

On the Problems of Studying Modern Zoroastrianism

Sarah Stewart

Arguably, the problems of studying modern Zoroastrianism are not dissimilar to those associated with the study of Zoroastrianism in the ancient world. In both cases, the idea of orality and how to deal with it is an issue that demands attention. And in both cases, one of the problems concerns exegesis; in other words, how to interpret or attribute meaning to oral texts that are literally “moving” through time and making themselves relevant to the different social, political, and religious eras they pass through. Only when an oral text is finally committed to writing is it possible to discern the length of its transmission and the various historical eras it may represent. Even then, there are other versions of the same narrative that show different lines of oral transmission. Scholars have learned to recognize which parts have remained static and why, and which have adapted to the times.¹

Some attempt has been made by the present writer to link the two areas of study, ancient and modern, in an exploration of a Gujarati song, the *Ātaš nu Gīt*, or “Song of the Fire,” as compared with the *Yašts*, hymns addressed to divinities of the Zoroastrian pantheon.² The song bears the structural characteristics of oral composition in much the same way as the *Yašts*. In both instances, there is little sense of temporality. Not only had the texts moved a long way from their roots by the time they were written down, but they are cumulative, reflecting a multiplicity of times, events, ideas, and people. In the song, we can substantiate some of the poetic allusions to historical events, not least of which is the founding of the *Ātash Bahrām* in Navsari in 1765. This suggests a developed or intentional structure whereby explicit sections in the text allow for new material to replace that which had become obsolete. I have suggested that a similar structure may have existed in those *Yašts* that contain legendary material. The structure of the “sections,” *karde*, appears fixed while at the same time sufficiently flexible to allow new material to be added to an existing corpus and older material discarded.

More challenging is the idea that the oral nature of ancient texts has a bearing on the way Zoroastrians understand and speak about their religion today. This is relevant to studies on contemporary Zoroastrianism should we wish to connect the living faith with the teachings of the Avesta and later religious texts. For example, after texts were written down and so became “fixed,” regional variations would have continued in oral transmission together with

¹ It should be noted that some of the transcriptions used in this paper, for example “sh,” are phonetic and do not necessarily correspond to the letter in the original language.

² See Stewart 2007a:145-46 and 2007b:62-64.

accompanying differences in ritual. It is possible too that as priests continued to interpret and attribute meaning to religious texts, lay understanding of those texts moved at a different pace and may have developed differently. As will be seen in the studies below, the laity develops metanarratives as a means of understanding doctrine and teaching. Particular tropes are repeated and appear in stories that serve a specific purpose within a religious context.³

If not meaning, then usage may change more readily in an oral rather than a written tradition. For example, the *Ātaš nu Gīt* was composed for the inauguration of an *Ātaš Bahrām*. When and why did it then become a wedding song? The performance retained its religious significance because of the purity laws surrounding it. On the other hand, it could have originated in Iran as a “song to the fire,” which was celebrated at weddings where the bride and groom circle a fire.⁴ It then came to India—where no sacred fires were established for a long time—and was used for the inauguration of the second *Ātaš Bahrām* but also retained its association with marriage. We just don’t know.

My contribution to this issue of *Oral Tradition* links the notion of oral texts or texts that began in oral transmission to Iranian literature more generally, and to the oral testimony that is increasingly used by those who study contemporary Zoroastrianism, or the “living faith.” Its purpose is to explore the question of how to establish a benchmark by which we can analyze or interpret qualitative data, in this case oral testimony, that deals with religious ideas and practices. Two modern studies that have been built around oral testimony obtained in Iran will be drawn upon here. The questions or problems that arise from them will be discussed with reference to my recent project, *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran: Oral Texts and Testimony*.

There are several points to make by way of introduction. First is the fact that the religious texts of Zoroastrianism have been subject to a lengthy process of translation, interpretation, and redaction. As knowledge of the ancient languages, Avestan and Pahlavi, together with knowledge of the Indo-Iranian tradition has increased, so scholars have sought to establish a coherent and stable account of Zoroastrianism through the ages based upon a chronology of language, theme, and text. A contraction of this chronology necessarily conflates the Avestan with the Pahlavi material resulting in a distillation of information on doctrine, teaching, ritual, and observance. This body of material is commonly referred to as the “classical tradition.” The problem that arises for those studying the living faith is that this interpretation of the religion may not resonate with Zoroastrians themselves. On the one hand, there is a foundational understanding of what constitutes Zoroastrianism, established mainly by non-Zoroastrians; on the other hand, there is the understanding of the faith by the faithful. While the modern researcher has a clear advantage over those studying the ancient texts insofar as they can engage with informants directly, they still need a benchmark by which to analyze their findings. And they also need to find common ground between their understanding of what constitutes Zoroastrianism and that of those who are the subject of inquiry.

Second, the extant religious corpus of texts is predominantly priestly, that is, compiled or

³ For the early transmission of Zoroastrianism, see Kreyenbroek 2013:51-67.

⁴ Circumambulating the fire took place either after the wedding ceremony or following the *arush keshi* ceremony when the bride and groom are received at the house where they will live as husband and wife. See Stewart 2020:270; Vahman and Asatrian 2002:39, 96.

composed by members of a hereditary priesthood for use in ritual performance and priestly instruction. Lay religious observance was not part of the body of oral literature that was eventually committed to writing, so there is a paucity of material, and consequently of knowledge, about the laity in ancient times. Lay usage of religious texts is quite diverse. For example, the corpus of daily prayers contained in the prayer book, *Khordeh Avesta*, comprises a composite selection of Avestan, Pahlavi, and Pazand texts. The nature of oral texts means that themes and narratives have passed through different genres of literature at different times. Prayers include verses in Old Avestan (*Gāthās*), Young Avestan (*Vīdēvdād*), and structures and themes from the *Yāsts*, as can be found in the *Niyāyeš*. Moreover, the laity does not always distinguish between what we might call popular and religious literature. In Iran, the epic *Shāhnāmeḥ*, which to some extent draws on the *Yāsts*, is revered and memorized in much the same way as are the prayers. Likewise, a performance of the *Ātaš nu Gūt* was traditionally held in the precincts of the fire temple and copies of the texts subject to purity laws.

My third point is to do with methodology. Scholars whose research belongs to the field of religious studies have usually trained in one or more subject disciplines: philology and/or linguistics, literature, history, archaeology, or anthropology. Zoroastrianism as a religion can thus be imagined and constructed by reference to a particular category of expertise. The philologist may apply his or her knowledge to the ancient religious texts linking them to monuments and artifacts, rock inscriptions, epic poetry, and secondary sources. The archaeologist is likely to derive meaning primarily from material culture rather than from texts. In the twentieth century, studies began to emerge about Zoroastrianism as it was being followed by its adherents. In Iran, such studies have mainly been conducted by anthropologists: M. Boyce (1963-4),⁵ M. Fischer (1970-71), J. Kestenberg-Amighi (1972-73), N. Fozi (2006-08). Research that engages with those who practice Zoroastrianism in Iran, India, or the diaspora may entail the collection of qualitative and/or quantitative data via interviews and the distribution of questionnaires. Or it may draw on conversations that contribute to other sources of information such as archival, media, or documentary evidence. There are various methodologies employed to gather such data that largely depend on the subject discipline of the study. Thus, the collection of oral testimony, as well as the purpose for which it is being collected, are significant factors when looking at the problems that may arise in its interpretation.

Zoroastrian religious texts do not feature significantly in the anthropological studies noted above, except for Michael Fischer and Mary Boyce's work. In both these cases, a detailed account of rituals, *sofrehs*, and prayers draws on textual material.

Three studies will be discussed here, beginning with Boyce's *A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism* (1977) that focused on the village of Sharifābād on the outskirts of Yazd.⁶ A similar study, insofar as its focus is the religious practice of the inhabitants of a village in Iran, is

⁵ Mary Boyce was an Iranist with a background in Iranian languages, archaeology, anthropology, and English. Her work in the Zoroastrian village of Sharifābād drew on historical documents and her knowledge of Zoroastrian religious texts but was derived mainly from informants (both priestly and lay) and observation of lay religious practices and priestly rituals.

⁶ *Persian Stronghold* was the result of the Ratanbai Kartrak series of lectures that Boyce gave in 1975 and which no doubt shaped the format of the book, which was published just over twelve years after her stay in Sharifābād.

Reinhold Loeffler's *Islam in Practice* (1988). Both this study and my *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran: Oral Texts and Testimony* (Stewart 2018 and 2020) are based on the collection of qualitative data. All three studies adopt different approaches to the question of orality and what constitutes mainstream or "orthodox" religion.

Mary Boyce's ethnographic work in Sharifābād was undertaken over twelve months during which she stayed with the family of the mayor (*kad-khodā*) of the village and head of the Anjoman, Agha Rustam Noshiravan Belivani. She became part of the household whose members shared with her their understanding and knowledge of the religion and allowed her to observe their daily devotional life and to take part in the seasonal festivities as they took place through the year. She was able also to accompany the parish priest, Dastur Khodadad Shehriar Neryosangi—who had married into the Belivani family—on many of his journeys undertaken to perform rituals in neighboring villages.

Boyce's bird's-eye view of Zoroastrianism as practiced in the rural context was accompanied by in-depth studies of a range of topics, from farming to the architecture of Zoroastrian houses as well as religious rituals and observances, that were published following her stay in Iran. These included articles on the sacrificial offerings to fire and water, the Zoroastrian calendars, festivals, and fire temples. Information for these topics no doubt derived in large part from the copious field notes that she made during her stay, which ran to over fifty notebooks. Boyce's fieldnotes are exemplary in their detail and the fact that they cover all aspects of village life including, for example, the *qanāt* irrigation system, the fruit and vegetables grown in the various villages, the climate and topography, demographics, and kinship networks. Religious ceremonies and beliefs are well documented in the notebooks accompanied by detailed sketches of architectural features of buildings, particularly the fire temples, which vary from village to village. Boyce also made recordings of priestly ceremonies and took a great many photographs to complement her writing.⁷

If we regard Boyce's notebooks as a primary source, then *Persian Stronghold* was the scholar's more discursive analysis of the material. It was presented within the context of Boyce's scholarly work on the Zoroastrian religion based on her interpretation and understanding of the religious texts. The book also reflects the contemporary academic milieu concerning anthropological studies, as well as ideas about orality and the oral transmission of texts. In her ethnographic study, Boyce interprets her findings according to her understanding of the religion as a historical continuum (1989:16):

That the orthodoxy of Sharifabad truly represented that of ancient Zoroastrianism can be established from the scriptures of the faith (the Avesta); from its secondary literature in Pahlavi (dating in the final redactions largely from Sasanian and early Islamic times); and from sporadic notices by foreign writers in the past—Greek, Roman, Syrian, Armenian.

The priestly sacrificial ritual is an example of how Boyce draws on sources from different epochs to trace continuity. Here, she cites Herodotus' description of lay sacrifice performed by a priest in

⁷ Mary Boyce's notebooks and photographs are held in the Ancient India and Iran Trust, Cambridge.

the open air with the blood sacrifice she witnessed at Pir-e Hrisht in the 1960s.⁸ This connection provides her with a link to the performance of the Yasna she witnessed in Sharifābād when she was there.

Finding and tracing continuities in religious ideas and practices from prehistoric times down to the present day presupposes an original form, which over time can be understood as being “orthodox.” In the case of Zoroastrianism, it also tends to project an essentialist notion of the figure of Zarathustra who, in Boyce’s view, was prophet, priest, and teacher. The problem here is that we know very little about religious thought and ritual in the context of Zarathustra’s purported time and place. As Almut Hintze (2019:27) has noted, the Avesta does not contain a structured account of the prophet’s teachings but, rather, allusions to concepts that we can assume were understood at the time when the Avestan language was in use. To reconstruct the religious thought that underpinned such allusions a scholar needs to draw on other sources, such as the Vedas of the Brahmanic tradition in India and/or the later Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts. The distance between the different corpora of texts, both in terms of time and space, means that “different pictures tend to emerge depending on which of the two ancillary sources is given more weight when constructing the conceptual world of the Avesta” (Hintze 2019:27-8). These different pictures can be imagined also as different traditions, rituals, and understandings of texts. Since the priesthood, at least from Sasanian times, formed a discrete hereditary group whose teachings were not always open to the laity, we can assume that they didn’t always match the lay understanding of texts once they came to be written down. There was thus room for another layer of variation when it came to religious practice.

The purpose of this paper is not to evaluate Boyce’s approach as such, but rather to look at how it determined her view of the oral material she collected. There are three points we can make here. First, there is the notion of orthodoxy and whether or not the villagers Boyce lived amongst shared her views on what constituted orthodox Zoroastrian doctrine, ritual, and belief. For example, there are customs and rituals that in Boyce’s view depart from the mainstream orthodox religion. She devotes one of her notebooks, titled “Folklore and Magic,” to a detailed description of these practices—mainly undertaken by women to ward off evil spirits (*jinn*s)—but is dismissive of them in her book, where she says: “Some weaker souls succumbed, indeed, at times to practicing a mild white magic in an attempt to control these unseen beings and to force them to remove sickness or blight or other misfortunes” (Boyce 1989:21). The *Sopra-ye Sabzī* was a rite that involved the sacrifice of a black hen and invoked Shah Pari, a supernatural figure associated both with malicious deeds and healing. While Boyce considers this rite “thoroughly irreligious,” she is sympathetic to those who perform it. The *Sopra-ye Shah Pari*, on the other hand, seems to have been accepted by Sharifābādis more generally (1989:67):

Although the Sharifābādi elders looked askance even at the *Sopra-ye Shah Pari*, as an unnecessary rite outside the mainstream of orthodox observance, it is readily understandable why their womenfolk, suffering from two great pressures—the need to bear sons and the need to keep the purity laws—should have sought help in diverse ways when they failed under either. There were other small rites . . . That belonged to folklore and magic rather than to religion.

⁸ See Mary Boyce (1982:179-80 and 1989:246).

This passage sums up Boyce's sense of what constitutes religious orthodoxy and what lies outside that continuum and belongs to a different category.

The second point is to do with texts and whether or not Boyce's informants shared her knowledge and understanding of their meaning. While priests and laymen and women with whom Boyce engaged were willing to give detailed descriptions of specific rituals and observances, it is not so clear whether they made the same connections that she did concerning their links to doctrine as set out in the Avestan and Pahlavi texts. For example, priests were familiar with texts such as the *Vīdēvdād* and the rituals surrounding purificatory ceremonies. They were also well versed in the liturgy of the *Yašt-e Srōš* (Yasna), which was solemnized regularly for different purposes (Boyce 1989:214 and n. 5). While it seems that the laity was (and still is) aware of the significance of purity laws and their connection to evil, both in Boyce's time and more recently, the text that many are familiar with in this respect is the relatively late Pahlavi text of the *Ardā Virāz Nāmag*, which people read in Persian and which describes explicitly the torments a soul will suffer in hell should its bad deeds outweigh its good ones at the time of individual judgment. According to interviews in *Zoroastrian Voices* Volumes I and II, whether religious education was undertaken by priests, a local teacher, or at home, it consisted of learning the Avestan prayers by rote. There seems to have been no discussion of texts and their transmission, nor of such notions as Zoroaster's radical dualism to which Boyce refers (1989:20). The doctrine of the *Ameša Spentas* (Pahlavi *Amahraspands*), she suggests, "was inculcated in the orthodox from childhood." But whereas Boyce outlines this doctrine with reference to the Pahlavi text of the *Bundahišn*, it is by no means clear that people were taught the creation story from this or other Pahlavi texts or that they thought of it as part of a reform of the old Iranian religion as Boyce describes it (1989:17):

. . . but Zoroaster saw it as the planned and purposeful handiwork of the supreme Lord, Ohrmazd, helped by the six great Amahraspands whom he had first called into being, and who, with his own Creative Spirit, made up a mighty Heptad.

Although villagers—priest and laity alike—evidently recognized a symbolic representation of the seven creations in the Yasna ritual, it seems likely that they derived this knowledge from the rituals and ceremonies that were passed down through the generations (Boyce 1989:51). These included the recitation of Avestan prayers and—in the case of priests—the Yasna liturgy, but perhaps without an understanding of their place in the religious corpus of texts (see below). Concerning the figure of Zarathustra, it appears that villagers were more familiar with the legends associated with his birth and imprisonment than with the implementation of a new system of belief. Thus, there is no evidence that they understood the intricacies of the various calendar reforms and their impact on Zarathustra's teachings, for example, on the separation of Nowruz from the other *gāhāmbārs*, which Boyce suggests was not Zarathustra's intention when he founded the seven great feasts.

The third point goes back to the problem for researchers of establishing a benchmark by which to evaluate the religious views and observances of informants. In Boyce's case, there exists a tension between the literary version of Zoroastrianism that comprises a collection of doctrines and teachings in different languages compiled orally over a long period and the

religious beliefs and practices of Zoroastrians in the contemporary context. Her approach is to extrapolate from both and meet somewhere in the middle. *Persian Stronghold* was greeted with some ambivalence in Iran. Some resented the portrayal of what to them was unsophisticated, ritually based village Zoroastrianism. Others, however, recognized and admired her rigorous detail, saying she had recorded what was still in living memory with the eye of a camera. Boyce's notebooks, on the other hand, provide a timeless record that could not be faulted by those who provided her with information.

Less than a decade after Boyce completed her fieldwork in Sharifābād, another study was underway in similar circumstances. Reinhold Loeffler spent three years (1970-71 and 1976) gathering information via in-depth interviews with members of a Shiite population in a large tribal village in the Zagros mountains. He returned there from 1980-81 and again in 1983 to compare how religious practices and attitudes towards Islam had changed since the Revolution. There are distinct differences in methodology between Boyce's and Loeffler's approaches. Whereas Boyce made extensive field notes from which she wrote up her account of Zoroastrian religious life, Loeffler's fieldwork involved interviews that he reproduced in translation. As an anthropologist, his study devoted more time to the sociological and less to the historical background of the village. He was not inclined towards establishing continuities in Islam, perhaps because the combined evidence of the Qur'ān and the figure of Mohammad provided a consistency of time, place, and language when compared to the oral transmission of the Avesta. Unlike Boyce, one of Loeffler's main aims was to validate "what we have rather depreciatingly labelled popular beliefs or folk religion" (1988:1). To achieve this, he ignores the Shi'a religion formulated by clerics, and focuses instead on the religious world views of twenty-one informants (selected from a group of seventy-five). Within this group, his primary interest lies with the farming community rather than with those employed in the city or industry. The nature of the relationships he needed to build with informants meant that he did not include women in his interviews. A range of devotional practices, for example, to do with foods prepared for special occasions, as well as women's rituals and rites of passage, were thus omitted.

Loeffler pays scant attention to the different schools of thought within Islam or the distinctiveness of the Shi'a faith and its Iranian context. In avoiding what he terms "doctrines" and "norms" (1988:3), he is more interested in how people understand them and adapt or deviate from them to fit their circumstances. For example, he observes that the "Five Pillars of Islam" do not adapt well to his particular rural setting where people are unable to make the journey to Mecca or to fast during *Ramadan* given the nature of their work in the fields. Such work also makes it difficult to maintain purity rituals. Loeffler suggests that there is a shift away from ritual orthodoxy towards an existential understanding of the religion whereby villagers believe in a compassionate God who will reward them for showing compassion to others: "to give to the poor is better than to make the pilgrimage to Mecca" (14-15). At the heart of the villagers' religious worldview is the notion of giving in order to receive. Thus, Loeffler interprets all the various *sofrehs*, alms-giving, gifts and offerings made in thanksgiving or to ward off evil, as well as rituals for the dead, as being part of an endeavor to seek divine help.

Loeffler outlines his editing methodology in some detail, observing that the written word limits the information transmitted in the original interview. Even though he allows each

informant to present their views and keeps his translations as close to the original as possible, he points out that (1988:4):

Much of what is conveyed by the immediate impact of the individual's personality is lost. Lost also are the cues and messages transmitted by facial expressions, gestures, enunciations, and intonations which function as a running commentary to the spoken words. And conventions of style and translation suppress subtleties of meaning as the diction of some persons needs more editing than that of others to render meanings intelligible.

Such audio/visual expressions are at the forefront of an oralist's understanding of how to interpret what is being conveyed. It is easier to reproduce passages *verbatim* rather than summarizing what people have said. How researchers categorize their subjects is important here. Loeffler chooses to name his interviewees either by their profession or by an attribute, which has the effect of externalizing that particular quality. He then adds a religious category to their title. For example, "The Old Teacher: Idealistic Humanism"; "The Young Teacher: Rationalism and Orthodoxy"; "The Old Hunter: Familiar of the Jinn"; "The Calm: Grassroot Morality and Cosmic Harmony"; "The Wealthy: Legitimization of Good Fortune"; "The Poor: Suppressed Revolt." While it seems unlikely that these categories would have accorded with people's self-understanding, they serve the author's purpose of shaping the structure of the interviews, which are prefaced by a short biography. For example, the first question addressed to a man who is a prosperous and well respected farmer, "The Wealthy," is: "What do you think is the source of your success?" (Loeffler 1988:213). Questions on religious views form part of all the interviews and add a dimension that only such oral testimony can provide, namely, to illuminate people's views with anecdotal evidence, personal context, and experience. They also enable us to understand how villagers' religious views relate to the author's theoretical framework. In a sense, it is this framework that we could call the benchmark by which Loeffler evaluates and analyzes his material. The synopses provided at the end of the book offer an interpretation of the interviews that belongs to an altogether different context. Here, Loeffler elaborates on the subtitle that he has accorded each person. For example (1988:284-88):

The style of the CRAFTSMAN [Modernist Purism] is a rather radical form of modernist purism and relativism, in which Islam is supposedly purged from all manipulative, nonsensical, non-essential, and harmful appendages. . . .

The two TRADERS [Virtuoso Devotionalism and Literal Zealotry] maintain a type of traditional, popular orthodoxy, incorporating into the strictly orthodox doctrines an abundance of marginally orthodox, folkloric, and magical beliefs and practices—virtually all are there. . . .

The REPRESENTATIVE [of the People: Islamic Activism] models an Islam of social activism and liberation, put into practice with the zeal and impact reminiscent of an old-testamentarian prophet. . . .

The world view of the YOUNG TEACHER [Rationalism and Orthodoxy] represents a haphazard

mixture of rationalistic ideas, emphasizing education, unconditional individual responsibility, and psychological explanations, with a firm belief in all fundamental, orthodox doctrines and—somewhat strangely—a variety of folkloric and magical practices.

It seems that though Loeffler is keen to show the villagers to be devout Muslims, he nonetheless makes a distinction—in much the same way that Boyce does—between what he considers to be orthodox and non-orthodox, or popular, religion. Whereas in Boyce's study, the benchmark seems to be tenets of the religion derived ultimately from religious texts, in Loeffler's case, he assumes an established, clerical form of Shi'a Islam in Iran. He draws on social theory and anthropological studies to organize and analyze his oral material (1988:246-50). The religious diversity of his informants and the formation of their world views are not discussed within their codified religious system but rather within the framework of academic disciplines.

The third study discussed here, *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran, Oral Texts and Testimony* (Volumes I and II) had the benefit of both previous studies, together with a methodology developed especially for similar work on the Parsi community in Mumbai in 1994 (Kreyenbroek 2001). The thinking about how to define religion today has become increasingly interdisciplinary. Scholars such as anthropologist Talal Asad (1993:1-3 and 11-13), for example, demonstrate how religion is inextricably linked to the formation of modernity. They are wary of talking about a range of concepts that derive from a particular moment in Western academic work and applying it to different cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts. European missionaries took to the colonies a template for what was thought to be the ideal religion, Christianity. From this time forward we begin to recognize this template in early studies of Zoroastrianism, for example, the idea that “belief” and “God” (a transcendent male divinity) are inextricably linked, which leads to the idea that the secularism of today with its emphasis on rational thought, contrasts with belief systems, which are portrayed as “retrogressive and inferior” (Hawthorne 2017:xiv). Western influence may account for the fact that Parsis like to point out that their religion is based on rational thought. Iranian Zoroastrians maintain that their religion emanates from the intellect. The idea of a hierarchy in religions is also characteristic of this period of European expansion. Belonging to the upper category were those that included organized worship and embraced an ethical code resulting in rewards and punishments in the hereafter.⁹ Animistic religions, often associated with indigenous peoples, were considered in need of reform.

The question of how to present the idea of religion within one cultural milieu to someone who belongs to another was addressed in the third study with recourse to Zoroastrians themselves. It quickly became evident that there were different understandings about what constituted *din*, the word that translates most directly to “religion.” It should be noted here that the word in Avestan, *daēnā*, means “vision” or “world view” (Hintze 2016:77) and is thus associated with thinking and belief rather than with physical vision. People we consulted agreed on four religious functions or categories that came under the umbrella of *din*. The first of these was “revelation/inspiration.” Here again, there is no direct translation in Persian for this concept. The words *vahy* and *elhām* come close, though being Arabic words they are associated with the

⁹ See Talal Asad 1993:41-43 under the heading, “The Construction of Religion in Early Modern Europe.”

Abrahamic religions, and people were not always comfortable with the idea that this concept belonged in Zoroastrianism. They often said that the *din* and the *Gāthās* of Zarathustra belonged to the category of divine revelation whereas other parts of the Avesta were their *mazhab* (broadly equivalent to a “school” of Muslim law).¹⁰

Translations and interpretations of the *Gāthās* by Zoroastrian scholar-priests, such as Mowbeds Rostam Shahzādi (1912-2000) and Firuz Āzargoshasp (1912-1996), were influenced in part by the reformist ideas they had absorbed during their priestly training in India. They also followed the teaching of Iranian scholars, such as Ibrahim Purdavoud, who owed much to the work of European orientalist scholars such as Bartholomae, Mills, Geldner, and Meillet. Finally, some influences are the product of belonging to a Muslim majority population, for example, ideas put forward about traditional Zoroastrian practices such as *khwēdōdāh* (“inter-kinship marriage”) by Muslim scholars like Hāshem Rāzi. As far as the Zoroastrian laity in Iran is concerned there are thus many strands of influence that can be recognized in some of the views expressed in interviews. Examples include approaches to the nature of good and evil and the practice of animal sacrifice (Stewart 2018:12-19).

The second category belonging to *din* is “doctrine and teaching” (*āmuzesh-hā-ye din*). Priests often explain the meaning of religious texts with reference to the great poets such as Abu’l-Qāsem Ferdowsi and Jalāl al-Din Mohammad Rumi with whom the laity are familiar. They sometimes put concepts such as good and evil into metaphorical language to make them more readily understood. Shahzādi maintains his belief in the monotheistic nature of Zoroastrianism when he speaks of creation as being the work of a single deity. At the same time, he conveys a sense of the dualism inherent within the religion when he says (Stewart 2016:358):

. . . how can day and night, which are so different from each other, have been created by one creator? . . . How is it possible for rose and thorn to have been created thus? When we reach out to pick the beautiful rose, which emits its sweet scent, should our fingers touch its thorns and be injured? . . . How is it possible that a god should give us our lives, and the same should take them away from us?

The term *din dabireh* is used to describe the corpus of the religious teaching contained in the Avesta. It is also the term used for the Avestan script. An interviewee puts this into a contemporary context when asked whether emigration from Iran post-1979 poses difficulties and challenges faced for the Zoroastrian population. She replies (Stewart 2018:218):

Not at all. I think things are very good. At present the Islamic Republic is working in favor of the Zoroastrian minority. There was a time when I was a student when we did not have to attend religious classes and we were not graded either. Now my child has to attend [Zartoshti] religious classes and he is graded. So his knowledge of religion has increased. He must learn the *din dabireh* script, which I did not have to learn. Now my children’s knowledge about our religion is much better than mine, because I went to school in the reign of the Shah. Those who say they are under pressure—to tell you the truth that is not so. I go to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic

¹⁰ See Stewart 2018:10-12 and 20.

Guidance and they know I am from a minority religion. They show me a lot of respect and they work with us. In any country, in whatever situation, if you act against the rules and laws of that country you will get into trouble.

A clear distinction is made between the *din dabireh* and what is sometimes termed *adabiyāt* literature when referring to the Middle Persian books, which are not thought to have the same degree of authority as the Avestan literature. Shahzādi uses Islamic terminology when he says that, apart from the principal teachings of the Zoroastrian religion which are contained in the *Gāthās*, other Avestan texts resemble the minor rules of the religion (*foru'-e din*), the religious law (*shari'a*), and Zoroastrian thought or interpretation (*fekr*). He also refers to religion in connection with ceremonies or rituals (*din o āyin*), saying that these are not as important as the religion itself. It can be seen here that when breaking down the concept of religion into categories, there are different levels of importance attached to various subdivisions, which need to be understood in order to give meaning to the ideas and views of interviewees.

Concerning the third category of *din*, ritual and the priesthood, people expressed a variety of views and took different approaches. Expectations of priests today include correct recitation of Avestan prayers and the parts of liturgy recited in rituals. This pertains not only to pronunciation but also to the tone of voice. A priest comments on the fact that tone should be melodious and attractive to listen to (Stewart 2018:272). A lady complains that a priest recites the Avesta so badly that she would like to slap his face when he has finished (213). Views are generally divided on whether or not the meaning of the Avestan prayers needs to be taught and understood. For some, the power of prayer lies in being recited correctly and regularly, while others seek to know the meaning of the words (204):

. . . . Each time we pray we are endowed with a [self-induced] belief which then gives us a power and determination to work better and perform our jobs better. This all depends upon whether we believe in such powers, if we do not believe in such powers, *niyāyesh* will have no effect. Fire ceremonies and *niyāyesh* do not bring you in touch with God, it strengthens your spirit; there is no God present between the *niyāyesh* and us, it is we who become godly through the *niyāyesh*.

The fourth and fifth categories are to do with religious observance or devotional life (*ānce ke mardom anjām midahand*), and faith (*kish*). Both these categories cover a broad range of subjects, and since most of our interviews were with laymen and women rather than with priests, there was much to learn here about people's religious views. I will mention those that demonstrate a distinctly oral understanding of the doctrines and teachings that are enshrined in Zoroastrian religious literature—in other words, how priests make teachings accessible to the laity (as shown in the example above, where Mowbed Shahzādi explains the doctrine of good and evil) and how the laity perceive such teachings when communicating with each other. It is this aspect of religious understanding that can be compared with the approaches of Boyce and Loeffler, discussed earlier in this paper, and how all three studies undertake the evaluation of qualitative data.

Unlike the approach to Zoroastrian texts that resulted in the construction of the “classical tradition,” the Zoroastrian laity doesn't differentiate in the same way between categories of texts

(other than those described above regarding the *din dabireh* and *adabiyāt* literature). Rather, they associate certain texts with particular themes. Thus, ideas about the day of judgment and the afterlife are informed more by the Persian text of the *Ardā Virāf Nāmeḥ*—particularly the illustrated version—rather than the *Gāthās* or Pahlavi texts such as the *Bundahishn* and the *Rivāyat* accompanying the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*. Eschatological ideas are also informed by people’s dreams and visions, as illustrated in secular literature such as the *Shāhnāmeḥ* and *Vis u Rāmin*, rather than the Pahlavi texts (Stewart 2018:5 and n. 12).

Notable here is the fact that non-Zoroastrian secular literature, such as the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, is referred to within a Zoroastrian context. One example is a story told by a man in the Yazdi village of Zeinābād whose family once owned a valuable illustrated copy of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, which was stolen from his house in the village. He recounted a story about Rostam and Ashu Zardosht [Zarathustra] from his family’s book in which he included details to illustrate a point or a value particularly relevant to Zoroastrianism. He explains how Rostam-e Zāl was sent by Esfandiār to find Zardosht. He arrived hungry and thirsty after a long journey only to find that there was no one to greet him and no music befitting the arrival of a hero. When leaving he sees Zartosht in the distance coming down the mountain. After greeting each other Rostam asks Zartosht where he has been, to which he replies, “A strand of my hair had fallen and I went to bury it behind the mountain because I did not want to pollute or cause a health risk, that is to say, we are very aware of health risks and it is a sin to touch fallen hair.” The story continues and Rostam goes into Zartosht’s house expecting to be fed but sees there is no fire or bowl or saucepan in place. Despite this, he is given a meal that “tastes of Paradise.” As a result of talking to Zartosht about his religion, Rostam realizes that he can no longer go to the desert to hunt or engage in wars and fighting as he is used to doing, because these things are sinful (Stewart 2020:179).

When it came to analyzing responses to the questions from the five categories that constitute “religion” which were drawn up for the *Zoroastrian Voices* project, it became clear that discussion within a notional framework of Zoroastrian orthodoxy was not going to be a useful means by which to measure people’s approach to their religion. The question remained, how do we evaluate or interpret people’s religious views? All three studies discussed here are not concerned so much with doctrines and norms, but with how people make sense of them. In Loeffler’s case, perhaps with the confidence of being able to rely on the well documented tradition of Shi’a Islam, he accepts doctrines and norms as a given and describes how his interviewees deviate from them. In other words, how they adapt and reappropriate the basic teachings enshrined in the five pillars of Islam: “. . . neglect of the orthodox ritual does not make them an irreligious people . . .” (Loeffler 1988:15). Boyce, on the other hand, is at pains to explain how villagers in Sharifābād adhere to the teachings of Zoroastrianism, excusing them from any deviation she encountered. This approach reflects perhaps the fragility of a religious tradition that, unlike Islam, is based on the oral transmission of texts that do not originate with a known person or an identifiable place. The third study, *Zoroastrian Voices*, has tended to sidestep the question of orthodoxy or academic analysis and deliberately avoids placing people’s religious

views in a framework or context which they might not recognize.¹¹ This renders the material more of a primary source than an analytical study.

The problems of studying modern Zoroastrianism are considerable, but perhaps not insurmountable. The challenge is to find a synthesis between an incomplete and abstruse religious corpus, the translation and interpretation of that religious corpus mainly by non-Zoroastrians, and the understanding of Zoroastrianism by its adherents in Iran, India, and the diaspora. The tendency is to view the first two categories as having greater authority when it comes to the true nature of the religion than the third. One of the reasons perhaps is that communities such as those studied by Boyce in Sharifābād or by Loeffler in Southern Iran belonged to an isolated locality whose people were not expected to have the same access to learning as those living in a metropolis. It may have been concluded that their unworldliness might limit their education, knowledge, and understanding.¹² In fact, however, in Iran today the religion is largely preserved and maintained by the laity. Whereas traditionally, Zoroastrian priests were considered the repositories of religious knowledge and the authors of religious texts and authorities on ritual practice, their influence began to diminish from the nineteenth century onwards. In Iran the numbers of the priesthood dwindled, so that today there are few hereditary priests left.

It could be argued that the laity played a much larger part in transmitting the religion historically than is generally accepted. It has been assumed that, since the laity would not have understood the Avestan language once it was no longer spoken, they would have had little or no influence on theological development. It is also thought that since the laity rarely had access to written texts, people's knowledge of the religion would have been limited. But neither of these two factors take into account the oral transmission of texts, upon which the laity was dependent in the same way as priests. The text of the *Ātash nu Git* referred to above, although it now exists in written form, is a characteristically oral account. The domestication of a priestly ritual that took place in a fire temple into a ceremony in celebration of fire that took place in the home is an example of how laypeople adapted (rather than popularized) a religious act of worship.

We can perhaps recognize a generic idea of "laity" in the accounts of villagers in all three of the studies outlined above. One way to mediate the view that there is such a thing as religious "orthodoxy" and that this is constituted mainly by priests, scholars, and written texts, is to take a different approach to the religious community. Here, we might draw on the ideas of the eighteenth-century theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, when he talked about the theologizing role of the community. He believed "religion" to be a continuous process dependent upon the participation and dynamic activity of those engaged with it, for "Unlike other concepts and perceptions, religious communication is not to be sought in books" (2003:75-76). In his *Fourth Speech*, Schleiermacher asks of his German Protestant audience about the divide between priest and laity that had been labeled as the source of so much evil. He suggests that this is not so much a distinction between people, but merely between situations and functions. Thus, "Each person is a priest to the extent that he draws others to himself in the field that he has specially made his own and in which he can present himself as a virtuoso; each is a layperson to the extent that he

¹¹ See for example Borland 2003:320-33.

¹² See Asad 1993:8, where he talks about the notion of being "local."

follows the art and direction of another where he himself is a stranger in religion” (75-76).¹³ Theological ideas such as these, though far removed in time, place, and context, can perhaps be drawn upon to better understand expressions of religious behavior amongst Zoroastrians in today’s world.

SOAS University of London

References

- Asad 1993 Talal Asad. *Genealogies of Religion*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Borland 2003 Katherine Borland. “That’s Not What I Said: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research.” In *The Oral History Reader*. Ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. New York: Routledge. pp. 320-32.
- Boyce 1982 Mary Boyce. *A History of Zoroastrianism*. Volume 2. Leiden: Brill.
- Boyce 1989 _____. *A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism*. Lanham, NY: University Press of America.
- Hawthorne 2017 Sian M. Hawthorne, ed. *Gender: God*. Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA.
- Hintze 2016 Almut Hintze. “A Zoroastrian Vision.” In Williams et al. 2016:77-96.
- Hintze 2019 _____. “Defeating Death: Eschatology in Zoroastrianism and Judaism.” In *Irano-Judaica VII: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture throughout the Ages*. Ed. By Julia Rubanovich and Geoffrey Herman. Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East. pp. 23-72.
- Kreyenbroek 2001 Philip G. Kreyenbroek in collaboration with Shehnaz Neville Munshi. *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis Speak about Their Religion*. Richmond, UK: Curzon.
- Kreyenbroek 2013 _____. “The Zoroastrian Tradition from an Oralist’s Point of View.” In *Teachers and Teachings in the Good Religion: Opera Minora on Zoroastrianism*. Ed. By Kianoosh Rezania. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. pp. 51-67.
- Loeffler 1988 Reinhold Loeffler. *Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village*. New York: State University of New York Press.

¹³ Schleiermacher’s speeches were cited in Stewart 1998.

- Schleiermacher 2003 Friedrich Schleiermacher. *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Ed. by Richard Crouter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stewart 1998 Sarah Stewart. "On the Role of the Laity in the History of Zoroastrianism." Unpublished manuscript.
- Stewart 2007a _____. "Worship According to the *Yašts*." *Iran*, 45:137-51.
- Stewart 2007b _____. "Parsi Prayer and Song in India." In *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*. Ed. by John Hinnells and Alan V. Williams. New York: Routledge. pp. 59-77.
- Stewart 2016 _____. "Ideas of Self-Definition among Zoroastrians in Post-Revolutionary Iran." In Williams et al. 2016:353-70.
- Vahman and Asatrian 2002 Fereydoun Vahman and Garnik Asatrian. *Notes on the Language and Ethnography of the Zoroastrians of Yazd*. Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab.
- Williams et al. 2016 Alan Williams, Sarah Stewart, and Almut Hintze, eds. *Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History and Tradition*. London: I. B. Tauris.

This page is intentionally left blank.