratha*.

It is from mount *Hara* which is the highest spot on earth the souls of the dead depart on their heavenly voyage. In the middle of the *Vourukasha* sea is found the Tree of All Seeds, as well as another tree that is endowed with healing powers and confers immortality. It is called white *Haoma*, the chief of plants.

Gavaevodata (the bull) and *Gaya-maretan* (human life) both killed by *Aharman* (evil spirit) were the prototype of animal and man respectively. From their seed originated all good animals and the first human couple – *Mashya* and *Mashyanag*.

Everything has a dual existence – spiritual or mental (*menog*) and physical or material (*getig*) similar to the Platonic notion of the world of ideas and the world of shadows. The first of the three basic moments in existence, creation is actually the separation of the spiritual and the physical. The second stage is their mingling and the third is the final separation of the two.

Zoroastrian notion of Man

According to Zoroastrian thought man is composed of the material, the vital and the spiritual. The spiritual part which exists prior to the physical and vital parts. At birth the spiritual is combined with the physical and the vital and at death it is separated. The physical part is called *tanu*. Vital parts are two namely, *gaya* and *ushtana*. The spiritual parts are *urvan* (soul) and *fravashi* (spirit) with their twin faculties of *manas* (mind) and *baodhas* (consciousness). The body is the instrument for the soul and spirit. Only in a healthy body the soul can function and so a healthy body is highly emphasized. The soul is responsible for the deeds of the body and receives due reward on punishment after death. Accordingly, it enters heaven or hell and commences the next life.

The notion of *fravashi* is not mentioned in the *Gathas* but find mention in other *Avesta* literature. The word is feminine in gender and is believed to be a feminine spiritual helpmate directing the soul to pursue the right course in every respect. It is a principle that guards, guides and protects the body from every danger. She is a loving friend of *urvan* and acts as the guardian angel of the soul. *Fravashi* is not responsible for the deeds of the body and hence receives no reward or punishment. On the cosmic plane she guards the world of *Ahura Mazda* against the evils of *Angra-mainyush*. Like the Platonic 'ideal' she exists prior to the individual whose guardian she becomes

when the individual is born. She enters the body with the *urvan* at birth and guides it and separates from the body at death.

Ahura Mazda endows the soul with *khra*tu (knowledge, energy) *chisti* (wisdom) *ushi* (intelligence, perception, sense), *means* (mind or thought), *vachas* (speech) *shkyaothna* (action), *vaso/kama* (free will), *daena* (religious animated conscience), *ahu* (practical conscience), *fravashi* (guardian angel) *baodhas* (consciousness, memory) and above them *Daena* (vision or the revealed religion). With these the soul is expected to perform his duties successfully and get the reward. Zoroastrians believe neither in destiny or fate nor in saving grace, instead hold that steady industry, strong will and determination will ward off evil and bring about good.

Zoroastrian Ethics

The two principles, *Spenta-mainyush* and *Angra-mainyush*, found in creation are found inherent in human nature in the form of *Vohumana* or *Beheman* (Good Mind) and *Akamana* (Evil Mind). These two influence man's *manashni* (thoughts) *gavashni* (words) and *kunashni* (actions). When the Good Mind predominates human nature it results in *humata* (good thoughts) *hukhta* (good words) and *hvarshata* (good actions). But when Evil Mind overtakes human nature it leads to *dushmata* (evil thoughts) *duzukhta* (evil words) and *duzarshata* (evil deeds). The responsibility of man is to act in support of the Good principle and destroy the evil one. He does that by cultivation of land, rearing of domestic animals etc., and destruction of wild animals and evil creatures. Think nothing but the truth, speak nothing but the truth and do nothing but what is proper is the gist of Zoroastrian moral philosophy. Good thoughts, words and action consist in Honesty, charity and truthfulness. (See *Socio-Religious System of the Parsis*)

The Zoroastrian scriptures teach several virtues. One is exhorted to love order and harmony and hate disorder and disharmony. Obedience to teachers, parents, elders and lawful government is highly recommended. Great value is given to sanitation, purification and cleanliness. A believer is duty bound to keep earth, air and water pure. While fasting is not recommended the virtue of temperance or moderation is considered a priestly virtue. Charity is another highly recommended virtue for the Zoroastrian. The *Vendidad* speaks of three kinds of charitable deeds: to help the poor, to help a man to marry and lead an honourable and virtuous life, and to give education to those who are in search of it.

Zoroastrian Concept of Liberation

The Zoroastrians believe in the immortality of the soul. The *Avesta* writings of *Hadokht Nushk* and the 19th chapter of *Vendidad* as well as the *Pahlavi* books of *Minokheard* and *Viraf-nameh* treat of the state of the soul after death. The last book also contains graphic description of hell and punishment meted out to the wicked. A plant called *Hom-i-sophid* is held to be the emblem of the immortality of the soul. Heaven (*vahishta-ahu*) is represented as a place of radiance, splendour and glory while hell (*achishta-ahu*) is one of gloom, darkness and stench. Between Heaven and this world there is supposed to be a bridge called *Chinvat* (the discerning ground) where a man has to render an account of his life.

The *Gathas* mention that the successful souls after death crosses the bridge called *Chinvat* and enters the house of purity and eternal joy and light (*garo demana*). *Gathas* teach retributive justice in terms of reward and punishment. Every want and

wish is fulfilled and the souls enjoy happiness in the company of other emancipated souls. The wicked souls at the foot of the same bridge descend into the house of impurity and utter darkness, is confronted and reproached by his conscience and bemoans his state.

The reward and punishment of the souls last till *frasho-kereti* or *frasho-gard* (the renovation of the world when the whole creation is to start afresh) and *ristakhez* (resurrection of the dead) which mark the end of the present cycle of existence. At this juncture there will arise the last *Soshyant* and the work of *Angra-mainyush* will be ultimately wiped out. The souls of the wicked will be brought out of hell and purified, being forgiven at the termination of their sentence. The souls of the righteous will also rise again and thenceforth the world will enter upon a new cycle, free from evil and misery. All souls will be endowed with new bodies and enjoy life of ineffable bliss and glory.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Discuss the Zoroastrian Concept of God - Ahura Mazda.

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2) What is the core of Zoroastrian ethics?

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1.4 THE ZOROASTRIAN RELIGION

Zoroastrianism is one of the most ancient living religions of the world with a history of over Three thousand years. Some scholars identify three phases in the growth of Zoroastrianism as a religion. The religion found in the Gathas (texts attributed to Zoroaster himself) is called Zarathushtrianism. The religious content of the younger Avesta is called Zarathushtricism and the religion of the Sasanid period is called Zoroastrianism.

The Zoroastrian Pantheon

In spite of polytheistic tendencies prevalent in the Indo-Mediterranean world, Zoroaster propagated a monotheistic religion. Deliberately did Zoroaster avoid the term ‘*daiva*’

and chose Ahura Mazda as the name for God. He considered '*daivas*' as the progeny of *Angra-mainyush* and hence demonic powers. However, in the course of time and in the hands of generations of his disciples and later elaboration by the clergy many aspects of polytheistic and ritualistic practices of other religions and cults reemerged, albeit with some alterations. Zoroastrianism which had emerged as a reaction to formalistic religion absorbed many of the concepts and values that belonged to world it had rebelled against. The historical developments in Iran, and contact with other religions led to liberal loans from alien faiths.

The Sacred Fire

The most important symbol of Zoroastrianism is the fire but they are not 'Fire worshippers'. They prefer Fire to idols as a symbol of *Ahura Mazda*. In the eyes of the Zoroastrian, fire's brightness, activity, purity and incorruptibility bear the most perfect resemblance to the nature and perfection of the *Ahura Mazda* who alone is worshipped. It is the witness of *Yasna* (sacrifice) and the object of the priest's address and of the offering of the *Haoma*. There are three ritual fires – the fire of priests, the fire of warriors, and the fire of farmers. There are also five natural fires which reside in front of *Ahura Mazda*, namely, the fires in the bodies of men, animals, in plants, in clouds and in earth.

The Zoroastrian Priesthood

In ancient Medes the priests called *Magi* formed a separate priestly tribe. Zoroastrian priesthood today seems to be hereditary. Every son of a priest is called '*ósto*' and daughter '*ósti*' derived from the Avesta word '*Havishta*' meaning one who is to prepare the sacred drink', that is, a candidate for priesthood. In former times priesthood was open to women as well but not any more. The son of a priest to be ordained must first memorize all the *Avesta* except the *Vendidad*. He should be without physical defect or ailment. He is initiated into the priesthood through a month long *Nevar* ceremony and is called *Érvad*, the master of art in teaching and sacrifices. As he advances in years, knowledge and experience he is designated '*Mobed*'. When an *Ervad* has completed his study of the *Avesta* and of the recitation and practice of the ritual, he is admitted to the ceremony of *Marateb*, the highest degree in priesthood. The highest rank in the hierarchy of Zoroastrian priesthood is called the *Dastur*. This dignity is conferred on a priest by common consensus. The *Dastur* enjoys special privileges and primacy in performance of ceremonies. (See *Socio-Religious System of the Parsis*)

The Zoroastrian Worship

Zoroastrians have both private and public forms of worship with the recitation of sacred word and ceremonies. One of the most common personal prayer is *Nirang-i-kusti* – the prayer on untying and retying the sacred thread, *kusti* around the waist. This prayer is known by everyone and recited several times a day. Most public prayers are conducted by the priests and offerings of the juice of the *Haoma* plant, milk, sacred bread, ghee and holy water, sandal wood and frankincense are made. All prayer and worship are held in the presence of the sacred Fire.

The day is divided into five prayer periods which includes meditation before the sacred Fire. The *Haoma* cult which consists in using a mortar to extract the juice of the *haoma* plant (a species of Ephedra) is the main Zoroastrian liturgy. The preparation of the juice called the rite of *Paragra* is accompanied by the recitation of the 72

chapters of *Yasna* before the fire which is constantly fuelled. The juice is drunk after a complex set of rituals are performed. *Haoma* is administered to the dying as a kind of *viaticum* which is believed to bestow upon their immortality at the resurrection of the dead. Among purification rites, *Padyab* (ablution), *Nahn* (bath) and *Bareshnum* (the great purification for the initiation of priests and corpse bearers) are the most common. In these rites consecrated urine of the cow (*gomez*) is used. The confession of sins during *Patet* (a ritual of penance) and the rituals surrounding the establishment of a tower of silence are important moments of public worship. *Zohr-i-atash* is the funeral rite at the tower of silence (*dakhmas*) at which animal fat is poured into fire. It is performed to free the soul from the demon of corpse (*Druj-i-Nasu*) and to assist it along its heavenly voyage which begins four days after death.

THE ZOROASTRIAN RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES

Navjote

Zoroastrians are initiated by ordained priests into the religious community through the ceremony of investing the child with the sacred undershirt '*sudra*' and the sacred thread '*kusti*' known as *Navjote* (new born). The same rite applies to both boys and girls. In the ancient times this occurred at the age of fifteen. The age of initiation into the faith of *Zarathushtra* was gradually lowered with the present day *Irani* Zoroastrians undergoing it between twelve and fifteen and with *Parsi* Zoroastrians initiating their children at the age of seven.

The rite begins in the presence of the ritual fire, the symbol of righteousness. On a tray a new *sudra* and *kusti*, with a new set of clothes are kept. The ceremony begins with the recitation of the *Ahuna Vairya* by the child. The priest presents to the child the sacred vest. This is followed by the elaborate rite of tying the *kusti*, thrice around the waist. At this time the child recites the *Nirang-i-kusti*, containing the most important part of the articles of faith.

As in Hinduism, the Zoroastrian initiation symbolizes spiritual rebirth or second birth. *Sudra* and *Kusti* must be worn every day and night during one's life time and one must ritually untie and tie the sacred girdle every time one prays or performs the *Padyab-Kusti*.

The *Padyab-Kusti* is performed before a Zoroastrian can engage in any religious activity as it ensures the purity of his body and soul. It is enjoined that this ritual be performed early each morning on rising from sleep, prior to religious act of eating, before ablutions, at the beginning of each of the five periods of the day and after urination and excretion.. All Zoroastrians do undergo the ablution on entering the premises of a fire-temple, to ensure that every religious act they perform is done so in the state of purity of body and soul. The *Padyab-Kusti* ritual, because it involves the performance of a purification rite, differs from the simple *Kusti* ceremony, in which a ritually clean person unties and reties the *kusti* without first performing ablutions; the simple *Kusti* ceremony is referred to as "making new the sacred girdle".

The Wedding Ceremony

True Zoroastrian marriage is a sacred union of two souls complementing each other with the ultimate goal of doing good and maintaining self-denial. Fire in a chalice and an oil lamp is prepared on a side table. The bride and the groom are prepared by ablutions, prayer and acceptance of sacrament. The couple sits facing each other and

a screen is held between them and their right hands are clasped. It symbolically represents God’s action of uniting spirit and matter at the moment of creation. Two priests recite mantras, tying cotton thread over the clasped hands of the bride and the groom and then pass the thread round the couple seven times. Then the screen is lifted and both shower grain over each other. Then the couple is made to sit side by side and the marriage obligation is recited thrice in the presence of two witnesses.

Death Ceremony and the Tower of Silence

Zoroastrians believe that death is a weapon of the devil and the funeral rites are aimed at restricting the influence of the evil and keep it away from good health living beings. The dead body is not burned or buried but exposed to the elements of nature where the vultures and other carrion birds dispose of it This is done to avoid the dead body polluting the earth, water and fire. If the body is buried it would pollute the earth and water and if cremated it would defile the pure flame. The body is washed and wrapped in clean cloth and then placed in the *dakhma* or a circular stone tower called the Tower of silence. The tower has high protective walls but open to the sky so that the birds of prey can have easy access. Annual ceremonies are held to commemorate the dead.

Check Your Progress III

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1) Discuss the significance of Fire in the Zoroastrian worship.
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- 2) Explain the significance of the initiation ceremony of *Navjote*.
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1.5 LET US SUM UP

This brief discussion on Zoroastrianism, one of the most ancient living religions of the world, provides an insight into its origin, history and literature. The history is marked by periods of growth and development of Zoroastrianism especially in Iran and beyond. The invasion of Iran by Alexander the Great, and centuries later, by the Arabs led to the decline of Zoroastrianism in the land of its birth. The *Gathas*, the *Avesta* as well as the *Nasks* provide ample insights into the Zoroastrian Philosophy of God, world and w/man.

Zoroaster held that *Ahura Mazda* is one and only wise Lord of the universe. The twin primeval principles of *Spena mainyush* and *Angro-mainyush* are responsible for the mixture of good and evil that is experienced in creation. W/man who is free must join hands with the forces of Good and better creation through Good thought, word and action. Such a w/man receives the reward for his/her moral actions at the moment of death. There is no possibility of a vicarious salvation by the grace of a saviour in Zoroastrianism. One ought to work out one’s emancipation oneself.

Zoroastrianism which emerged as a monotheistic challenge to the polytheistic tendencies of the Indo-Mediterranean region soon ended up embracing the appeal of the latter. Contact with other religions led to accepting several deities into their fold. The Zoroastrian liturgy is elaborate with several rites of purification and sacrifice. Of the many Zoroastrian ceremonies the *Navjote* is perhaps the most significant. The Death ceremony (*Zohr-i-atash*) at the Tower of Silence (*dakhmas*) stands out as a rite very peculiar to the Zoroastrians.

1.6 KEY WORDS

- Monotheism** : Monotheism is belief in one God.
- Polytheism** : Polytheism is belief in many gods.
- Pantheon** : The pantheon (*pantheon* from the Greek: meaning “every god”) is a building in Rome which was originally built as a temple to all the gods of Ancient Rome, and rebuilt circa 126 AD during Hadrian’s reign. The generic term *pantheon* is now applied to a monument in which illustrious dead are buried.

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) Who was Zoroaster?

Zoroaster, the founder and prophet of Zoroastrianism is believed to have lived around 1000 B.C. Zoroaster was a member of the family of Spitama, a descendant of Feridun, king of Persia of the Peshadian dynasty. *Avesta* narrates that as a youth Zoroaster passed his time in the deep study of philosophical questions and in divine meditation on the top of a mountain named '*Ushidarena*'. His teaching is based on the divine inspiration that he received during the solitary study. At the age of thirty he left his native town of Rae and proceeded to Balkh, the capital of Gushtasp, at that time the King of Iran where he preached his faith and converted the King and many others to his faith.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) Discuss the Zoroastrian Concept of God - Ahura Mazda.

Zoroaster combined two words *Ahura* and *Mazda* to refer to God. *Ahura Mazda* is conceived as the great creator and governor of the universe. The entire universe is governed by him so He is called *Ahura* and everything in the world is created by him so He is *Mazda*. He is creator, preserver and destroyer of the Universe. As creator He is the father of Reason and so He is '*Vahishta Mananh*' (Best Reason) and as the governor of the universe He is the originator of the Right Law and hence He is '*Ásha Vahishta*' (Righteousness).

- 2) What is the core of Zoroastrian ethics?

The two principles, *Spenta-mainyush* and *Angra-mainyush*, found in creation are found inherent in human nature in the form of *Vohumana* or *Beheman* (Good Mind) and *Akamana* (Evil Mind). These two influence man's *manashni* (thoughts) *gavashni* (words) and *kunashni* (actions). When the Good Mind predominates human nature it results in *humata* (good thoughts) *hukhta* (good words) and *hvarshta* (good actions). But when Evil Mind overtakes human nature it leads to *dushmata* (evil thoughts) *duzokhta* (evil words) and *duzarshata* (evil deeds). The responsibility of man is to act in support of the Good principle and destroy the evil one. Think nothing but the truth, speak nothing but the truth and do nothing but what is proper is the gist of Zoroastrian moral philosophy. Good thoughts, words and action consist in Honesty, charity and truthfulness.

Check Your Progress III

- 1) Discuss the significance of Fire in the Zoroastrian worship

The most important symbol of Zoroastrianism is the fire but they are not 'Fire worshippers'. They prefer Fire to idols as a symbol of *Ahura Mazda*. In the eyes of the Zoroastrian, fire's brightness, activity, purity and incorruptibility bear the most perfect resemblance to the nature and perfection of the *Ahura Mazda* who alone is worshipped. Fire is also a symbol of piety, purity, humility and brotherhood in Zoroastrianism.

2) Explain the significance of the initiation ceremony of *Navjote*.

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrians are initiated by ordained priests into the religious community through the ceremony of investing the child with the sacred undershirt '*sudra*' and the sacred thread '*kusti*' known as *Navjote* (new born). *Sudra* is the garment of the Good Mind. This simple garment and the white colour symbolize purity and simplicity of the heart of the worshipper. *Kusti* means 'that which encircles the body'. It is wound thrice around the waist and symbolizes the three cardinal virtues – good thought, good deeds and good words. The wearing of the *kusti* designates a man to be at the service of *Ahura Mazda*.