



Reversion, Revival, Resistance

Framing Iranian Neo-Zoroastrian Religiosities

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ABSTRACT Both in Iran and India, Zoroastrian communities have traditionally possessed a strong and rigid ethno-religious identity. In recent decades, however, debates regarding the opening of the communities to converts have become increasingly significant. At the same time, a growing interest in religious conversion to Zoroastrianism can be observed among Kurds, Tajiks, Iranians, and other populations. This article analyses the autobiographical account of two Muslim-born Iranian converts to Neo-Zoroastrianism and discusses how such conversions can be adequately framed. It criticizes previous works on Neo-Zoroastrians for framing its religious practice as “unauthentic.” As Zoroastrian religiosities transform, especially among urban Tehran Zoroastrians, one can observe a certain convergence of reformed ethnic Zoroastrian and Neo-Zoroastrian religious discourses. Taking this trend into account, Iranian Neo-Zoroastrianism can be framed as a movement for religious revival and reform as well as a vehicle of resistance against the state-promoted Shi’ite Islam of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

KEYWORDS Zoroastrianism, Religious Conversion, Iran, Nationalism, State Religion, Islam

Introduction

Zoroastrians today constitute a small religious community with no more than around 130,000 global members (Stausberg 2002, 1:11). In Iran—the historical homeland of Zoroastrianism—around 23,000 Zoroastrians remain, the majority of which now live in the capital city of Tehran, with significant numbers still residing in the previous strongholds of Kerman and Yazd (Markaz-e Āmār-e Irān 2018, 99). As a consequence of recurring emigration waves from Iran to India, beginning after the Islamization of Iran in the seventh century, the demographic centre of global Zoroastrianism today is Bombay, where 70% of the roughly 75,000 Indian Zoroastrians live (Stausberg 2002, 1:11). Iranian and Indian Zoroastrians, the latter of which are referred to as “Parsis” (alluding to their origins in Persia), are divided by a religious and cultural gap that has developed throughout the millennia. Both Zoroastrian subgroups today moreover have considerable diasporas, primarily in North America (ca. 10,000) and the UK [1]

(ca. 5,000) as well as Pakistan, Australia, Hong Kong, and elsewhere (Hinnells 2005; Stausberg 2002, 1:12).

Despite the small number of its adherents, Zoroastrianism and its founding figure Zarathustra [2] have been an enormous source of inspiration and fascination in different historical and geographical settings. Early modern European obsessions with the ancient Persian prophet are most prominently reflected in Nietzsche's late nineteenth century work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; earlier already, European historians of religion made ample references to Zarathustra and discussed his impact on European and Christian thought (Stausberg 1998). More relevant to this article, however, are Iranian perceptions of Zoroastrianism: in the nineteenth century, Iranian nationalists re-discovered the pre-Islamic era of Iran as a supposedly golden age (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016). Zoroastrianism came to be equated with pre-Islamic—and, by extension, “authentic”—Iranian national culture. This idea was also promoted by Iranian Zoroastrians and Indian Parsis themselves, who at the time were entering a vibrant exchange (Marashi 2020; Ringer 2011). As we shall see later in this article, the notion of Zoroastrianism as a vehicle of original Iranian culture has been very popular and powerful up to the present.

The recent decades have witnessed a growing interest in religious conversion to Zoroastrianism, particularly among Kurds, different Central Asian populations (especially Tajiks and Uzbeks), Russians, and Iranians. Converts and their communities are labelled “Neo-Zoroastrian” or “Para-Zoroastrian” (Stausberg 2007; Rose 2011, 226–28) to distinguish them from *ethnic* Zoroastrians who usually do not recognize such conversions. Especially Muslim-born converts of a Kurdish, Tajik, or Iranian background understand their turning to Neo-Zoroastrianism as a “reversion” to their ancestors' religion. While Neo-Zoroastrian movements in the Kurdish and Tajik contexts have at times enjoyed political support, conversions from Islam are prohibited and subject to legal persecution in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Recent quantitative research by Pouyan Tamimi Arab and Ammar Maleki suggests that many Iranians self-identify as Zoroastrian (Maleki and Tamimi Arab 2020). As the authors clarify in a later article, this self-identification primarily amounts to “a dream or an aspiration more than an actual alternative lived religion embedded in a religious community” (Stausberg, Tamimi Arab, and Maleki 2023, 16). [3]

Drawing upon a Persian-language account of the conversion of two Muslim-born Iranians, published by the UK-based publisher *Satrap* in 2016 (Āriā and Āriā 2016),¹ I would like to discuss ways to conceptually frame the Neo-Zoroastrian movement and conversions to Neo-Zoroastrianism in this article. The scarce existing literature on the subject has generally used analytical frames highlighting the supposed lack of authenticity in the religious practice of Neo-Zoroastrians, using terms like “co-optation” (Foltz 2016), “appropriation” (Stausberg and Tessmann 2013), and “invented tradition” (Szanto 2018, 97). My argument takes a different tack: recent ethnographic research in the Tehran Zoroastrian community (Fozi 2014; Stewart and Moavenat 2018) accounts for vibrant discourses of modernization and the making of a reformed Zoroastrianism. If one takes this urban form of Zoroastrianism as a reference point and compares it with Neo-Zoroastrian religious practice and identity, the latter no longer appears as a “bad copy” of “authentic Zoroastrianism.” In fact, one will find a trend for *coalescence* between the two. This coalescence especially manifests in a modernized religious practice that is driven by “religionization,” roughly defined as the homogenization of religious [4]

1 The book was published bilingually. I am here only referring to the (original) Persian account. As we shall see, the linguistic features of the Persian used by the authors is relevant to the book's analysis. Translations are my own and not taken from the English-language version of the book.

practice through a liberal Protestant ideal (Dreßler 2019; Masuzawa 2007). Second, a trend towards coalescence can be observed in the critical dissociation of both Iranian Zoroastrians and Iranian converts to Neo-Zoroastrianism from their hegemonic religious environment: Shi'ite Islam as promoted by the Iranian Islamist government. Consequently, “revival” and “resistance” appear as two suitable additions to the analytical vocabulary used in the study of Neo-Zoroastrianism.

Zoroastrians and the Vexed Question of Conversion

Zoroastrianism traditionally does not allow for the admission of new members. Belonging to the Zoroastrian community is exclusively defined by family descent. Similar to communities like the Druze, Yezidis, Alawites, Alevis, and the Ahl-e Haqq, Zoroastrianism may thus be referred to as an “ethno-religious” community (Smith 1991, 7; Arakelova 2010).² Such communities are non-proselytizing and strictly endogamous; according to Victoria Arakelova, endogamy serves the communities either in the “preservation of [...] esoteric religious knowledge” or constitutes a reaction to a “hostile surrounding” which considers them heretics (Arakelova 2010, 5–6). In the case of Zoroastrianism, the latter argument is relatively pronounced while the religious teachings of Zarathustra, at least in theory, are thought of as universally accessible. [5]

Much resembling the concept of “ethno-religious” communities, Albert De Jong (2018) [6] proposed the concept of “spiritual elite communities” to collectively classify groups like the Druze, Yezidis, Alawites, and Zoroastrians. Alongside endogamy, De Jong mentions the existence of “a small section of specialists in whom knowledge of the tradition is vested” (2018, 127), i.e. a “spiritual elite” as a second mutual trait. The religious practice of spiritual elite communities is strongly place-bound and depends on their (usually rural) surroundings. The arrival of modernity and its inevitable by-products—such as urbanization, penetration of village life by the nation-state, and the emphasis of the national community over more local or religious identities—has presented spiritual elite communities with massive challenges (2018, 137). Endogamy is far less likely to be maintained in cosmopolitan cities than in homogenous villages, and the authority of the spiritual elites appears questionable once lay members have attained a “more valuable,” secular education.

Zoroastrians have equally faced these challenges and members are now increasingly questioning traditional conventions. The permissibility of conversions and of intermarriage, two issues held to be inextricably tied, “have evolved as the shibboleths of contemporary Zoroastrianism” (Writer 1994, 105). Generally speaking, the debate is more openly embraced among Parsis than among Iranian Zoroastrians, and there is a divide between “orthodox” and “reformist” opinions (1994, 105–27). As Michael Fischer has pointed out, the prohibition of conversion “is not a religiously or theologically grounded rule, but rather a pragmatic rule for survival” (1973, 67). Paradoxically, both opponents and supporters of the admission of new members cite the fear of extinction as an underlying rationale: while opponents fear harsh repercussions in the case of especially Muslim conversions to Zoroastrianism, supporters point to the dwindling numbers of Zoroastrians worldwide and argue that conversion was a necessary measure to prevent the complete disappearance of the community. [7]

Negative views on the conversion question are occasionally also justified by reasons specific to the Iranian and Indian Zoroastrian subgroups. Indian Parsis, who over centuries have [8]

2 Platvoet (1996) uses the term “community religions” which appears to roughly denote the same phenomenon. A related, though broader, concept is that of “primordial communities” (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995).

developed into a distinct caste, fear a “swamping” of the charitable systems established in their community by members of other, less wealthy communities (Fischer 1973, 70; Hinnells 2005, 119). As for Iranian Zoroastrians, some community members are particularly sensitive to the wish of Iranian Muslims to convert to their religion. They argue that Iranian Muslims historically betrayed Zoroastrians by converting to Islam and should therefore not be allowed back (Fischer 1973, 67; Fozi 2014, 176–77). Notions of racial purity and the fear of corrupting one’s purely Persian, “non-Arab” descent may as well play a role in these considerations. Irrespective of how Iranian Zoroastrians view the matter, conversions away from Islam are not possible according to the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Nevertheless, before the 1979 Revolution, during the rule of the Pahlavi Shahs (1925–1979), intermarriages between Zoroastrians and Muslims happened occasionally and were condoned (Kestenberg Amighi 1990, 284).

Already in his 1971 ethnographic study of Iranian Zoroastrians, Fischer noted that “support for allowing conversion is slowly and cautiously growing” (Fischer 1973, 68). More recent studies seem to confirm this trend, at least for Zoroastrians living in Tehran. Sarah Stewart straightforwardly points out: “Urban Zoroastrians have become reformist in their outlook and, given the opportunity, would welcome converts to the religion” (Stewart and Moavenat 2018, 1). Due to the Iranian government’s lack of acceptance, Stewart’s respondents still admitted that the question was a largely theoretical issue (2018, 99). It is likely that Iranian Zoroastrians, even if they actually are in favour of admitting converts, may be hesitant to openly express this view—both out of fear of the Iranian government and conservative Zoroastrian clergy. [9]

In summary, it can be assumed that the uprooting from the community’s original locality and its encounter with new environments, whether it is the urban centre of Tehran or a diasporic setting, may prompt Zoroastrians to re-consider the traditional prohibition of conversion. Many Zoroastrians as a principle are not opposed to outsiders engaging with the teachings of their religions. While some may point to the obvious fact that Zoroastrianism, like any ethno-religious community before its “closing” (Arakelova 2010, 4), at some point *must* have been open to the admission of new members (for how else would it have come into being?), others separate the Zoroastrian religious teachings from Zoroastrianism as an ethnic identity. Accordingly, one of Stewart’s respondents explained that “[a] good Muslim who is living in an honest way is also a Zoroastrian, he is a Muslim Zoroastrian” (Stewart and Moavenat 2018, 155). Following the same logic, members of the Indian Parsi community may argue for a distinction between a religious Zoroastrianism and an ethnic “Parsism” (Niechcial 2020, 14–16). [10]

The diversity of views ethnic Zoroastrians hold regarding the question of conversion reverberates in their perceptions of Neo-Zoroastrians. For as early as the 1970s, Navid Fozi relates an anecdote conveyed to him by anthropologist Janet Kestenberg Amighi: when a number of Iranian Muslims desired to convert to Zoroastrianism, an Iranian Zoroastrian priest (*mowbed*) “in fear” refused to initiate them (Fozi 2014, 156). They then found an Indian Zoroastrian cleric who initiated them before they returned to Iran, propelling their new “co-religionists” into an ambiguous state: “Several Zoroastrians seemed very proud of this; others worried about the impact” (2014, 156). As for the present, Paulina Niechcial’s field visit to the eleventh World Zoroastrian Congress, held 2018 in the Australian city Perth, accounts for a similar ambiguity. That the congress hosted a number of Kurdish Neo-Zoroastrians was met with dismay by conservative-minded Zoroastrians, especially those following the line of the orthodox Parsi clergy of Bombay (2020, 15). For Neo-Zoroastrians themselves, such reservations are largely [11]

irrelevant. The Iranian account studied for this article, for instance, blames the prohibition of conversions exclusively on the Iranian government's Islamism and, perhaps unsurprisingly, does not distinguish between *Neo-Zoroastrianism* and Zoroastrianism (Āriā and Āriā 2016).

“Returning to the Religion of our Ancestors”: Neo-Zoroastrianism and “Reversion”

The book *The Displacement of Iranians: Taking Courage—Travelogue of Tārā and Mazdak Āriā, from Leaving the Homeland to Seeking Asylum in the West*³ tells the story of a young Iranian woman who, born to a Neo-Zoroastrian⁴ father and a Muslim mother, embraces Neo-Zoroastrianism and together with her husband (a fellow Muslim-born convert) emigrates from Iran in pursuit of religious freedom (Āriā and Āriā 2016). Throughout the book, conversions of Iranians to Neo-Zoroastrianism are exclusively framed as a “return to the religion of our ancestors” (*bāzgasht beh āyin-e niākān*) (2016, 7, 11, 15). This idea of a “reversion” to the “original religion” of Iranians is equally present among Neo-Zoroastrians with other ethnic backgrounds, most notably Kurds (Foltz 2016, 2017; Niechcial 2020; Raßbach 2021; Szanto 2018) and Tajiks (Foltz 2016). Notably, the Russian Neo-Zoroastrian movement, although claiming Zoroastrianism “to be part of Russian cultural heritage and history” (Stausberg and Tessmann 2013, 454), is less concerned with the idea of “reversion” (Tessmann 2012; Stausberg and Tessmann 2013).⁵ [12]

Kurdish Neo-Zoroastrians believe that Zoroastrianism was the “original” religion of the Kurdish people (Foltz 2017; Szanto 2018). Historian of Iranian religions Richard Foltz dismisses this claim as “the product of modern nationalist ideology with little in the way of unambiguous historical support” (Foltz 2017, 102). Rooted in an equally ahistorical conflation of Zoroastrianism with Yezidism, the promotion of Zoroastrianism as the supposedly original religion of Kurds was largely advanced by the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its leader Abdullah Öcalan (Foltz 2017, 94; Raßbach 2021; Szanto 2018, 98). For Öcalan, Zoroastrianism was an ideological tool to foster secularization and the dissociation from Islam that was ultimately void of any religious implications. In contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan, however, Neo-Zoroastrians are currently developing a religious infrastructure to accommodate “reverts.” As Edith Szanto succinctly put it: “For Öcalan, Zoroastrianism is a crucial part of the Kurdish past, while [for; sic!] the founders of the two Zoroastrian centers in Sulaimani, it is part of a bright future” (2018, 98). [13]

Neo-Zoroastrianism is not the only religious context in which the concept of “reversion” plays a role. Taken literally, one could argue that “reversion” denotes the re-embracing of a religion an individual was original affiliated with and at some moment turned away from. [14]

3 *Āvāregi-ye Irāniān: Del beh Daryā—Safarnāmeḥ-ye Tārā va Mazdak-e Āriā. Az Tark-e Miḥan tā Panāhandegi dar Gharb*

4 Since it is not possible to officially change one's religious affiliation in the Islamic Republic of Iran, “Neo-Zoroastrian” in this case denotes the personal religious self-image rather than an official legal status.

5 The Russian Neo-Zoroastrian movement originated with the Astrologist Pavel Globa who, claiming to descend from an Iranian Zoroastrian grandmother, began to call his astrological teachings “Avestan” from the late 1980s onwards. Having acquired a small fellowship, a number of Neo-Zoroastrian communities came into being in Russia later on. Like other Neo-Zoroastrian communities, they have an ambiguous relationship with ethnic Zoroastrians. Notably, their claim to Zoroastrianism as a component of Russian culture and history may also depend on the necessity that such a connection is required to achieve the status of a recognized religious community in Russia. This status has meanwhile been successfully attained (Stausberg and Tessmann 2013).

Some Muslims, especially those with Salafi leanings, contend that *any* conversion to Islam actually constitutes a “reversion,” claiming that all human beings by their natural instinct were born Muslim (Hermansen 2014, 633; van Nieuwkerk 2006, 2014).⁶ Interestingly, as Karin van Nieuwkerk notes, the “reversion” discourse among Muslims appears to have originated with conversions to Islam by Black Americans who considered themselves to be reverting to their ancestors’ religion (2006, 161).⁷ Their conceptualization of “reversion” thus bears a striking resemblance with that of Kurdish, Tajik, and Iranian Neo-Zoroastrians.

Enrico Pace points to other instances in which a “reversion” discourse is pronounced (2009). Taking the examples of the Neo-Hindu movement in India and the Haredi Jewish Chabad Lubavitch movement, Pace is concerned with cases in which religious actors endeavour to purify and “revert” spaces and individuals they consider to theoretically belong to their communities but to currently linger in a somehow converted (or “perverted”) state. Accordingly, Neo-Hindus may try to “revert” an Indian mosque into a Hindu temple (2009, 197), and Haredi Jews seek to persuade secular Jews to strictly abide by Jewish law (2009, 207). At least the Neo-Hindu example displays a certain parallel logic to Neo-Zoroastrianism: it seeks to safeguard an “authentic” national-religious identity perceived to be threatened. Just as Indian Neo-Hindus accuse Indian Muslims and Christians of “being responsible for the Hindu people’s loss of traditional values and identity” (2009, 200), Iranian Neo-Zoroastrians harbour a bitterness regarding the Islamization of Iran and its loss of original identity, as they would see it.⁸

No matter how “reversion” is understood in a particular context, it is crucial to highlight that it fundamentally is an *emic* concept, the analytical value of which is highly questionable. To use it as a conceptual tool would essentially mean to copy the insider discourse and uncritically accept its ideological narratives. To assume, for example, that Islam was a sort of “natural religion” instilled into any human being is, to say the least, highly patronizing. Van Nieuwkerk therefore is right when she argues that “[r]eplacing conversion by reversion as a general analytical concept does not appear to be very useful,” given it is “a specifically ideological concept” (2006, 163). Nonetheless, any analysis of conversions to Neo-Zoroastrianism would be weak if it failed to acknowledge the converts’ claim to being “reverts.” This notion lies at the heart of the self-perception of converts. Scholarly analyses can take these claims to, for instance, further inquire into what nationalist presumptions the notion of “reversion” is based upon, and why the notion of “reversion” becomes particularly prominent at a specific time and place. In this article, however, I will foreground two different perspectives arising from the mentioned book by Tārā and Mazdak Āriā and recent literature in the study of Zoroastrianism.

Neo-Zoroastrianism as Religious Revival

Existing scholarship implies that there is a lack of authenticity in Neo-Zoroastrian religious practice. Referring to two Neo-Zoroastrian centres opened in Sulaimaniyya (Iraqi Kurdistan), Szanto writes that “neither is trying to recreate Zoroastrianism the way it is currently and has been historically practiced in Iran and South Asia” (2018, 97). Participating individuals rather create “their own versions of Kurdish Zoroastrianism” which are “nationalist, postmodern,

6 This “natural instinct” corresponds with the Arabic concept of *fiṭrah*.

7 See also the contribution by Sebastian Rimstad in this special volume (2024).

8 There are more interesting parallels between Iranian and Indian nationalisms, among them the omnipresent pointing to the original “Aryan” identity of Iranians and Indians as well as a vibrant anti-Islamic discourse (Motadel 2014, 130).

and liberal” and foreground “questions of Kurdish nationalism and women’s rights” (2018, 97). Szanto furthermore observes:

Despite the emphasis on the continuity of Zoroastrian rituals in contemporary Kurdish life, modern Kurdish converts are generally not interested in either learning Zoroastrian texts or following historically documented Zoroastrian rituals as they are practiced in Iran and India today. They generally strip Zoroastrianism of its ritual and legal aspects and reduce it to the ethical imperative: “Good thoughts, good speech, good deeds”. (Szanto 2018, 104) [18]

Along similar lines, Foltz points out that Kurdish “Zoroastrianizers” are “stripping the religion of its legal and ritual aspects while emphasizing the ethical core of ‘good thoughts, good words, good deeds’” (2017, 97). While Szanto and Foltz are certainly right in pointing this out, there is a danger of basing one’s image of “historically documented Zoroastrian rituals as they are practiced in Iran and India today” solely on the classical scholarship in the field, especially the pioneering ethnographic works of Fischer (1973) and Mary Boyce (1977).⁹ Readings in more recent scholarship, such as the insightful studies by Fozi (2014) and Stewart (2018)—both of which this article will extensively draw upon—attune us to the fact that “[t]oday one will find only a pale reflection of the village Zoroastrianism that was described by Mary Boyce and Michael Fischer” (Stewart 2016, 354). Urban Iranian Zoroastrians are moving towards reform and religious revival. [19]

I argue that the religious practice of both reform-minded urban (ethnic) Zoroastrians and Neo-Zoroastrians are shaped by the necessity of modernization and, as a result, are subject to a process of “religionization.” Dreßler uses the term religionization to heuristically denote “practices through which religion is homogenized and reified” (2019, 2). This homogenization is not arbitrary but follows a very concrete pattern: critical scholarship in the study of religions for over two decades has pointed to a “world religions discourse” that, while superficially speaking the language of diversity, possesses a very narrow image of what defines the core of religion (Masuzawa 2007). Taking liberal Protestant ideals as a template, the importance of one clearly defined holy scripture, the emphasis of personal belief over public rituals, religious individualism rather than adherence to clerical authority, and the necessity of a universalist message, among other aspects, are emphasized (McCutcheon 1997; Nongbri 2013). When entering a process of religionization, discourses and practices are streamlined towards these ideals. [20]

The individuals speaking through Fozi’s ethnography of Tehran Zoroastrians repeatedly aver that their religious practice is in need of “a contemporary interpretation corresponding to the exigencies of modern life” (Fozi 2014, 68). Contemporary Zoroastrians “had to follow a more modern religion and get rid of burdensome customs” (2014, 87); they were stressing “aspects of Zoroastrian religion that are more appealing to present-day Zoroastrians” (2014, 123) and “abandoned some religious ordinances” while simplifying others “in response to the necessities of modern life” (2014, 152). In what follows, I will briefly exemplify this trend through three aspects: the opening of the clergy to lay people, the utilization of the Gathas as *the* holy scripture of Zoroastrianism, and the emphasis of the belief in simplified ethics at [21]

9 Ethnographic studies of Iranian Zoroastrians generally are scarce. Apart from the studies by Boyce and Fischer, only two studies drawing on extensive field work existed until recently: Kestenberg Amighi’s 1990 book and Robert Langer’s 2008 meticulous documentation of Iranian Zoroastrian shrines and pilgrimage sites (Kestenberg Amighi 1990; Langer 2008).

the expense of lengthy rituals. By juxtaposing these aspects with the Neo-Zoroastrian primary source, I shall point to the growing parallels and coalescence in the religious practice of the two groups.

Universal Priesthood

As in other “spiritual elite communities,” priesthood in Zoroastrianism is inherited and reserved to specific families. However, since the sons of families belonging to the priestly caste have become less and less interested in accepting their traditional duty, Iranian Zoroastrians created a new office: the “assistant priest” (*mowbed-yār*). Assistant priests are not required to descend from the priestly caste and, notably, can be male or female (Stewart and Moavenat 2018, 21–23).¹⁰ The extent to which the assistant priest can perform the tasks traditionally assigned to a full priest is subject to an ongoing debate among Tehran Zoroastrians (Fozi 2014, 88). [22]

Neo-Zoroastrians generally consider Zoroastrianism a religion with a fully universalist outlook. Next to the possibility of conversions this universalism also makes rituals and other religious duties accessible to a larger demographic. The conversion account of Tārā and Mazdak Āriā does not make any reference to the qualifications needed to serve as a priest. The initiation ritual (*sedreh-pushī*) of Tārā is performed via Skype by a US-based priest who the book refers to as “Dr Omid” (Āriā and Āriā 2016, 13); the same Dr Omid also performed the wedding ceremony of Tārā and Mazdak (2016, 16). [23]

Tārā and Mazdak themselves take on tasks to serve in their (virtual) Neo-Zoroastrian community: while Mazdak administered a Facebook group of Neo-Zoroastrians with 15,000 members in which he answered questions other group members had about the Gathas (2016, 9), Tārā used her position as a university teacher to “spread the religion of true Zoroastrianism in any way that I could” (2016, 8).¹¹ Whereas proselytism is completely at odds with ethnic Zoroastrian practice, Tārā and Mazdak also at other points in the book remark that they were “striving to spread our religion and make it known” (2016, 14).¹² If priesthood is universal, everyone can (or should) participate in religious services of the Zoroastrian religion. Much like foreseen by the liberal Protestant template enforced through “religionization,” there is an opening and a divide of religious labour. [24]

The Gathas as the Central Holy Scripture of Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism possesses a large canon of texts that are referred to as the Avesta. Historically, the Avesta was transmitted orally from generation to generation by the priesthood who spent a considerable amount of time memorizing it. Unlike the contemporary liberal Protestant ideal, the primary purpose of the Avesta was not its study by “Zoroastrian believers” but merely its recitation in the context of rituals. In fact, dealing with the Avesta was, for centuries, a privilege of the priesthood. Only in the late nineteenth century was the Avesta translated into Gujarati and Modern Persian, the respective vernaculars of Indian and Iranian Zoroastrians, who were thus enabled “to freely peruse the ‘Holy Scriptures’ and individually arrive at judgements regarding their content” (Stausberg 2002, 1:74). [25]

Amidst the Avestan canon, the “Gathas” (“songs”) seize a prominent position. Their au- [26]

10 In the view of Niechcial, the opening of the assistant priest office to woman, alongside being a necessity, also served Iranian Zoroastrians to display their commitment to gender equality and, implicitly, criticize Iranian Muslims (Niechcial 2020, 11).

11 “Beh har rāhi mi-tavānestam beh gostarēsh-e āyin-e ashu-zartosht mi-pardākhtam.”

12 “(...) barāye gostarēsh-e āyinēmān va shenāsāndan-e ān mi-kushidim.”

thorship is directly attributed to Zarathustra, the prophet of Zoroastrianism (Stausberg 2002, 1:86). Some Zoroastrian reformers as well as Neo-Zoroastrians therefore have promoted a “Gathas-only” approach (Rose 2011, 227). As Michael Stausberg describes, it was the influential convert to Zoroastrianism Ali Akbar Jafarey (1921–2020) who pioneered a Gatha-centric Zoroastrianism (2007, 247). That being said, Jafarey’s ideas also had “a profound influence on the way Zoroastrianism is understood in Iran today”; he and other reformers induced that “[p]riests were trained to focus on the teachings of the *Gāthās* and to reduce the importance of ritual” (Stewart and Moavenat 2018, 66). Jafarey’s influence thus is a historical example of coalescence between ethnic Zoroastrian and Neo-Zoroastrian religious practice.

The Gathas are the only text from the Zoroastrian canon that Tārā and Mazdak Āriā refer to in their book. Tārā’s appreciation of the Gathas materializes in the fact that among the scarce personal belongings she took along on her and her husband’s burdensome journey to Europe were a pen and ink which she used to write the Gathas in calligraphic style (2016, 6). She goes on to explain: [27]

Mazdak and me are Zoroastrians, and the Gathas are the book which compiles the words of the great and wise Zarathustra. In this book, all humankind is asked to reach out their hands and advance the world towards joy, prosperity, and progress. How could I possibly put them aside and leave?!¹³ (Āriā and Āriā 2016, 7) [28]

The Gathas here appear as *the* “Holy Book” of Zoroastrianism through the personal study of which the essence of the Zoroastrian religion can be deduced. It is presented as a book with a universal message that is accessible for anyone. Moreover, the ethical mission of the Gathas is highlighted. This Gatha-centric approach to Zoroastrianism thus segues into the final aspect I would like to address as a vehicle of revival in (Neo-)Zoroastrianism: the emphasis of belief and simplified ethics at the expense of lengthy rituals, the latter of which traditionally are the main site in which the Avestan canon is recited. [29]

Emphasis of Belief in Ethics at the Expense of Rituals

During the course of the twentieth century, Iranian Zoroastrians have abandoned some of the rituals that previously defined their religious practice. The most significant example is the adjustment of Zoroastrian burial customs: traditionally, Zoroastrians placed the deceased in their community on top of a *dakhmeh*, a hill or tower on which birds like vultures would eat the flesh of the corpse. This practice was increasingly perceived as controversial, given that it appears daunting to non-Zoroastrians. While the *dakhmeh* continues to be used among Indian Parsis, Iranian Zoroastrians between the 1930s and 1970s gradually abandoned it in favour of graveyards.¹⁴ Another religious custom no longer observed is the obligatory prayer five times a day. An assistant priest interviewed by Fozi remarked that “[o]ur life pattern has changed and we cannot expect our youth to wake up early to pray towards the rising sun anymore” (Fozi 2014, 93). [30]

Zoroastrian religious practice involves a number of time-consuming rituals during which priests or assistant priests recite episodes from the Avesta. Lay Zoroastrians are present as more [31]

13 “*Man o Mazdak Zartoshti hastim va Gātā-hā ketābi ast keh dar girandeh-ye sokhanān-e Ashu-Zartosht-e bozorg ast, Dar in ketāb az hameh-ye ensānhā khāesteh shodeh keh dast beh dast-e ham dahand tā donyā rā beh su-ye shādi o khoshbakhti o puyāyi pish bebarand. Chetor mi-tavānam ānhā rā jāyi begozāram va beram?!*”

14 Hutter notes that the final *dakhmeh* burial in Tehran took place in 1937. In Yazd, six *dakhmehs* were still operating by the 1970s. Eventually, they were shut down as well (1995, 78–79).

or less passive observers in some rituals. One of Stewart’s respondents suggested that especially young Zoroastrians found these rituals tedious. Talking about the *gāhāmbārs*, thanksgiving rituals conducted several times a year, he said:

Younger Zartoshtis are completely indifferent toward *gāhāmbārs*. I do not know about Yazd, but if you attend any hall in Tehrān where a *gāhāmbār* is being conducted you only see people over the age of fifty. Even I myself get really tired when I attend a *gāhāmbār*: a *mowbed* comes, reads Avesta [i.e. reads Avestan prayers] from beginning to end then they pass around some fruits and, if you are lucky, they serve *āsh*.¹⁵ [...] If the child finds it boring, they will naturally prefer to stay home and sit behind their computer. Customs and practices ought to be re-examined and reassessed, we ought to reform them as our ancestors did long ago, and through the ages, to recreate and preserve them. They adapted the customs and practices to suit the needs of the day and therefore they were passed down successfully, I think this [practice] must continue indefinitely. Otherwise, it will be the end of the religion. (Stewart and Moavenat 2018, 250)

[32]

The suggestion made by the respondent has partially been put into practice: the important *yasna* worship ceremony, for instance, is today performed in a shortened version among Tehran Zoroastrians (Stewart and Moavenat 2018, 4). The shortening of rituals constitutes a primary example in the afore-mentioned quest of Tehran Zoroastrians to “get rid of burdensome customs” (Fozi 2014, 87).

[33]

In the account written by Tārā and Mazdak Āriā, belief in moral principles as the core of religiosity are put front and centre. Although the book occasionally refers to ritualistic elements—most importantly the setting of decorative tables (*sofreh*) displaying symbolic items—ethical principles like the famous Zoroastrian triad of “good thoughts, good words, good deeds” are presented as the main defining feature of the religion. Towards the end of the book, Tārā reflects upon the journey of her and her husband: they had encountered well-intended, supportive people as well as malicious and egoistic ones (2016, 55). In those good-natured, Tārā identified the spirit of Zoroastrianism:

[34]

These are well-minded (*nik-andish*) people who are striving on the true path—the path aiming to develop and please the world. They possess good thoughts, good words, and good deeds [...]. All of their benign (*nik*) behaviour is in accordance with the benign and productive teachings and ideas of the wise Zarathustra.¹⁶ (Āriā and Āriā 2016, 55)

[35]

In this aspect, the travelogue of Tārā and Mazdak Āriā confirms the observations of Szanto and Foltz, who averred that Neo-Zoroastrians emphasized the ethical core of Zoroastrianism (Foltz 2017, 97), or even “reduced” Zoroastrianism to it (Szanto 2018, 104). However, my argument holds that this is not necessarily a development peculiar to Neo-Zoroastrians but a corollary of religionization. In the case of Tehran Zoroastrians we can observe the emergence of a similar process resulting from a vying for reform. Lengthy rituals outside the original context of their application (the rural “spiritual elite community”) generally appear unrelatable and pointless

[36]

15 A soup dish.

16 “*Inān ensanhā-ye nik-andishand keh dar rāh-e rāsti mi-kushand, dar rāh-e ābādābi o shād kardan-e jahān mi-kushand, andیشه o goftār o kerdār-e nik dārand [...]. Va hameh-ye in raftār-hā-ye nik hamānand-e āmuzeshhā o andیشه-hā-ye nik o hasti-sāz-e ashu Zartosht ast.*”

to community members unfamiliar with this context. Neo-Zoroastrians and reform-minded ethnic Zoroastrians alike are striving to focus on a straightforward message that defines Zoroastrian religiosity and renders it attractive.

Neo-Zoroastrianism as Resistance

Conversions to Neo-Zoroastrianism in many cases appear as a reaction to negative experiences with Islam and/or Islamism. As Szanto illustrated, the Neo-Zoroastrian movement among Kurds gained momentum after the horrors of Jihadi violence by the Islamic State (2018, 96). A conversion then becomes an act of resistance to an “imposed” religious identity that converts identify with violence, oppression and, following the “reversion” narrative, with an attack on their original religious identity. The Kurdish case here resembles the Iranian context: in the conversion account of Tārā and Mazdak Āriā, the injustices of the Islamic Republic of Iran (seemingly identified with Islam as a whole) are constantly referenced and contrasted with an idealized Zoroastrianism. Impossible on the official level, conversions away from Islam constitute a subversive act in Iran and, if they become publicly known, are legally persecuted. [37]

Because Tārā and Mazdak Āriā are writing in exile, they can freely express their views on the Islamist regime in Iran and the Islamic religion. Zoroastrians living in Iran, like other Iranians, need to attune the criticism they might have to the drastic limits dictated by the Iranian government. In his insightful study, Fozi portrays the ambiguities resulting from these circumstances. A most striking example, he illustrates how Iranian Zoroastrians blame their historical suffering at the hands of the Muslim conquerors on “misguided *Sunni Arabs*”, thus vindicating their Shi’ite Iranian compatriots (2014, 125). Criticism of Islam can consequently be framed as criticism of the supposed “infringements” of “Arab culture” on the true nature of Islam—a notion the Iranian government can stomach much easier than an outright attack on its own hegemonic understanding of Shi’ite Islam. [38]

Nevertheless, Iranian Zoroastrians occasionally reference Islam in a negative way to set themselves positively apart. Similar to what I have described in the preceding section, we can again observe a coalescence between discourses promoted by Iranian Zoroastrians, albeit cautiously, and the Neo-Zoroastrian primary source written by Tārā and Mazdak Āriā. In the following, I draw upon three aspects to exemplify this observation: the emphasis of gender equality in Zoroastrianism, the contrasting of a “cheerful” Zoroastrianism with a “mournful” Shi’ite Islam, and the framing of Zoroastrianism as an authentically Iranian religion (as opposed to Islam). [39]

Emphasis of Gender Equality

Tehran Zoroastrians very avidly emphasize that Zoroastrianism promotes full equality between men and women. Given the precarious state of women’s rights in Iran, Fozi argues that “the Zoroastrian emphasis on an equal position for women has become an important marker of their distinct identity” (2014, 140). They occasionally substantiate this claim by pointing to history, portraying the pre-Islamic Iranian Sassanian Empire (224–651 CE) as highly advanced regarding women’s rights (Fozi 2014, 140). Moreover, they suggest that the promotion of gender equality was “an Iranian practice in contrast to the supposed misogyny of the Arabs” (Fozi 2014, 144). [40]

One finds a similar, though more vehement discourse in Tārā and Mazdak Āriā’s travelogue [41]

in which criticism of the situation of women's rights in Iran plays a central role. Alluding to a Quranic verse, Tārā says that women in Islam were the “ploughing-field of men” (*keshtzār-e mardān*),¹⁷ while in Zoroastrianism they “were respected” (*zan arj dārad*) (2016, 31). Generally, Islam “bereaves women of their fundamental rights” and harbours an “enmity towards women” that surfaces in the legal treatment of women in Iran and the behaviour of Muslim men towards their wife/wives (2016, 38–39).¹⁸ Suggesting that “Arabs” have a particular proclivity to indulge into Islamic misogyny (2016, 38), Tārā concludes:

I am happy that I am a Zoroastrian woman and that women and men are equal in my religion. When I got married to my husband, he did not buy me with an amount of money and I am not his ploughing-field.¹⁹ (Āriā and Āriā 2016, 39) [42]

Notably, Tārā takes the dire state of women's rights in Iran to make generalizations of the situation of human rights in “Islamic countries” (*keshvar-hā-ye eslāmi*): one glance was enough, she suggested, to understand that a lack of freedom was a “fundamental and self-destructive” (*bonyādīn va khānemānsuz*) characteristic of these countries (2016, 52). Moreover, her claim to complete gender equality in Zoroastrianism undoubtedly derives from an idealized rendition of her new religion. [43]

Cheerful Zoroastrianism as Distinct from a Mournful (Shi'ite) Islam

Fozi lists several examples that account for a religious self-image of Tehran Zoroastrians operating “in dialectical opposition to that of the dominant Shi'a,” one being the “emphasis on jubilation in opposition to the culture of mourning enjoined by the Shi'a” (Fozi 2014, 54). This jubilation, Zoroastrians argue, is also a component of Iranian national culture; in fact, “the cheerfulness of Iranian culture was addressed as a Zoroastrian gift” (2014, 104; italics added). As a corollary of this argument, Shi'ite mourning rituals appear as “un-Iranian” (2014, 105). Iranian Zoroastrians thus corroborate their claims to being authentic heirs of Iranian national culture by dint of their religion—a notion I will return to in a moment. [44]

Both Fozi's interlocutors and my primary source call making others happy a religious duty in Zoroastrianism (Āriā and Āriā 2016, 33; Fozi 2014, 122). Tārā and Mazdak Āriā frame happiness as a central characteristic of the Zoroastrian religion: [45]

The religion of the wise Zarathustra is a joyful religion and everyone who considers themselves a Zoroastrian ought to use all efforts to bring happiness to the whole world. Every month, we have a religious celebration, and our prayers are accompanied with happiness, singing, and music. The message of Zarathustra is that your joy should stem from the joy of others.²⁰ (Āriā and Āriā 2016, 33) [46]

17 Verse 223 of the Surah “The Cow” reads: “Your wives are your fields, so go into your fields whichever way you like (...)” (Abdel Haleem 2005, 25). The Arabic word translated as “field” is *ḥarṭ*.

18 “*Eslām bānavān rā [...] az hoquq-e ebtedāyishān mahrum mi-konad.*”; “*Doshmani-ye din-e Eslām bā bānavān [...]*”

19 “*Man shādām keh yek bānu-ye Zartoshti-am keh dar āyīnam zanān o mardān barābarand. Hengām-e ham-peyvandi hamsaram man rā bā mablaghi nemi-kharad va man keshtzār-e hamsaram nistam.*”

20 “*Āyīn-e Ashu-Zartosht āyīn-e shādi ast va har kas khod rā Zartoshti mi-dānad bāyad hameh-ye kushesh-e khod rā dar rāh-e shād kardan-e hameh-ye jahān beh-kār begīrad. Mā har māh do jashn-e āyīni dārim kva niyāyesh-hāyemān hamrāh bā shādi o āhang o musiqi ast. Payām-e Zartosht inast keh shādi-ye shomā az shādi-ye dīgerān sarcheshmeh mi-gīrad.*”

They then go on to immediately contrast the supposedly joyful nature of Zoroastrianism with Iranian Shi'ite Islam: [47]

Once again, Iran came to my mind where for two complete months, Moharram and Safar, everyone and everything was dressed in black—and, more than that, everyone mourned for the death of the [Shi'ite] Imams, their spouses, their sisters ... Dancing, joy, and exuberance were forbidden.²¹ (Āriā and Āriā 2016, 33) [48]

By converting to Neo-Zoroastrianism, Tārā and Mazdak Āriā endeavoured to liberate themselves from the mournfulness of Shi'ite Islam. If one follows their labelling of Iranian culture as a joyful culture, they moreover have turned to a religion much more in harmony with their Iranian national identity. Generally, different facets of Iranian nationalism play a central role in Tārā and Mazdak Āriā's book and offer a final example in which, yet again, a coalescence with Tehran Zoroastrians can be observed. [49]

(Neo-)Zoroastrianism as a Religion Faithful to the Iranian Nation

Iranians critical of the Islamist Iranian government often understand their national identity as an antithesis to the religion of Islam. Sociologist Reza Gholami has labelled this phenomenon “non-Islamiosity” and studied its prominence in the Iranian diaspora of London (2016). One manifestation of “non-Islamiosity” is the popularity of Zoroastrian symbols (2016, 8–10) which are understood as *Iranian national* symbols. The image of Zoroastrianism as a truly Iranian religion also is drawn upon by Tehran's Zoroastrian community: it enables them to make claims to being “the exclusive proprietors of authentic Iranian culture” vis-à-vis the Islamically-tinged national identity promoted by the state (Fozi 2014, 100). At the same time, and this is the other side of the coin, some Zoroastrians complain that they are being viewed “as a ‘museum’ of Iranian culture” (Fozi 2014, 108) by other Iranians. [50]

Iranian nationalism with an anti-Islamic thrust surfaces in various contexts. One prevalent vehicle is linguistic purism.²² Iranians who perceive the large extent of Arabic loanwords in the Persian language as a regrettable consequence of their country's Islamization may endeavour to speak a “pure” form of Persian and replace Arabic (and other) loanwords with Persian coinages. For Tehran Zoroastrians, language is one way to dissociate their Iranian identity from “Arab” Islam. Fozi notes that his field contacts “never use *salām*” (2014, 85), the conventional greeting used in Persian—originally a loanword from Arabic. He mentions other examples where his interlocutors eschewed the prevalent Arabic loanword in favour of a “purely Persian” coinage (2014, 130). Similarly, the travelogue of Tārā and Mazdak Āriā is written in a heavily purist idiom: throughout the book, words with Arabic roots which are otherwise common in Modern Persian are avoided.²³ At one point, Tārā praises her husband Mazdak for being “very sensitive to the usage of a pure Persian” (*besyār bar Pārsi-guyi hassās ast*) after he berated her for using the English loanword “surprise” instead of a Persian equivalent (Āriā and Āriā 2016, 43). [51]

21 “*Va bāz beh yād-e Irān oftādam keh do māh dar māh-hā-ye kām-e Moharram o Safar dar o divār siāhpush bud va ‘alāveh bar ān barāye marg-e Emāmān va hasarāneshān va khāharāneshān ... sowgvāri mi-kardand. Rāmeshgari va shādi va pāykubi mamnu‘ bud.*”

22 Further information on the historical movement for linguistic purism in Modern Persian is provided by Karimi-Hakkak (1989) and Kia (1998).

23 Examples include *beh-rāsti* instead of *vāqe‘an*, *bedrud goftan* instead of *khodāhāfezi kardan*, *aknun* instead of *al-‘ān*, *sepās* instead of *mannun*, and *bāmdād* instead of *sobh*. In one instance, the usage of *chāsht-e bāmdādi* for “breakfast”, Tārā additionally indicates the conventional Persian word (*sobhāneh*) to avoid confusion.

Another symbol through which Iranians disconnect their national identity from Islam is the figure of King Cyrus the Great. The founder of the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE), Cyrus was a primary reference point during the reign of the Pahlavi Shahs (1925–1979) and came to be hailed as a supposed pioneer of human rights (Steele 2021, 1). This aspect, in combination with a general nostalgia for the pre-1979 Iranian monarchy, has turned Cyrus into an icon of resistance against the Iranian government. During the past decade, an annual “Cyrus the Great Day” has evolved during which overwhelmingly young Iranians gather at Cyrus’s tomb to protest against the political system and its injustices. [52]

While Tehran Zoroastrians positively refer to Cyrus as “an important secular hero” and author of the world’s first human rights chart (Fozi 2014, 57), Tārā and Mazdak Āriā immediately connect him to the religion of Zoroastrianism: the “preservation of the pure ideal of the wise Zarathustra and the Zoroastrian religion” appear in the same breath with “the preservation of the name of Cyrus the Great” (Āriā and Āriā 2016, 16).²⁴ Tārā also mentions a fellow convert to Neo-Zoroastrianism who participated in the “Cyrus the Great Day” and was imprisoned as a consequence (2016, 15). As a sign of resistance to the Islamic Republic of Iran, he and his wife named their son Cyrus (2016, 15). [53]

A conversion of a Muslim-born Iranian to Neo-Zoroastrianism thus is also a statement against the governmentally promoted narrative of what it means to be a real Iranian. Both Tehran Zoroastrians and Neo-Zoroastrians implicitly (or explicitly) “arabize” Islam and deny the possibility of a full indigenization of Islam among Iranians. This view of things is commonplace among Iranians of different religious backgrounds and, in the words of Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, “since the 1980s [...] has become the most conventional form of secular opposition to the Islamic Republic” (2016, 4). [54]

Conclusion

Scholars from the study of religions and neighbouring disciplines may approach the growing interest in religious conversion to Neo-Zoroastrianism, especially among Kurds and Iranians, from multiple perspectives. Previous works have tended to portray Neo-Zoroastrian religiosities as fundamentally different from “authentic” Zoroastrian religious practice. In this article, I have endeavoured to offer an alternative perspective by pointing to aspects of coalescence between the religious practice and self-image of Neo-Zoroastrians and reform-minded, urban Iranian Zoroastrians. By shifting the focus this way, Neo-Zoroastrianism appears as a vehicle for religious revival (in a “religionized” pattern) and for resistance against the Islamic Republic of Iran’s version of Shi’ite Islam. [55]

Ethnic Zoroastrians traditionally have constituted a “spiritual elite community,” shaped by endogamy, a non-missionary attitude, place-bound rituals, and a clear divide between priestly and lay families. However, recent ethnographic research on Iranian Zoroastrianism has pointed out that earlier religious conventions are gradually loosening up as a consequence of large-scale migration to the urban centre of Tehran. Confronted with the challenges of life in a modern nation-state, urban Iranian Zoroastrians are prompted to re-consider their religious practice and accommodate it to the lifestyle especially of the younger generations. [56]

Meanwhile, a number of Muslim-born Iranians identify as converts (or “reverts”) to Zoroastrianism and join a growing Neo-Zoroastrian community. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, this [57]

24 “[...] *zendeḥ negahdāshṭan-e ārmān-e pāk-e Ashu-Zartosht va āyin-e Zartoshti va zendeḥ negahdāshṭan-e nām-e Korush-e Bozorg* [...]”

community is forced to remain invisible; for some, the cyberspace becomes a religious home. In emigration, Iranian Neo-Zoroastrians can openly express their religious views. Generally, there is very little and cautious contact between Neo-Zoroastrian and ethnic Zoroastrian communities. Conservative ethnic Zoroastrians, especially those following the Orthodox Indian Parsi priesthood, vehemently oppose conversions to Zoroastrianism and disapprove of the Neo-Zoroastrian movement.

Reform-minded Iranian Zoroastrians are more open to the idea of conversion. Moreover, [58] there is a trend for coalescence between their modernized religious practice and that of some Neo-Zoroastrians. The priesthood now to some degree is accessible to members of lay families (including women), the vast canon of ritual texts is re-assessed and rendered more concise, and lengthy rituals abbreviated. As a result, Zoroastrianism appears in a shape conforming with the hegemonic “world religions discourse,” moving towards an ideal of religion that is normatively shaped by a liberal Protestant template. Neo-Zoroastrians too move towards this ideal; for them it is taken for granted that their religion is a universally accessible one and not defined by ethno-religious boundaries.

Both ethnic Iranian Zoroastrians and Neo-Zoroastrians react to their encounter with Shi’ite [59] Islam as promoted and imposed by the post-1979 Islamist government of Iran. They dissociate from Iranian Shi’ite Islam by emphasizing gender equality in Zoroastrianism, framing Zoroastrianism as a “joyful” religion (unlike “mournful” Shi’ism), and claim to adhere to the religion most suitable to the Iranian nation. Similar discourses are notably found in the Iranian Evangelical Christian movement (Römer 2024). At times, the dissociation from Islam both of ethnic Iranian Zoroastrians and Iranian Neo-Zoroastrians appears in a racialized form by pitting a supposedly “Arab” Islam against the character of Persian (or “Aryan”) Iranians, thus following a broader tendency among anti-Islamist Iranians.

In the future, encounters between ethnic Zoroastrians (especially those pushing for re- [60] form) and Neo-Zoroastrians may become more frequent and stir further debates in the ethnic Zoroastrian communities. If ethnic Zoroastrians are willing to give up traditional conventions, especially that of strict endogamy, the religious interest of Iranians and others in Zoroastrianism has the potential of becoming an opportunity for actual revival. Other “spiritual elite communities” are confronted with the same questions, although the fascination stirred by Zoroastrianism is quite unique. Eventually, ethnic Zoroastrians may find a “middle way,” allowing for conversions while maintaining their distinct ethno-religious identity, not unlike the *modus vivendi* that has historically developed in Judaism.

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