

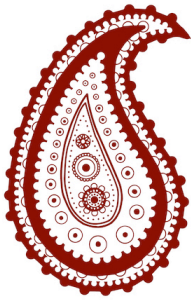
DĀNESH

THE OU UNDERGRADUATE
JOURNAL OF
IRANIAN STUDIES



The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA
College of International Studies
Department of International and Area Studies

Volume 2 (2017)



The UNIVERSITY *of* OKLAHOMA
College of International Studies
FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER
for IRANIAN and PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

DĀNESH: The OU Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies

Published under the auspices of:
The OU Farzaneh Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies,
the Department of International and Area Studies, and
the College of International Studies at
the University of Oklahoma

Volume 2 (2017)

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From the Faculty Advisor

This second volume of *DĀNESH* represents a significant expansion of the journal, both in terms of the scope of topics covered by the published articles, and by the growth of the journal's editorial team. Since its founding in 2016, *DĀNESH* has sought to provide a forum to showcase original research produced by Iranian Studies undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma. This volume of the journal was produced through the able leadership of **Elizabeth "Libby" Ennenga** (BA, 2017), as the journal's editor-in-chief. Under Libby's editorial leadership *DĀNESH* has continued to thrive as a forum for the study of all aspects of the history, culture, society, and politics of Iran and the Persianate world.

This year also marks the maturing of OU's Iranian Studies program into the newly christened **Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies**. As the program has grown, so too has the interest and dedication of OU students in the field of Iranian Studies. The publication of *DĀNESH*, a peer-reviewed journal published under the auspices of OU's Farzaneh Center and the OU College of International Studies, is also dedicated to highlighting the growing undergraduate program in Iranian Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

The name of the journal, *DĀNESH*, comes from the Persian word meaning *knowledge, learning, and wisdom*. We believe this is a fitting name for a journal that seeks to foster deep and compassionate understanding of one of the world's most culturally rich and historically complex civilizations. It is with this in mind that we present the second volume of *DĀNESH*.

Afshin Marashi
Farzaneh Family Chair in Modern Iranian History
Director, Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies

From the Editor-in-Chief

I am honored to have been a part of the creation of Volume Two of *DĀNESH*. After an exceptionally successful inaugural edition of the journal, I have been more than impressed to see the quality of this new edition. This journal is made up of outstanding research examining the rich history, numerous religions, complex political climate, and vibrant culture of Iran. I believe in the transformative power of knowledge, and each article published in *DĀNESH* proves the academic dialogue on Iranian Studies is thriving at the University of Oklahoma.

Many students worked diligently to create the second edition of the journal. I would like to acknowledge and thank all of the associate editors who were consistently a positive hardworking team throughout this process. I would also like to recognize the authors of Volume Two; whose distinguished works are the reason the journal is possible. Each author remained professional, involved, and patient throughout the entire process — and for that I thank you. To the University of Oklahoma Libraries and Printing Services, thank you for your necessary assistance to help make *DĀNESH* accessible to readers both digitally and in physical copies.

The quality of work and endless support given to this journal is a direct reflection of the growth of the Iranian Studies Program at the University of Oklahoma. Thank you to the Farzaneh family for their generous donations that have allowed students to continue to pursue their interests in Iranian Studies. Most of all, my sincerest gratitude goes to Dr. Afshin Marashi. Neither this journal, nor the Iranian Studies Program would be possible without your continued support of the students and their work. Your guidance, assistance, and support have made all the difference.

Libby Ennenga (BA 2017)
Editor-in-Chief

Bending without Breaking: Zoroastrianism Through the Centuries

Daniel Holland

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The Sassanian Empire had existed for over 400 years when a confluence of political instability, economic recession, and military decay brought on by decades of conflict with its Byzantine neighbors to the west left it vulnerable to the newly arriving soldiers of Islam.¹ The fall of the Sassanids to Muslim forces could have marked the death knell for Zoroastrianism, the beginning of a slow absorption of the faith and its adherents into the *ummah*.² However, despite the rise of Islam and the influence of Christian missionaries, Zoroastrianism has survived, amalgamating many concepts of Abrahamic monotheism with its unique blend of dualistic monotheism that made it the historic trailblazer of the monotheistic transition.

The History of Zoroastrianism

In order to examine the remarkable resilience of Zoroastrianism as an institution, it is first necessary to contextualize the religion that would grow to affect all the various parts of life in Iran. To speak of Zoroastrianism is to discuss one of the oldest religions in the entire world, with religious texts that predate the Quran, the New Testament, and possibly even the Torah, although it is hard to speak with certainty about texts that were already centuries old by the time Jesus of Nazareth was born. The earliest portion of the *Avesta*, the single most important and most sacred

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¹ Richard Foltz, *Religions of Iran: From Prehistory to the Present* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013), 103.

² The *ummah* is, in this context, the general Muslim religious community.

Zoroastrian text, is the *Gathas*, a collection of seventeen hymns attributed to the prophet Zoroaster himself.³

Zoroaster, considered the founder of the religion named after him, was actually most likely named *Zarathushtra* in his native Avestan tongue. The anglicized version of his name was taken from a fifth century BCE Greek transcription and is thought to be roughly translatable as “undiluted star,” while the original Avestan is thought to mean “he who can manage camels,” though there is a lively debate over this.⁴ While discussing the etymology of the creator’s name, it is perhaps pertinent to also mention that the Avestan name for the religion is *Mazdayasna*. This is a portmanteau of two words, “Mazda”, meaning “god” or “mind”, and “Yasna” meaning, “worship”. The former is also seen in *Ahura Mazda*, the name for the transcendent god of Zoroastrianism, and the latter is also the name for the principal text of the *Avesta*, the religion’s liturgical canon, which includes the *Gathas*. Put together, the term means something close to “worship of god.”⁵

Unlike myriad mythological founders of ancient religions, Zoroaster was a real historical figure traditionally thought to have lived in the sixth or fifth century BCE, though he is now dated as far back as the 17th century BCE (on the extreme end) in modern scholarship.⁶ The discrepancy between the two sets of dates is due to a difference in the methodology classical and modern scholars used to determine their preferred centuries. As pure speculation, it is perhaps possible that both claims are correct, but this would seemingly imply that Zoroaster was not the original author of the *Gathas*, which has not been an idea put forth in the mainstream study of the religion.

The claim of Zoroaster as a sixth century figure is founded upon actual Zoroastrian sources, which recorded him as living “258 years before Alexander,” who was born to King Phillip II of Macedon in 356 BCE. The

³ Irach Taraporewala, *Divine Songs of Zarathushtra: A Philological Study of the Gathas of Zarathushtra* (Bombay, 1951), 22.

⁴ This debate stems from a disagreement over the original form of the name—efforts at reconstructing the name from later languages have yielded two possibilities as the original form: “Zarantustra” and “Zaratustra”

⁵ Taraporewala, *Divine Songs of Zarathushtra*, 34.

⁶ Mary Boyce, *The History of Zoroastrianism Volume I* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), 47.

unusual dating method arose out of a dispute between the Zoroastrian priesthood, known as the Magi, and the kings of the Seleucid Empire that arose after the death of Alexander the Great.⁷ In response to the “Age of Alexander,” the kings developed as the new calendrical epoch, the priesthood tried to establish the “Age of Zoroaster,” counting back successive generations to determine that Zoroaster must have lived 258 years before Alexander.⁸

In contrast, modern scholarship has used linguistic and socio-cultural evidence to determine that the *Gathas*, authored by Zoroaster, must have been written relatively near the time that the *Rigveda* of Hinduism was written.⁹ Interestingly, if true, this would mean that Zoroastrianism may be able to challenge Hinduism for the title of oldest known surviving religion, in addition to almost certainly being the world’s oldest surviving monotheistic religion— although the claim of Zoroastrianism as a monotheistic religion is nuanced and will be explored later on. These scholars point to similarities between the Old Avestan of the *Gathas* and the Sanskrit of the *Rigveda*, as well as a general alignment of the customs described in the *Gathas*, with common social norms of the time period specified, to claim that both texts have a common Indo-Iranian origin. As the *Rigveda* is commonly thought to have been composed circa 1500-1200 BCE, the modern scholastic community speculates that the *Gathas* were most likely written circa 1100-1000 BCE, placing the life of Zoroaster in the same time frame.¹⁰

The Incompatibility of Dualistic Monotheism in Zoroastrianism

It is likely that the exact date the seventeen hymns of the *Gathas* were composed will never be known, so suffice it to say that the hymns, and the religion they started, are exceptionally old. This ancient status makes Zoroastrianism all the more intriguing when contextualized within religious history. At a time when polytheism ruled the day, Zoroastrianism was “combining a cosmogonic dualism and eschatological monotheism in

⁷ Solomon Nigosian, *The Zoroastrian Faith: Tradition and Modern Research* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 86.

⁸ The convention of dating events “Before Christ/Before Common Era” and “After Death/Common Era” is an example of a modern calendrical epoch

⁹ Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

a manner unique... among the major religions of the world.”¹¹ In layman’s terms, there is nothing like it. Zoroastrianism preaches that the cosmos was created from the interplay of two separate and distinct forces, while simultaneously maintaining that the ultimate destiny of mankind is to acknowledge *Ahura Mazda* as the one true god.

If there seems to be a certain level of tension between those two ideas, that is because there is. There are an estimated 2.6 million modern day followers of Zoroastrianism, primarily in Iran, India, and the western diaspora. Many of these modern adherents attempt to interpret the *Gathas* as containing the same monotheistic and moral teachings as the three main Abrahamic religions¹² in an effort to integrate contemporary religious and societal values with a religion that was born over two millennia ago.¹³ The emphasis here is on “modern,” as it is far from certain to what extent the idea of a monotheistic god, like that contained in a concept such as *tawhid*,¹⁴ was actually present in the Zoroastrianism of Classical Antiquity or Late Antiquity.¹⁵

With the time period and founding of Zoroastrianism established and the question of its dubious claim to monotheism raised, it is best to delve into the actual theology of the religion. The most basic tenet of the religion is a belief in *Ahura Mazda*, who was understood by Zoroaster to be the supreme god of the cosmos. There is a belief in some Zoroastrian circles

¹¹ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2.

¹² Judaism, Christianity, and Islam- the three main religions using the Old Testament and the legacy of Abraham.

¹³ Many Iranians fled the advance of the Muslim-Arab armies in the 7th century, forming a tight-knit Zoroastrian community on the western coast of India centered in Bombay, now known as Mumbai. They are now known as Parsi, the original Persian word that was changed to “Farsi” because the Arabic alphabet (possibly more accurately labelled an abjad, as the average Arabic writer often takes the vowels of a word to be implied) lacks a “P.”

¹⁴ *Tawhid* is best understood as meaning the indivisible oneness of god in Islam. It means in the most fundamental way possible that there is one god and one alone, a monotheism even more strict than that found in Christianity, which ascribes to the idea of a tripartite god (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, seen in the Nicene Creed, among other places).

¹⁵ Classical Antiquity refers to the time of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, while Late Antiquity, defined by the Sassanian and Byzantine Empires, refers to the time of transition between Classical Antiquity and the Medieval Period, which started circa the fall of Rome in 476.

that *Ahura Mazda* is the uncreated Creator, an obvious attempt at further “monotheizing” the religion, but the original Avestan texts do not specifically explicate any monotheistic concepts as comparatively nuanced.

What the texts do make clear is that *Ahura Mazda* is to be understood as the embodiment of *asha* (truth and order), the antithesis to the *druj* (falsehood and disorder) that is embodied by *Ahriman*.¹⁶ To couch the relationship in the terms of Abrahamic theology, *Ahriman* can be thought of as the “Satan” to *Ahura Mazda*’s “God”, although that is an imperfect and inevitably simplistic comparison.¹⁷ Another potential parallel would be found in the *yin* and *yang* of Chinese philosophy, although there is not the same idea of a necessary balance between *Ahura Mazda* and *Ahriman* that there is between *yin* and *yang*. A better way to understand the relationship is to refer to the ideas of the *Spenta Mainyu* of *Ahura Mazda* and the *Angra Mainyu* of *Ahriman*, which can be translated as the “Bounteous Principle” and the “Destructive Principle” respectively.¹⁸

The problems encountered with defining the relationship between *Ahura Mazda* and *Ahriman* arise from the aforementioned conflict between the ideas of dualism and monotheism in Zoroastrianism. On some level, the relationship between these two is that of the struggle between order and chaos, the battle between good and evil. On a different level, the relationship much more closely resembles traditional monotheistic concepts, with *Ahura Mazda* as the supreme god of the cosmos, superior to and above *Ahriman*, who is more of an unthinking force than an anthropomorphized being in this version of the relationship, and is better described as *Angra Mainyu*.

Anthropomorphization of the Divine in Zoroastrianism

Modern Zoroastrians have addressed the seemingly irreconcilable tension between the Zoroastrian concepts of coexistent cosmogonic duality and ultimate monotheism by turning the conflict between *Ahura Mazda* and *Ahriman* into a battle of general principles.¹⁹ Still, there is evidence of

¹⁶ Peter Clark, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction to an Ancient Faith* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010)

¹⁷ “Satan” and “God” primarily refer to the respective figures in Judaism and Christianity, as the relationship between the Allah and *Iblis Shaytan* of Islam is slightly different.

¹⁸ Clark, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction to an Ancient Faith*, 63.

¹⁹ Michael Witzel, *The Home of the Aryans* (Boston: Harvard University, 2003), 147.

the anthropomorphization of the two beings by the Zoroastrians of Classical and Late Antiquity. *Ahura Mazda* is often depicted as a man in Iran art and architecture, although it is possible that this is due to the admitted challenge an artist faces in trying to depict a shapeless force.²⁰ It is common to see bas relief or other works of art that show *Ahura Mazda* as a man, usually conquering a serpentine depiction of *Ahriman* or offering an Iranian shah the *farr*, a type of magical dust indicated by a diadem that implies the shah has been given divine right to rule.²¹

However, despite the widespread anthropomorphizing of the two in Persian art, Persian literature is often much less specific on the subject. For example, the *Gathas*, which are supposed to come directly from Zoroaster and form the foundation of Zoroastrianism, do not specifically refer to *Ahriman* as the divine enemy of *Ahura Mazda*. This is important because it demonstrates that Zoroaster did not necessarily intend for the relationship between *Ahura Mazda* and *Ahriman* to be construed as a battle between two gods, but rather as a conflict between two opposing forces. The anthropomorphized idea of *Ahriman* was developed later—possibly influenced by the concepts of devils from other religions, as there is a tendency of Zoroastrianism to incorporate the ideas of other religions that will be explored later on.

Because *Ahriman* was developed independently from the original creation of Zoroastrianism in the *Gathas*, *Ahura Mazda* can no longer be understood to be struggling against a personified adversary. This weakens the rationale for the interpretation of him to be considered similar to the kind of monotheistic god found in other religions. Taking into account the dualistic ideas inherent in the religion, as well as the lack of an embodied force of evil or chaos, it becomes much more plausible to interpret *Ahura Mazda* as more of a force for good than as an actual being.

Comparing Indo-Iranian Religions

With the relationship between *Ahura Mazda* and *Ahriman* clarified, it is necessary to elucidate the basic dynamics at work in the Zoroastrian cosmos in order to draw parallels between it and its Indo-Iranian Hindu and

²⁰ Dinshaw Jamshedji Irani and Rabindranath Tagore, *The Divine Songs Of Zarathushtra* (London: Macmillan, 1924), 45-55.

²¹ In the original Avestan, the concept of “farr” is actually contained in the word “Khvarenah”, which is literally translated as “glory” but understood to signify divine splendor. “Farr” as a word is unique to Pahlavi and Farsi, the two Iranian languages that developed after Avestan, or “Old Persian”

Buddhist counterparts. The concepts of *asha* and *druj* that were previously discussed, and the inherent conflict between the two, is the backdrop upon which Zoroastrianism presents its fundamental beliefs. As *Ahura Mazda* is the personified force of good, he wishes the *geti* (all physical creation) to follow the *daena*, which is the eternal law and can be alternately translated as religion, faith, or law.²² Interestingly, its meaning can also be compared to the concept of *dharma* in Hinduism and Buddhism in the context of “virtue” or “duty”.²³

The *daena* is *Ahura Mazda*'s ultimate plan to enable *asha* to prevail over *druj*, shown to humanity through the *Mathra Spenta*, or “Holy Words”.²⁴ It instructs humans to defend *asha*, something that Zoroaster emphasizes in the *Gathas* as being possible through deeds and action. This is roughly comparable to the importance placed by certain sects of Christianity on acting on one's faith, as the apostle James famously states, “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”²⁵²⁶ This emphasis on works is coupled with a rather vehement exhortation against asceticism by Zoroaster, making the link between *daena* and *dharma* all the more puzzling, as both Hinduism and Buddhism actively promote asceticism.

In those religions, self-deprivation is used to distance the *atman*, or self, from *samsara*, the painful cycle of reincarnation and existence in the superficial reality. This culminates with *moksha*, the release from *samsara* and the entrance into *nirvana*. The objective is the realization of the artificial nature of the *atman* and the reality of the oneness of the *atman*

²² Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 72.

²³ As previously discussed, it is not entirely accurate to present *Ahura Mazda* as a wholly anthropomorphized being. However, much of Zoroastrian theology depends on the presence of a god possessed of many human characteristics, so in order to understand Zoroastrian theology in its proper context, it is necessary to rely on an interpretation of *Ahura Mazda* as more of a being than a generalized force.

²⁴ Here it is important to note that Zoroaster attributed only *asha* as the creation of *Ahura Mazda*- *druj* is not only chaos, it is the lack of creation, and as such was uncreated.

²⁵ James 2:24

²⁶ This is just one of the many parallels that Zoroastrianism and Christianity share, which is why some believe that the former served as partial inspiration for the latter. There is an argument to be made that Zoroaster is in many ways a Christ-like figure, born of a virgin and conceived by divine reason, which provides an interesting hypothetical if nothing else.

with *Brahman*, the interconnectedness of all reality. Zoroastrianism is the exact opposite of this, as it is believed that if the *urvan* (often translated as “soul”) avoids any part of life that is shirking its social, familial, and religious obligations. There is, however, still a belief in Zoroastrianism that reunion with *Ahura Mazda* and thus becoming one with the cosmos is the ultimate destiny of humanity once *druj* has been overcome by *asha* with the help of the *urvan* following the *daena*. This is the closest Zoroastrianism gets to a cogent concept of the afterlife outside of appropriated ideas of heaven and hell that come from other religions.

Abrahamic Influences on Zoroastrianism

Having developed the foundation that supports the various nuances in how competing ideas of duality and monotheism have been interpreted by different generations of Zoroastrians, it is time to examine the influence of other religions on Zoroastrianism. Here it is mindful to clarify that the representation of the forces supporting *asha* and *druj* as *Spenta Mainyu* and *Angra Mainyu* is actually a modern (17th century) construct not present in the original Zoroastrian texts.²⁷ The idea of competing forces of order and chaos was a fundamental part of Zoroaster’s archetype of the cosmos, but the specific terms were developed as a response to the criticism of Christian missionaries. The creation of these terms was an effort to bring the cosmogonic duality that had been a staple of Zoroastrianism from the beginning into line with the prevailing religious currents of monotheistic modernity.

One product of the Zoroastrian urge to conform to the more “evolved” religions with highly developed abstract concepts was the development of the aforementioned conflict from a battle between two anthropomorphized beings into a dispassionate struggle between two principles. This is similar to the way in which modern Zoroastrians all but ignore the cosmogonic duality believed in by their ancestors. Instead, they favor interpreting the *Gathas* and other religious texts in a way that allows them to believe in a similar type of monotheism and morality, as that which the majority of other large religions adhere to.²⁸

It is actually a common occurrence for Zoroastrians to alter their own interpretations of their texts in order to conform to the kinds of abstract ideas presented by their religious neighbors, primarily the followers of

²⁷ James Hope Moulton, *The Treasure of the Magi: A Study of Modern Zoroastrianism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1917), 41.

²⁸ Nigosian, *The Zoroastrian Faith*, 54.

Abrahamic religions. Neither heaven nor hell is explored in any depth at all within the original Zoroastrian texts, save for vague allusions made in the *Gathas*. As these are now familiar concepts in the Zoroastrian faith, it is evident that over time concepts from other religions worked their way into the religious doctrine of Zoroastrianism.²⁹

For the idea of heaven and hell, as well as the notion of the judgement of the *urvan* after death, it is most likely that one or more of the Abrahamic faiths were responsible. Zoroastrianism is bordered by the Asiatic religions to the east and Abrahamic religions to the west, and only the latter group has these types of ideas readily developed and prepared for diffusion. It is a strange quirk of history indeed that Zoroastrianism would share so much of its origins with fellow Indo-Iranian religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, yet evolve to so closely mirror the monotheistic Abrahamic religions.

The Unique Resilience of Zoroastrianism

Of course, for all of the similarities that have developed between Zoroastrianism and its religious counterparts over the years, there are still a number of significantly different beliefs the religion possesses. The judgement of the *urvan* is not a final judgement, as in the end Zoroastrianism stipulates that all *urvan* will return to the *fravashi* that sent them. The *fravashi* has no equivalent in the Abrahamic faiths, and can be best described as the spirit of an individual that exists outside of the material cosmos.³⁰ This spirit will send the *urvan* to Earth to take part in the conflict between *asha* and *druj*, but, as previously mentioned, eventually all *urvan* will return to the *fravashi*.

Zoroastrianism again differs from the Abrahamic faiths by taking a universal approach to salvation— judgement is not final, and all souls find “salvation” in the end, making the purpose of the judgement of the *urvan* after death not readily apparent. It is again, equally unclear exactly what function heaven and hell play in Zoroastrianism, but neither concept is a significant part of the Zoroastrian afterlife. This is because there is actually very little articulation of a Zoroastrian afterlife other than the *urvan*’s reunion with the *fravashi* outside of the material cosmos.

Finally, considering that the *Gathas* seem to have been written first, it is likely that Zoroaster conceived of *Ahura Mazda* as the supreme creator

²⁹ Michael Stausberg, *Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism: A Short Introduction* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2008), 12.

³⁰ Taraporewala, *Divine Songs of Zarathushtra*, 37.

of the universe without any influence from the major Abrahamic religions. It remains apparent that, while there has certainly been a liberal exchange of ideas from Mesopotamia and into the Iranian plateau, Zoroastrianism has retained many of the concepts developed in its original texts. However, it is true that many of the ideas that had Zoroastrianism straddling the fence between polytheism and monotheism have been gradually watered down as its adherents have been exposed to the Abrahamic faiths.

Conclusion

By some accounts, Zoroastrianism challenges Hinduism for the title of world's oldest surviving religion— if the linguistic analysis of scholars such as Mary Boyce and Gherardo Gnoli can be trusted. In any case, the *Gathas* of Zoroaster likely predate the religious texts of any other monotheistic religion still around today, texts with rings to their names, texts like the Torah, the Quran, and both the New and the Old Testaments. The Abrahamic religions may have been the ones to usher monotheism into the mainstream of religious thought, but *Ahura Mazda*, not Yahweh or Allah, can lay claim to the coveted title of oldest supreme god of the cosmos.

The monotheism of Zoroastrianism is often unconventional, and can make for some convoluted theology when combined with its concept of cosmogonic duality, but it has survived to this day, as a remnant of a time when monotheism was a bold new concept and stunning example of doctrinal malleability. When Muslims conquered Iran, Zoroastrianism found a new home on the west coast of India, where it exists to this day. The religion founded by Zoroaster, centuries before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, was known to the members of the Italian Renaissance and part of the cultural renaissance of the Iranian kingdoms several centuries after the arrival of Islam. Several more centuries after that, the mislabeled “fire worshippers” resisted Christian missionaries’ attempts at assimilation in order to remain unique— an ongoing reminder to some of the largest religions that monotheism was not exclusive to Abraham and his progeny.

Zoroastrianism has changed, adopting notions of heaven, hell, and judgement after death; it has adapted to retroactively reinterpret ancient texts that have little in common with modern religion; but most importantly, it has survived. It has shamelessly showcased an incredible ability to contort itself into what its adherents require of it, and although it will likely, inevitably, become extinct in the upcoming centuries, Zoroastrianism has left an indelible mark on the institutional concept of

religion. That is a remarkable feat that few have equaled and fewer, still, will top.