

Univerzita Karlova  
Filozofická fakulta  
Ústav filozofie a religionistiky  
Religionistika

Milan Horňák  
**Conversion in the Parsi Community**  
**Otázka konverze u Pársů**  
Diplomová práce

## **Poděkování**

Chtěl bych poděkovat vedoucímu své práce, doc. Mgr. Radku Chlupovi, PhD. za jeho ochotu, vstřícnost a cenné rady.

**Prohlášení:**

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V Praze dne .....

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Milan Horňák

**Abstract:**

The present work examines the debate about the permissibility of conversion in the Parsi community of India. It explores the historical development of the debate with a focus on the main groups and their ideologies. It shows that both of the sides of the debate aimed to formulate their convictions in a Westernized language for a greater social prestige, while in both cases largely preserving the traditional endogamic rules in practice.

**Key words:** Zoroastrianism, Parsi, Conversion, Colonialism, Inter-marriage, Endogamy, Identity

**Abstrakt:**

Tato práce se zabývá debatou o přípustnosti konverzí, která probíhá v indické komunitě Pársů. Zkoumá dějinný vývoj debaty se zaměřením na jednotlivé skupiny v ní angažované a jejich postoje. Ukazuje, že obě strany debaty měly za cíl formulovat svá přesvědčení v jazyce západní kultury pro větší sociální prestiž, přičemž v obou případech do značné míry v praxi udržovaly tradiční pravidla endogamie.

**Klíčová slova:** zoroastrismus, Pársové, konverze, kolonialismus, smíšená manželství, endogamie, identita

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## Introduction

Conversion is, without a doubt, an important religious and social phenomenon. By offering an option for crossing the borders between communities, it offers us a way to see those borders as they are perceived by the community studied. In this work, I am going to examine the attitudes to conversion among the Parsi community of India.

There has traditionally been presented a divide on the issue of conversion, with orthodox group on one hand continuing the traditional ban on accepting any potential converts, and on the other the reformists, who are supposed to favor conversion. On the following pages I will explore both of those positions in their historical context and infer from them what they can tell us about the character of the community that they presuppose.

In the first chapter I intend to present a brief history of the Parsis with emphasis on the events that were especially influential in forming the positions regarding conversion. The second chapter will then focus on the various sources of the ideology of the orthodox side of the debate. As we will see, the orthodox side dominate the public space in independent India, and so the third chapter will examine how the orthodox conception of religion fits into the Indian environment. Finally, the topic of the last chapter will be the reformist position.

## Methodology

In this work I intend to present a historical overview of the debate about conversion in the Parsi community. Therefore most of the works cited will be those using the method of textual analysis, which I consider representative enough of the public debate, but is certain to leave out some opinions or some segments of the Parsi thought. The work of Kreyenbroek and Munshi<sup>1</sup> will be an exception to some extent, as they collected interview with not only prominent public figures but also with some other members of the community.

To my knowledge, there is no monography dedicated solely to conversion, although the topic of identity and community borders is naturally touched in many works. For the legal aspects of the construction of Parsi identity, the best source are the works of Mitra Sharafi,<sup>2</sup> while Leila Vevaina's works<sup>3</sup> show its ties to the institution of the trust.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Shehnaz Neville Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis Speak about Their Religion*, Richmond: Curzon, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Mitra Sharafi, *Bella's Case: Parsi Identity and the Law in Colonial Rangoon, Bombay and London, 1887–1925*, PhD. Thesis, Princeton University, 2006,

Mitra Sharafi, *Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia: Parsi Legal Culture, 1772–1947*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014,

Mitra Sharafi, "Judging Conversion to Zoroastrianism: Behind the Scenes of the Parsi Panchayat Case (1908)", in J. R. Hinnells and A. Williams. *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*. London: Routledge, 2007, 159–180.

<sup>3</sup> Leilah Vevaina, "Good Deeds: Parsi trusts from 'the womb to the tomb'", *Modern Asian Studies* 52.1 (2018): 238–265,

For the general history of the Parsis I turn mostly to the work of Jesse Palsetia,<sup>4</sup> and to various works by John Hinnells, but especially to his *magnum opus* on the topic of the Zoroastrian diaspora.<sup>5</sup> When it comes to the worldviews of the two sides of the conversion debate, Tanya Luhrmann provides a concise overview of the orthodox ideologies with a focus on the Zoroastrian Studies group,<sup>6</sup> Monica Ringer's work proves an invaluable source on the development of reformist thought.<sup>7</sup>

## History of the debate

The Parsis are a small minority group living mostly in India and in the city of Mumbai<sup>8</sup> in particular. By the account of their own tradition, they came to India as refugees after the Arab conquest of Iran to escape the raising discrimination and to protect their Zoroastrian religion. After years of travel, they settled in the south of Gujarat, with the permission of a local ruler.

This story appears not to be historically strict,<sup>9</sup> but it is key to the self-perception of the position of the community vis-à-vis the Indian society. In a famous passage, the Parsis meet with the local ruler, Jadhav Rana, on the shores of Gujarat near the village of Sanjan, who refuses to accept them, because he feels that his people are already too numerous. To illustrate this, he orders a pot of milk full to the brim brought before the refugees. But in response, the leading Parsi priest puts sugar (or, in some versions, a golden ring) in the milk, which does not subsequently overflow, to show that they will only enrich the new land. After this, the ruler lets them stay with several conditions like adopting the local language or for the women to wear sari.<sup>10</sup>

Subsequently, the Parsis came into contact with European colonists. First the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and ultimately the British, with whom they developed close collaboration. Many members of the community started to move to Bombay, which became the center of British activity in the region, and eventually it became the city with the most numerous Parsi population in India, a distinction it holds to this day. In connection to this, the power in the community started shifting there from Surat and the old priestly centers of

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Leilah Vevaina, "She's Come Undone: Parsi Women's Property and Propriety under the Law", *PoLAR* 41.1 (2018): 44–59.

<sup>4</sup> Jesse S. Palsetia, *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City*, Leiden: Brill, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> John R. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Tanya Luhrmann, "Evil in the Sands of Time: Theology and Identity Politics among the Zoroastrian Parsis", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61.3 (2002): 861–889.

<sup>7</sup> Monica Ringer, *Pious Citizens: Reforming Zoroastrianism in India and Iran*, 1 ed., Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> I use the older form "Bombay" when talking about the period before the name change.

<sup>9</sup> On the archeological evidence of Parsi settlement in Gujarat, see Rukshana Nanji and Homi Dhalla, "The landing of the Zoroastrians at Sanjan: The archaeological evidence", in J. R. Hinnells and A. Williams, *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 35–58.

<sup>10</sup> Claudine Gauthier, "Zoroastriens et néo-zoroastriens en diaspora : une même revendication identitaire, des communalisations divergentes", in F. Clavairolle et P. Ricaud. *Sentiments d'appartenance et parcours de reconnaissance: regards sur la diversité des processus de communalisation*, Tours: Citeres-université de Tours, 2013, online periodical, accessible from: [http://citeres.univ-tours.fr/IMG/pdf/c\\_gauthier.pdf](http://citeres.univ-tours.fr/IMG/pdf/c_gauthier.pdf) (Accessed 1. 1. 2020).



Udvada and Navsari. With waning power of the priesthood, the formal leadership transferred gradually to the panchayats, local government structures consisting from leaders of the community, who could, but did not have to be priests.

The most prominent of the panchayats was the Bombay Parsi Panchayet (BPP), which gained recognition from the British administration as representing the Parsis. This raised the need to address the membership in the community, and so in 1830 the BPP ruled that it is no longer permissible to initiate non-Parsi children under the punishment of excommunication.<sup>11</sup> The practice up to this point is unclear. Prior to the Arab conquest, the Zoroastrian religion certainly was not opposed to conversion,<sup>12</sup> and there is evidence that the Parsis converted locals even in India before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, although by the 19<sup>th</sup> century the practice was no longer accepted.<sup>13</sup>

## External challenges

In the year 1813 the East India Company allowed Christian missionaries access to the territories under its control, which led to the confrontation of local traditions with Christian proselytism. Most important for the Parsi community was the activity of John Wilson, a Scottish Presbyterian and educated Orientalist, who founded a mission school in Bombay.<sup>14</sup> As Western education was popular and prestigious among the Parsis,<sup>15</sup> many of the community enrolled their children in the school.

Wilson also studied the religious traditions of the Parsis and began debating them on their religion for which the Parsi scholarship was not prepared at the moment.<sup>16</sup> This eventually led to a response that was built on the Protestant presuppositions about the character of religion,<sup>17</sup> and somewhat later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the interpretation of Zoroastrianism by Western scholarship, most prominently the German Iranist Martin Haug.<sup>18</sup>

But a more “material” threat to the community came when in 1839 two of Wilson’s Parsi students converted to Christianity. This caused a great outrage in the community, which then turned to the British Supreme Court of Bombay, arguing that the boys were deceived and should return to their families. The court ultimately decided against the Parsi prosecution, which led to a re-evaluation of the community’s position under the British rule. The system of British justice was markedly different from traditional Parsi law, and when the

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<sup>11</sup>Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> Alberto Cantera, “Legal Implications of Conversion in Zoroastrianism”, in Carlo G. Cereti (ed.), *Iranian Identity in the Course of History: Proceedings of the Conference held in Rome, 21–24 September 2005*, Rome: Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, 2010, p. 53–66.

<sup>13</sup> Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 86–88.

<sup>14</sup> Jesse S. Palsetia, “Parsi and Hindu Traditional and Nontraditional Responses to Christian Conversion in Bombay, 1839–45”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74.3 (2006): 616–621.

<sup>15</sup>Ringer, *Pious Citizens*, p. 37–46.

<sup>16</sup> Palsetia, “Parsi and Hindu Responses”, p. 620. Although Luhrmann lists relevant responses (Luhrmann, “Evil in the Sands of Time, p. 866), those are all from the time after the conversion case, around ten years after Wilson started his attacks against Zoroastrianism and thus do not reflect the initial situation.

<sup>17</sup> Luhrmann, “Evil in the Sands of Time”, p. 867, Ringer, *Pious citizens*, p. 68–70.

<sup>18</sup> Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 165–167.

Parsi side was obliged to provide reassurance that its law protects the rights of individual, it was unable to comply, for there had existed no codified Parsi law up to that point.<sup>19</sup>

## The Parsi Panchayet Case

The Parsis were therefore pressed to create their own law in the British sense, focusing mainly on personal law fields such as marriage or inheritance,<sup>20</sup> but most important for the next development in the conversion question was arguably the adoption of the British concept of trust. The community has accrued much wealth under the British rule and used this legal device to continue the old tradition of Zoroastrian charity.

In a trust, people designed as trustees are responsible for some property that has to be used for some predefined purpose.<sup>21</sup> In Parsi case its uses are wide, as both the sites of worship and sites of burial are administered by trusts. The biggest one in the Parsi case is the BPP itself, which assumed the character of a trust in 1884,<sup>22</sup> and which was at the heart of the arguably most important conversion controversy of the modern Parsi community.

In 1903, a French woman named Suzanne Brière married Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata, a member of the wealthy Parsi Tata family, while undergoing the Parsi initiation ceremony just before the marriage. Consequently, in 1906 Tata and several other members of the Parsi elite filed a suit in the High Court of Bombay claiming that all Zoroastrians, including converts, could use the sites administered by the BPP, which were designed for Parsis.<sup>23</sup> The court ultimately ruled that only someone born of a Parsi father could be considered to be Parsi and benefit from the structures in the care of BPP.<sup>24</sup>

There were other events leading to this case. In 1882 a controversy was caused by eleven men, who had Parsi father, but not a Parsi mother, and who demanded to be initialized to the religion. In their case, they succeeded and nine of them were able to undergo the ritual, but it once again raised the question of who is a Parsi.<sup>25</sup> In the leadup to the 1906 case, there were several debates on the topic of admissibility of conversion. First of those was the committee of 1903,<sup>26</sup> which decided that conversion was admissible.<sup>27</sup> Then in 1905, just before the start of the case, there was a community meeting that ruled any conversions of non-Parsis inadmissible, including those of any person with just one Parsi parent, and also appealed to the community to boycott the priests who would perform such a ritual.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Palsetia, "Parsi and Hindu Responses", p. 627.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the Parsi law of 1865 failed to address the question of who is Parsi (Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 226–227) For details on Parsi interaction with the colonial legal system see Sharafi, *Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia*.

<sup>21</sup> Vevaina, "Good Deeds", p. 244–251.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 252.

<sup>23</sup> Another point in the lawsuit was the legitimacy of the appointment of the current BPP trustees.

<sup>24</sup> Sharafi, "Judging Conversion to Zoroastrianism", p. 159.

<sup>25</sup> Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 228–229.

<sup>26</sup> Established by the Anjuman, another type of communitarian self-government.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 232.

It is not necessary to go into the details of the trial itself here,<sup>29</sup> but it is significant that Justice Davar, himself a Parsi who had previously advised BPP on the issue of conversion,<sup>30</sup> made a distinction in his final ruling between Parsi and Zoroastrian, the first conceived as an ethnicity and the other as a religion, and he argued that the religious trusts in India were meant for Parsis only, so whether one is religiously a Zoroastrian does not really matter. The second justice in the case, Frank Beaman, an Englishman and a theosophist, concluded that the Parsis have become a caste in their Indian environment, and so one can only become Parsi by birth.<sup>31</sup>

### Subsequent controversies

Although the decision of the two justices was only *obiter dicta*, it has been considered authoritative to the extent that it is not only referenced by Parsis in independent India, but it is also referred to even by Parsis living in Western diaspora.<sup>32</sup>

Another case where the trust administration and definition of Parsi identity were at stake was the case of Bella Captain. She was a girl adopted by a Parsi couple living in Lower Burma, where they took her to a local temple for her initiation. This provoked an opposition in a part of the local community, which turned to the Chief Court of Lower Burma to prevent Bella from entering the temple ever again.<sup>33</sup>

The court, and then the appeal court as well, ruled that there can be no right to exclusive worship for a racial group. The defendants finally appealed to the Privy Council in London, which agreed with the lower courts, but ruled in favor of the defendants, because, referencing the ruling from Davar from the Parsi Punchayet Case, the trusts were established for Parsis only and thus were racially exclusive.<sup>34</sup>

Another event which raised significant controversy among the Parsi community of India was the conversion of Joseph Peterson. His initiation took place in New York on 5 March 1983 and was performed by four priests. A heated debate soon erupted in which the reformists and especially the American diaspora approved of the act, while it was met with scathing condemnation from the orthodox side, mainly in the Indian orthodox press.

The reformist argument showed focus on Zoroastrianism as a religion and made clear references to American conception of religion. The orthodox in turn argued for the authority of the community of Bombay and claimed that conversions like this one may endanger their

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<sup>29</sup> For details see Sharafi, "Judging Conversion to Zoroastrianism".

<sup>30</sup> Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 229–232.

<sup>31</sup> Sharafi, "Judging Conversion to Zoroastrianism", p. 163–164.

<sup>32</sup> John R. Hinnells, "Changing Perceptions of Authority among Parsis in British India", in J. R. Hinnells and A. Williams, *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 109.

<sup>33</sup> It may seem peculiar to appeal to secular, British courts to decide on religious matters, but there had been a tradition of Parsis turning to secular courts in these matters even before the two rulings that I mention here. For more on this see Hinnells, "Changing Perceptions of Authority".

<sup>34</sup> Sharafi, *Law and Identity*, p. 285–289. Ironically, the father of Bella was, allegedly, a brother of her adoptive father, and thus she could have been considered a Parsi even racially. For detailed analysis of this particular case see Sharafi, *Bella's Case*.

coreligionists in Iran, to which the priestly council of Tehran replied with an approval of conversion.<sup>35</sup>

## Double standards?

Three events occurred in the 1990s that once again raised questions about the Parsi identity and this time also about the equality in religious matters.

The first one was the case of Roxan Shah. She was a Parsi who married outside of the community and then in 1990 tragically died in a car accident. The family wanted to have a Zoroastrian funeral for her, but they were denied on the base of her mixed marriage. The parents argued that the marriage was according to the Indian Special Marriage Act, which does not require the spouses to renounce their religious affiliation. Dastur<sup>36</sup> Firoze Kotwal replied that this secular form of marriage has no value from a religious viewpoint and that in Zoroastrian tradition woman takes the name and religion of her husband.<sup>37</sup>

Then in 1993, following the death of an important Parsi industrialist J. R. D. Tata, whose father, like himself, was married out of community, had his funeral rites performed by orthodox priests, including two of the Dasturs, an act which was then condemned by Dastur Kotwal.<sup>38</sup>

Even more controversial was the initiation performed for Neville Wadia and his son Nusli. Wadia was a member of the wealthy Parsi Wadia family, but his father joined the Church of England and his son Neville was also brought up in that religion. Nonetheless later he felt drawn to the religion of his ancestors and queried the Dasturs of Bombay about the possibility of having a Zoroastrian initiation ceremony, which they eventually performed not only for him, but also for his son.

This led to many articles in the Parsi press charging the Dasturs with inconsistency, especially with their approach in the recent Roxan Shah case. The priests in turn argued that it was not a case of conversion, but merely of a return to one's faith, which was admissible.<sup>39</sup>

## Recent events

In the current millennium the question did not fade away. Apart from the occasional proclamation by priests against the conversions<sup>40</sup> there was also an event during which a priestly initiation of a Russian man was blocked by a Parsi mob.<sup>41</sup> This is significant not only

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<sup>35</sup>Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 478–483.

<sup>36</sup> A high priestly title.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 125–128. I would like to point out here that it is certainly not the case that a woman who marries a Parsi would become a Parsi in the current practice, but it also is not an inconsistency on the part of the Dastur, as he opposes any kind of intermarriage, the case where the man is Parsi included.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 129–132.

<sup>40</sup> For example: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Seven-Parsi-high-priests-condemn-conversion-and-interfaith-marriages/articleshow/50522828.cms> (Accessed 14. 12. 2020).

<sup>41</sup> <https://parsikhabar.net/news/parsis-storm-zoroastrian-college-to-stop-conversion-of-a-russian/2146/> (Accessed 14. 12. 2020).

because it shows the continuing strength of conviction of those who oppose conversions in the Parsi community, but it also indicates that this position is not unanimous even among the priests. Even more so when it was not merely a conversion, but a priestly initiation, which are normally exclusive for people born into priestly families even among the Parsis.

Around the same time the World Zoroastrian Organisation (WZO), an organization based in the UK which has for its aim the representation of Zoroastrians around the globe, changed its rules to allow any person professing the Zoroastrian religion to become a member. This led to a reaction in India, in which 35 of the various Parsi anjumans denounced the possibility of conversion,<sup>42</sup> which again highlights the differences between India and the diaspora.

## The teachings of the orthodox

As we have seen in the previous chapter, there has always existed in modern times a significant portion of the Parsi community opposed to the very possibility of converting outsiders. But it would be a mistake to assume that the ideology and reasons behind this stand are uniform and constant. In this chapter I will examine some of the more prominent sources of the ideology of the so-called orthodox wing of the conversion debate to show how this renouncement of the possibility of accepting outsiders is consistent with the rest of the system.

## Early formulations

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the extent of the practice of conversion before the 19<sup>th</sup> century is uncertain, and we do not have many sources about the theology of conversion during this period either. The best sources are probably the so-called Persian *Rivāyats*, letters that Parsis of India sent to their coreligionist in Iran, who were then still seen as an authority in the matters of religion.<sup>43</sup>

In this correspondence the question of conversion was raised three times in total and the Iranian response was always positive, providing that the person is willing and no harm will result from them to the community.<sup>44</sup> Although the advice may have been heeded, it reflects the conviction of the Iranian side more than the Parsi one.

In contrast, the debate following the baptism of two Parsi boys by John Wilson led to a clear formulation of an anti-conversion stance by some Parsi thinkers. Their religion was attacked from Protestant positions as ritualistic and not divinely revealed. The Parsi response was, as Ringer shows,<sup>45</sup> centered at proving that Zoroastrianism is no more of a “superstition” than Christianity and ultimately just as valid. To this goal the authors

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<sup>42</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Parsis-say-no-to-conversion/articleshow/6726134.cms> (Accessed 14. 12. 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 23–25.

<sup>44</sup> Gauthier, “Zoroastriens et néo-zoroastriens en diaspora”, p. 86.

<sup>45</sup> Ringer, *Pious Citizens*, p. 60–70.

employed instruments ranging in origin from the responses to Islamic demand of monotheism to the Enlightenment's critique of Christianity.<sup>46</sup>

From the universality of religious truth, it followed for the Parsi authors that no one should attempt to change their religion. They viewed religion as a communal matter and rejected proselytism as something that brings strife and thwarts peaceful cohabitation, a view conforming to the Indian context, to which I will return in the next chapter. And just as there is no superior religion, there is not just one unique way to achieving civilization, which allowed challenging Christianity's and European claim on societal progress.

## Theosophical influences

At the same time the apologists had to accept several presuppositions about the nature of religion that were previously foreign. In showing that Zoroastrianism conformed to the Protestant criteria of true religion, the apologists had to adopt an anti-ritualist stance, interpret their sacred texts either metaphorically or as later and not authoritative, and emphasize rationality.<sup>47</sup> And as Luhrmann argues, even the renouncement of dualistic character of Zoroastrian cosmology and stressing out its monotheistic qualities had its origin in this phase of Parsi thought.<sup>48</sup>

This westernizing rationalistic trend continued throughout the century and will be discussed later. Now I will turn to a movement which, while still of Western origin, brought an entirely different appreciation of indigenous Indian culture and came to deeply influence Parsi orthodox thought: theosophy.

Theosophy is an occultist religion formulated by Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry S. Olcott, which claimed to possess divine knowledge acquired from hidden Tibetan and Indian teachers. In contrast to the Christian missionaries, this movement valued the local traditions highly, including their ritual aspect. When the Bombay Theosophical Society was founded in 1879, the local Zoroastrian community was highly involved,<sup>49</sup> and both Olcott<sup>50</sup> and Blavatsky<sup>51</sup> spoke highly about the Zoroastrian tradition.

In theosophy Parsis found a defense of their tradition formulated in Western terms. Moreover, while the rationalist discourse often used Orientalist research for its critique of the tradition, theosophists were highly sceptical about the value of the Orientalist scholarship itself.<sup>52</sup> In contrast to the Orientalist method, they offered a different way of interpreting the sacred texts, one which has an immense impact to this day.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 62–63.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 68–70.

<sup>48</sup> Luhrmann, "Evil in the Sands of Time", p. 867.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 871.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 870.

<sup>51</sup> Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 262.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Luhrmann, "Evil in the Sands of Time", p. 871. Luhrmann also provides here an interesting comparison of Olcott's influence on Sri Lankan Buddhism and on Parsis. While on Sri Lanka his teaching led to "protestantization" of local tradition, among Parsis it softened their version thereof.

At the same time, theosophy resonated with elements of Parsis' own mystical tradition. Many Parsis in the 19<sup>th</sup> century considered a text known as *Dasatir* to be a part of their sacred tradition. The text was brought to India by an Iranian Zoroastrian immigrant Azar Kaivan, and its origins probably lie among the Sufi circles of Iran.

A group founded by Azar practiced a form of asceticism and propagated mystical teaching based in Zoroastrian symbolism. The relevance of this movement and its continuity in the Parsi theosophy is manifested among other in the fact that the importance of *Dasatir* was stressed by H. S. Olcott, which likely shows that it was seen as an important part of Zoroastrian tradition by the Parsis who were in contact with him.<sup>54</sup>

## Ilm-e Khshnoom

When the theosophist society moved to Madras in 1907 and started focusing more on Hinduism, Parsi involvement therein subsided.<sup>55</sup> But soon a new movement appeared, one that was quite compatible with theosophy and offered a message targeted specifically at Parsis. It is called Ilm-e Khshnoom, the path of knowledge, and was proclaimed by Behramshah Shroff, after he, allegedly, went to Iran with a caravan of secret Zoroastrians and conversed there with a race of giants possessing ancient knowledge on Mount Damavand.<sup>56</sup>

Khshnoomists are characterized by belief in the magical power of prayer, which has to be uttered in the original Avestan. It also prescribes vegetarianism and ascetism to purify the soul so that it may escape the cycle of rebirth. In this system it is decided by God to which religion one is born according to their purity, Zoroastrianism naturally being the last stage before leaving the cycle.<sup>57</sup>

It also provides an esoteric interpretation of the sacred texts, thus appreciating the whole canon, while also allowing to interpret it as rational and non-dualistic.<sup>58</sup> In this way it offers a reintegration of the whole tradition – where before the rationalistic interpretation demanded the translation of the sacred texts or discarding those that did not seem to contain the values expected. In the same way it integrates the ritual and therefore is perhaps of little surprise that many influential orthodox figures are involved.<sup>59</sup>

In a similar integrating vein, the Khshnoom does not aspire to be a sect distinct from mainstream Zoroastrianism, which makes it possible for it to exert influence over much of the Parsi society.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, p. 48–49.

<sup>55</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 103.

<sup>56</sup> Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 205, Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 104.

<sup>57</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 104. There is also a belief that this is the reason why Avesta does not mention reincarnation, because the knowledge of reincarnation is not that important when one is born in its last stage anyway (Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, p. 54 reference n. 62).

<sup>58</sup> Luhrmann, "Evil in the Sands of Time", p. 871–874.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 873.

<sup>60</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 106. An interesting example of its continuous influence might be the recent controversy concerning a new metro line that is built, in the eyes of its Parsi detractors, too close to the fire temples and will therefore clash with their mystical aura:

Before moving to another interesting combination of Parsi tradition and Western influence, I shall first explore one frequent aspect of modern orthodox argumentation.

## Racial Theory

In another example of using contemporary scientific or pseudo-scientific ideas to formulate their position the orthodox side started utilizing racial and biological arguments in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the major proponents of such reasoning was J. J. Vimadlal, a solicitor, ardent eugenicist, and a prominent figure on the orthodox side, who argued that when intermarriages occur, the result is a degradation of the community.<sup>61</sup>

He further asserted that people of a pure race are themselves of greater quality, referencing the Japanese and the British, both successful nations of his time, who in his eyes were able to achieve greater racial purity by the virtue of living isolated on their respective islands. For him the Parsi racial uniqueness was more than on physical features based on mental and ethical qualities, that were nonetheless only obtainable by birth.<sup>62</sup>

As Sharafi shows,<sup>63</sup> Vimadlal's influence might have also been decisive in the outcome of the Parsi Panchayet Case. While the judges first proposed a possibility of limited conversions, during the course of the trial Davar, and also J. J. Modi, an expert witness on the topics of Parsi history and theology, shifted towards denying conversion altogether. As Davar and Vimadlal worked together and were both leading figures in the orthodox movement, this does not seem unlikely.<sup>64</sup>

While the language used in theorizing race may have since shifted from eugenics to more modern genetics,<sup>65</sup> it is still customary to see mentions of race purity among the reasons given against converting outsider or permitting initiation of the children of intermarried Parsis.<sup>66</sup> In 1980 the argumentation even manifested in a change of Indian legislation, when orthodox Parsis were able to gain an exemption from the new adoption law.<sup>67</sup>

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<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/dec/14/metro-tunnel-mumbai-cricket-zoroastrian-india> (Accessed 14. 12. 2020).

<sup>61</sup> Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 258–260.

<sup>62</sup> For the overview of his thought see Sharafi, *Bella's Case*, p. 329–341.

<sup>63</sup> Sharafi, "Judging Conversion to Zoroastrianism", p. 170.

<sup>64</sup> Vimadlal also led the opposition against Bella Captain in her initiation case during its Bombay commission (Sharafi, *Bella's Case*, p. 301–302).

<sup>65</sup> Paulina Niechciał, "Essentialism in Zoroastrian boundary construction", *Anthropology Southern Africa* 43.2 (2020): 125.

<sup>66</sup> In such way Parsi lawyer Homi P. Ranina did not hesitate to liken intermarriage to mixing different breeds of animals in a pamphlet against intermarriage he has written together with Dastur Kotwal (Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 122–123). It is also common to encounter arguments about "genetic distinctness" in many articles about the diminishing population of the Parsis, a topic I will speak about later. One example of such article may be: <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/23/world/despite-birth-bonuses-zoroastrians-in-india-fade.html> (Accessed 14. 12. 2020).

<sup>67</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 123–124.



Overall, the racial discourse articulated the practice of endogamy existing in India in Western and scientific terms. Apart from domestic opposition<sup>68</sup> it has turned out to be more problematic to establish in diaspora, especially in North America.<sup>69</sup>

## Zoroastrian Studies

As we have seen, what the reformist and orthodox conceptions of religion had in common was the inspiration in Western systems, be it Protestantism or theosophy. But in the 1970 a new movement appeared that set as one of its goals the purification of Zoroastrianism of foreign influences – through Western scholarship.

In 1977 a Parsi named Khojeste Mistree cofounded an organization called Zoroastrian Studies and, together with a scholar of Zoroastrianism, Dr Alan Williams, started giving public lectures on the nature of their religion to the Parsis in India. Mistree, previously an accountant in London, always had an interest in mysticism and his religion and ultimately decided to study it in Oxford under Robert C. Zaehner. After the death of his teacher, Mistree continued his studies under Mary Boyce, whose ideas greatly influenced him.<sup>70</sup>

Boyce believed that the Zoroastrian religion manifests considerable continuity due to techniques of memory of the previously oral tradition. This implied that even the later works written in Young Avestan or Middle Persian contained essentially Zoroastrian content, a view that Mistree adopted, but which proved hard to accept for both the Khshnoomists and reformists.<sup>71</sup>

For these movements a strictly monotheist understanding of the religion was important, one which was hard to accommodate to the theology of the Middle Persian texts, and so Mistree found himself frequently at odds with both sides of the debate.<sup>72</sup>

His opposition to the theology of his contemporaries is nothing surprising, for he has made a conscious effort to show Zoroastrianism as fundamentally different from Christianity and Hinduism, and one of his main motivations was to motivate Parsis to resist the assimilation that seems to threaten such a small minority.<sup>73</sup>

Zoroastrian Studies lectures attract predominantly the community's youth and focus on exegesis of the traditional theological texts. But the goal is not primarily academical,

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<sup>68</sup> Some of which is talked about in the passage about Vimadalal's philosophy in Sharafi, *Bella's Case*, p. 329–341.

<sup>69</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 481, 729.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>71</sup> It is judicious to note here the close relationship between Zoroastrian scholarship and theology. The leaders of the community frequently found academical interpretation of their tradition authoritative, just as the scholars accepted the interpretation of the theologians, which is a dynamic that one has to keep in mind with movements like ZS. More on the insider/outsider relationships in the study of Zoroastrianism in Yuhana Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, "No One Stands Nowhere: Knowledge, Power, and Positionality across the Insider-Outsider Divide in the Study of Zoroastrianism", in A. Hintze, S. Stewart, and A. Williams (eds.), *The Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History and Tradition*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2016, p. 27–57.

<sup>72</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 108.

<sup>73</sup> Luhrmann, "Evil in the Sands of Time", p. 876-877. It is worth noting that Luhrmann points out the similarity between ZS and Jewish orthodox theology in America. For her assessment of the movement, see Ibid, 881–885.

instead the aim is to give meaning to the texts and rituals and to create emotional connection between individual Parsis and the whole community.<sup>74</sup>

But what are Mistree's views concerning conversion? If we presumed that he shares the Western scholarship's view based on the traditional literature, we would expect him to allow conversion, maybe even favor proselytism. This is decidedly not the case. Throughout his career he vehemently opposed any possibility of conversion, from the times of the Peterson case<sup>75</sup> to this day.<sup>76</sup>

In his statements, Mistree mixes ethnicity and culture in a notable way.<sup>77</sup> By this fusion his stance against both conversion and intermarriage could be seen as a continuation of his efforts to purify Zoroastrianism of its perceived Christian and Hindu admixtures, or conversely those efforts themselves could be seen as a way to protect the community's borders.

## The Champions of Orthodoxy

The movements I mentioned in this chapter certainly do not exhaust the whole span of opinions on the orthodox side of the spectrum. Their character is also quite different – while Khshnoom permeates much of traditionalist thought, Zoroastrian Studies is a smaller and more compact movement, while the use of racial theory is more of a tendency in some conservative circles than some coherent theology. They might even stand in opposition, and indeed they sometimes do, as in case of Khshnoom and ZS.

That being said, I'm convinced that a lot can be inferred about the character of the orthodox movement and specifically its approach to the question of conversion. The first thing I would like to highlight is that the movements mentioned in this chapter were decidedly modern in their ideology. All emerged in some dialogue with previous local forms of thought and also with some form of Western influence, be it Protestant conception of religion, theosophy, racial theory or the academic study of Zoroastrianism itself. This is probably not surprising when we speak about a community as urban and modern as the Parsis, but it nonetheless should be noted that orthodoxy here certainly does not imply mere continuation of pre-modern thought.

In contrast, what strongly marks the various orthodox movements is a continuation of practice. Not only do not the various ideological stances require any significant ritual change, they actually reinforce the traditional ritual forms. In contrast to the selective nature of the reformist practice, Khshnoom gave a new meaning to the practice of all the rituals

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid 878–881. As mentioned above, Mistree himself had always an interest in mysticism which highly influenced his development as a religious leader of some sort. For his own account of his life and journey towards becoming a leading figure in the Parsi community of Mumbai see the interview with him in Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, p. 126–145.

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/religion/story/19830715-controversy-surrounds-acceptance-of-non-parsi-who-embraced-zoroastrian-religion-770807-2013-07-19> (Accessed 14. 12. 2020).

<sup>76</sup> <https://parsikhabar.net/interview/the-zoroastrian-flame-an-interview-with-khojeste-mistree/18088/> (Accessed 14. 12. 2020).

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/the-conflict-within-parsis-and-gender-rights/article18520582.ece> (Accessed 14. 12. 2020).

through their mystical interpretation, just as ZS did through the study of religious history and texts. The adoption of some forms of racial theory was, in turn, useful in formulating the community's traditional endogamy in modern and (pseudo-)scientific language.

In this context the designation of the members of this side of debate as "orthodox" is probably a little ironic, as their ideologies do not necessarily have that much in common, while on the other hand they all demand the same ritual practice, and therefore the more fitting designation would probably be orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy.

Seeing the continuity of ritual practice, it would not be unsensible to see the underlying motivation of the community's refusal of conversion in its conformity with the Indian environment and especially with the caste system. Indeed, several authors mention that the Parsis in India came to be influenced by it in defining community's borders.<sup>78</sup> At this point it may seem prudent to look at the orthodox' refusal of conversion in its Indian context, which shall be the topic of the next chapter.

## Parsis in modern Indian society

In this chapter I will explore some specific elements of the culture of India, of which the small Parsi minority has been a part of for centuries. Especially I will look into those aspects of Indian and Parsi culture that may have reinforced the tendency to refuse the possibility of people of different origin joining the Zoroastrian religion, although I certainly do not intend to postulate a strict causal relationship between any one of those aspects and the stance of the majority of the community.

### Premodern India

I mentioned previously that according to their own tradition, the Parsis came to India to escape the religious persecution in their ancient homeland of Iran. The main account of this migration and subsequent developments is the Qesse-ye Sanjan, a Persian text created at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. On one hand, the text professes the dedication of the Parsi community to safeguard their religious tradition even at a great cost, on the other it thematizes its acculturation and identification with their new Indian homeland.<sup>79</sup>

While in some areas the assimilation was significant, as in language, dress or cuisine, the specific Indian environment enabled the continuation of some practices that kept the Parsis distinct from their surroundings. In the Indian caste system, they could keep their distinct rituals and purity rules as well as practice endogamy without being considered as a threat to the surrounding society.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> For example Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 101, Ringer, *Pious Citizens*, p. 64 or Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 18–19, where he even mentions that up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Parsis referred to themselves as a caste "in imitation of terminology used by the Indians".

<sup>79</sup> Alan Williams, "The Structure, Significance and Poetic Integrity of the Qessa-ye Sanjān", in J. R. Hinnells and A. Williams, *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*. London: Routledge, 2007, p. 15–34.

<sup>80</sup> Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 13–19.

However, the Parsis never adopted a strict and hierarchical occupational system akin to the caste system in India, apart from the professions of priests and corpse-bearers, which are tied to a special state of purity and pollution respectively. This lack of strict structure is significant as it distinguishes Parsis not only from the Hindus, but also from other traditions of foreign origin such as Muslims or Christians. Palsetia sees this as a consequence of Parsi refusal to accept converts and which in turn led to stronger sense of collective identity.<sup>81</sup>

In this interpretation the acculturation that the Parsi underwent in India led in some way to them at the same time being able to protect their distinctness. In conforming to the caste expectation of endogamy and in refusal to accept locals to their community they were able to protect parts of their Iranian and Zoroastrian character.<sup>82</sup> This was something not to be taken for granted, as a failure to find their place in their new cultural context would result in them not being considered Indian, just as more thorough assimilation would result in a loss of a distinct character and in becoming just another group under the umbrella of Hinduism, as it happened for example in the case of the so-called Maga Brahmins.<sup>83</sup>

### Hindu views of conversion

As we have seen, the Parsi community adapted to their Indian surroundings in many ways. It may be the time now to look at the approach to conversion among Parsis' Hindu neighbors, especially in the modern period, and how the Parsi refusal to convert contributes to their position vis-à-vis the modern political Hindu movements including the ruling BJP.

Hinduism has generally been regarded as a non-proselytizing religion, even though historically traditions that would be today seen as a part of Hinduism spread across South-East Asia, as witnessed for example by their still dominant role on Bali. In recent times though, the view has shifted towards conversion being seen on one hand as something unnecessary, as all the great religious traditions in the world are seen as leading to the same goal, and on the other hand as something that disrupts communal harmony and leads to strife.<sup>84</sup>

This attitude to conversion is naturally also reflected in modern Indian politics. While the Indian constitution guarantees the right to propagate one's religion, there has been continuous debate on the topic.<sup>85</sup> One of the most prominent cases was the Niyogi Committee, which was established by the state government of Madhya Pradesh to analyze Christian missionary activity and whose final proposals, which were not implemented, were strictly limiting any possibility of missionary activity. Nevertheless, several Indian states enacted laws that limit what they see as forced conversions.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 18–21.

<sup>82</sup> The existence of the *Rivāyat* correspondence mentioned above is indicative of perceived ties to the original country and their coreligionist living there.

<sup>83</sup> Jesse Buck, "'The world's best minority': Parsis and Hindutva's ethnic nationalism in India.", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40.15 (2017): 2815.

<sup>84</sup> Arvind Sharma, "Hinduism and Conversion", in L. R. Rambo and C. E. Farhadian (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 2014, p. 429–434.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 437.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Moreover, with the recent rise of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics, their own understanding of conversion gained more power accordingly. In their narrative, conversion is frequently portrayed as something dishonest, achieved only by trickery or by offering some material gain, and the proselytizing communities, especially Christians and Muslims, are seen as untrustworthy in their public work, which is seen only as a mean to procure more adherents, and as disloyal to the Indian state.<sup>87</sup>

As we have seen with the Parsi responses to the attacks on their religion by John Wilson,<sup>88</sup> they have used similar argumentation as is seen in Hinduism against the need of converting anyone. They held that conversion is unnecessary as all religions are path to the same truth and that conversion has a detrimental effect on inter-community relations.

On the other hand, there exists a practice in some Hindu groups that is akin to conversion, although it is seen by its proponents as fundamentally different from the one practiced by missionaries of Christianity and Islam. In the ritual called *śuddhi*, meaning purification, members of Hindu group Arya Samaj<sup>89</sup> offered a possibility of a “return” to Hinduism to those people that were seen as originally Hindu but who during history joined some of the proselytizing religions. The practitioners of *śuddhi* do not see it as a conversion, even when it in some cases may even mimic the Christian practice,<sup>90</sup> but rather as a reconversion and a return to one’s original fold.<sup>91</sup>

Arguably, we have seen something alike to this kind of reconversion in the aforementioned initiation of Neville Wadia and his son Nusli. In this case the priests admitted the initiation after a purification that was prescribed in the *Rivāyats* for those who abandon the religion in the case of Islamic pressure.<sup>92</sup>

This may seem to imply a purely Iranian origin of the practice, but since it had been never used before this particular case in this manner for a person who had never been initiated to the faith, and since the conservative side in Iran decisively refused arguments of this kind in their approach to the new convertites in their country,<sup>93</sup> I would see this solution as an Indian development, although it is worth noting that this was a singular event and as mentioned above the clergy is sometimes suspected of holding members of the most wealthy and influential Parsi families to a different standard.

## A model minority

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<sup>87</sup> Kalyani Devaki Menon, “Converted Innocents and Their Trickster Heroes: The Politics of Proselytizing in India”, in A. Buckser and S. D. Glazier (eds.), *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, p. 43–54.

<sup>88</sup> And to some extent in the theosophical movements, at least when it comes to the universality of religious truth.

<sup>89</sup> Both of the articles cited here mention primarily this group, but for earlier discussion of the possibility of purification in reaction to conversion on a larger scale of Hindu society, see the Hindu case in Palsetia, “Parsi and Hindu Responses”.

<sup>90</sup> Menon, “Converted Innocents”, p. 49.

<sup>91</sup> Sharma, “Hinduism and Conversion”, p. 431, 434.

<sup>92</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 130–131.

<sup>93</sup> Gauthier, “Zoroastriens et néo-zoroastriens en diaspora”, p. 88–89.

In my opinion, a contribution<sup>94</sup> of Homi B. Dhalla to a relatively recent work on religious conversion is a good example of the orthodox Parsi approach to the Indian developments in regard to religious conversions mentioned above. While it is not very useful as an academic overview of the conversion debate among the Parsis for its one-sided point of view,<sup>95</sup> it serves as a concise formulation of the orthodox views on the matter.

In his article, after recounting the political debate mainly around Christian missions, Dhalla presents conversion and proselytism as an impediment to interreligious dialogue, and as harmful to community relations.<sup>96</sup> He then turns to the reformists in his community to ask them to refrain from supporting conversions to avoid harming their community. In his words:

Parsi advocates of conversion have to ask whom they seek to convert. Do not they see that the communal violence caused by 'conversion' would also pose a threat to their own community? They have to be made to see that active proselytizing and conversion would deal a death-blow both physically and psychologically to the less than 100,000 Parsis in India.<sup>97</sup>

At this point it seems evident that in the Indian political environment it is in some way beneficial for a minority religious group not to be a proselytizing one. Indeed, Dhalla cites two public figures he questioned about how would the Parsi existence in India change had they pursued conversion of others. Madhukar Kania, former Chief Justice of India, in his reply remarked that they would likely have much worse relation with surrounding communities, and Ushta Mehta, a Gandhian and a freedom fighter, replied:

It is the wisest policy that the Parsis adopted - not to convert. This has helped them to live harmoniously with all other communities. To not proselytise is the right spirit in religion. You have identified with the country that has offered you sanctuary. Indeed, you are an ideal minority - a model for other communities in India.<sup>98</sup>

As Jesse Buck shows,<sup>99</sup> the Parsis are also considered model minority among the Hindu nationalists such as the currently ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In the nationalist ideology the Parsi stand as an opposite of Muslims and to some extent Christian as the ideal minority, in part owing to their approach to conversion: while Muslims are remembered for

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<sup>94</sup> Homi B. Dhalla, "Contra conversion: the case of the Zoroastrians of India", in C. Lamb and D. Bryant, *Religious Conversion, Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, London – New York: Cassell, 1999, p. 115–135.

<sup>95</sup> As witnessed for example in the description of the Peterson case or the Wadia initiation, where the author just refers to the opinion of the Dasturs. It is also somehow ironic that he sees the Wadia reconversion as wholly legitimate, but describes the reconversion practice introduced by Arya Samaj in following terms: "It was the Arya Samaj which introduced proselytism into Hinduism and this is what brought about hostility towards other proselytizing religions." (Dhalla, "Contra conversion", p. 117). That it not to say that his statements about Arya Samaj might not be true, but the contrast is notable. For more on the role of the Hindu reconversion practice in intercommunity relations see Yoginder Sikand, "Arya Shuddhi and Muslim Tabligh: Muslim Reactions to Arya Samaj Proselytization (1923–30)", in R. Robinson and S. Clarke (eds.), *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations and Meanings*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003, 98–99.

<sup>96</sup> Dhalla, "Contra conversion", p. 119–121.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>99</sup> Buck, "The world's best minority".

forced conversions, Parsi refusal to convert is seen as a successful integration and acculturation.<sup>100</sup>

This puts Parsis in a special position vis-à-vis the government as politicians such as the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi might find it useful to support them so that he can pose as a protector of minorities, such as in the case where he intervened when a proposed residential colony was too close to the most important sacred fire in India, the Iranshah of Udvada.<sup>101</sup>

## Economic considerations

The usual target of Christian and Muslim missionary activities are the lower castes of India, that might wish to escape their unprivileged position in the strict Hindu caste system.<sup>102</sup> Those people also frequently figure in the Parsi debates concerning conversion, albeit in a somewhat different position. To quote Justice Davar in the Parsi Panchayet Case:

If the interpretation sought to be put upon these instruments by the plaintiffs was to prevail, the plaintiffs would succeed in encompassing the disintegration and ruin of the whole Parsi community. We were told by the learned Counsel for the defendants that the Parsis were proud of the fact that there were no street beggars and professional prostitutes amongst the Parsi Community and the Community took care of its own paupers and cripples. If the plaintiffs' contentions prevailed, the Community would very soon have no reason to boast of these characteristics of their race, and the Parsis would soon cease to exist as a Community by reason of the rapid invasion of all pauper sweepers and Dubras of Gujerat, who would, no doubt, be attracted to the Holy Mazdiasni religion by reason of the 53 lacs of rupees in the possession of the defendants, and the other advantages of belonging to the Anjuman of the Holy Zoroastrians of Bombay. It must be remembered that the question must not be judged from the standpoint that, in the present instance, the plaintiffs are fighting for the admission of an educated and cultured lady, belonging to one of the most civilised nations of Europe. That is a mere accident.<sup>103</sup>

As in the case of the Hindu criticism of Christian proselytism, conversions are seen here as in most cases primarily motivated by a material gain. But the missionaries are perceived as actively enticing others with economic benefits, which is certainly not the approach of the Parsis in the scenario given by Davar. To elucidate his point, it would be fitting here to look into what constitutes the advantages of belonging to the Parsi community that Davar mentions in his remarks.

In the case of Bella Captain, her access to a temple administered by a local Parsi trust was in question. From this it might not seem obvious why the poor masses of India would long for such a privilege, but managing religious sites is in fact only a portion of the goals of

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 2817–2818.

<sup>101</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/For-long-a-Congress-vote-bank-Parsis-willing-to-give-Narendra-Modi-a-thought/articleshow/33753891.cms> (Accessed 14. 12. 2020).

<sup>102</sup> Sharma, "Hinduism and Conversion", p. 437.

<sup>103</sup> *Petit and others v Jijibhai and others* (Suit No. 689 of 1906) case papers and judgment notebooks of Davar and Beaman, BHC, Mumbai; and ILR 33 Bom (1909) 509–609. I had at my disposal the text available online at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1697846/> (Accessed 14. 12. 2020) where the passage cited appear in the paragraph 273.

the Parsi trusts. As Hinnells shows,<sup>104</sup> the purpose of the majority of the resources of Parsi trusts went to general fund for the disadvantaged in the society.

That is not to say that the charities of the Parsis do not also target disadvantaged people from the whole of Indian society. In fact, Parsi Charities have great renown in India and especially Mumbai, which is probably best illustrated by the fact that Mahatma Gandhi mentioned their charities as the best protection for the community in a speech in 1931.<sup>105</sup>

## Communal wealth

Nonetheless, much of the wealth of Parsi charities is intended only for members of the community. Apart from religious objectives, such as maintaining temples and the so-called Towers of Silence,<sup>106</sup> or financing various rituals, the funds are also intended for purposes such as education, medicine, support for poor and disabled or housing.<sup>107</sup>

In this light, the definition of who is and who is not Parsi has clear tangible implications. As Vevaina shows,<sup>108</sup> the establishment of a trust may keep one's wealth in the community, even at the expense of one's children, as with the case of Jerbai Wadia, who donated her properties for the benefit of Bombay's Parsi populace, instead of leaving it to her sons, two of whom were converts to Christianity.

Thus, in one way or another, a Parsi might profit from various trust services throughout their life,<sup>109</sup> which some even criticized as demotivating honest work.<sup>110</sup> There has also been controversies regarding the alleged corruption in the administration of the trusts, especially regarding housing. Just the BPP alone is the largest private landowner in the city of Mumbai, with most properties in the south of the city, which the Parsis have traditionally inhabited, and which has become prohibitively expensive.<sup>111</sup> In contrast, the local Parsi housing is very cheap, provides various public facilities and is of course intended only for members of the community as a place to "nurture Zoroastrian culture and traditions."<sup>112</sup>

## The Floodgate Argument

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<sup>104</sup> John R. Hinnells, "The Flowering of Zoroastrian Benevolence: Parsi Charities in the 19th and 20th Centuries", in J. R. Hinnells, *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies: Selected Works of John R. Hinnells*, Kindle ed., Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, chapter 3: "Parsi secular charity to Parsis".

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, chapter 1: "Introduction".

<sup>106</sup> While out of the scope of this work, the public debate on the admissible methods of burial is significant and illustrates how the respective ideological movements perceive Parsi identity. For more on this see for example Leilah Vevaina, "Excarnation and the City: The Towers of Silence Debates in Mumbai", in I. Becci, M. Burchardt and J. Casanova (eds.), *Topographies of Faith: Religion in Urban Spaces*, Brill: Leiden – Boston, 2013, p. 73–95.

<sup>107</sup> Hinnells, "The Flowering of Zoroastrian Benevolence", chapter 3: "Parsi secular charity to Parsis".

<sup>108</sup> Vevaina, "Good Deeds", p. 254–255.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 259.

<sup>110</sup> Hinnells, "The Flowering of Zoroastrian Benevolence", chapter 4: "The organization of Parsi charities".

<sup>111</sup> Vevaina, "Good Deeds", p. 260.

<sup>112</sup> <https://parsikhabar.net/bombay/the-parsi-baug-of-mumbai/6623/> (Accessed 14. 12. 2020).



In this light it is perhaps less surprising that economic motivations were suspected in the potential converts during the most influential court cases regarding conversion and Parsi identity. We have seen the reservation of Justice Davar before, but Justice Beaman made a similar statement, expecting “a constant stream of the lowest and most despised persons” if conversion were allowed.<sup>113</sup> Another important figure professing this belief was J. J. Vimadala during the *Bella Captain* case.<sup>114</sup>

What is worth noting is that in the period when both those cases were taking place, there was a heightened religious mobility among the Indian lower castes and even among the Europeans there were some cases of conversion.<sup>115</sup> After the start of the census, demographic strength started to be perceived as political strength, giving another impetus to augment the numbers of faithful, and those of a lower caste were an easier target because of their underprivileged position.<sup>116</sup>

While some communities with stronger ties to ethnicity also developed rules that were quite strict in the possibility of admitting outsiders, none was as thorough as the Parsis, whose orthodox leaders were keen on limiting the access even further, convincing those on their side who favored some very limited option for conversion to abandon it.<sup>117</sup>

Overall, it can be clearly seen that the question of identity has had a significant economic dimension among the Parsis throughout the modern history. While the definitive rejection, at least in the orthodox circles, came about during the controversies and court cases at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the economic aspect of conversion was perceived for much longer, and it is probable that it played a great role in the gradual closing of the community in the centuries leading to those modern cases.<sup>118</sup>

## Religious culture of Mumbai

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the various schools of orthodox thought do not profess any uniform theology. In this chapter I will show that for a large portion of the community exclusivity of Zoroastrian cultural forms is not necessary either, and also how some of the modern Indian religious phenomena were incorporated into the Parsi practice.

Overview of the relationship the Parsis developed with their surroundings is a good way to elucidate the perception of the Parsi identity in the community. As will be shown, the relationship with outside traditions does not follow the conception of Parsis as an Indian caste fully, for while in many cases the blending of Parsi and foreign religious forms is profound, it is seldom complete as the Parsis are still aware of their distinct identity, which is at least partially based on them professing a different religion.

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<sup>113</sup> Sharafi, *Bella's Case*, p. 198.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> There were a few cases where a member of a lower caste pretended to be Parsi, in the most notable one B. R. Ambedkar, soon to be one of the founding fathers of independent India, tried to pass for a Parsi to stay at a Parsi hostel (*Ibid.*, 31).

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 203–205.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 205–206.

<sup>118</sup> Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 87, Gauthier, “Zoroastriens et néo-zoroastriens en diaspora”, p. 86.

One of the most marked examples of the way the Parsis separate themselves is through the exclusivity of their ritual setting. The fire temple is arguably the most important and known religious site in contemporary Zoroastrian practice. There are three grades of the temple, or more precisely of the fire they house. While there are well over a hundred fires of the third and second grade, only eight fires of the highest rank exist in India.<sup>119</sup>

What sets them apart in the Indian context is the fact that only members of the community are allowed inside, excluding even those Parsi women who marry outside of the community.<sup>120</sup> Even the Parsi celebrations which traditionally take place outside of a temple are rarely public and tend to be celebrated at homes or community halls.<sup>121</sup>

This is quite different from the general practice in the city of Mumbai. The city is home to many important sites belonging to its numerous religious communities. Those places draw members of all of the local communities, not just the one to which it belongs, especially during some special festival connected to the respective holy site. You can thus find Parsis at the temple of Mahalakshmi, St. Michaels Church or a mausoleum of a local Muslim saint.<sup>122</sup>

The great public religious celebrations such as Diwali or Muharram also draw crowds from across all communities and the Parsis are no exception.<sup>123</sup> Outside the public sphere it is also possible for a Parsi to pray to figures originating in other tradition, such as Virgin Mary or Shiva, as can be in this account by a Parsi lady interviewed by Kreyenbroek:

And there are Parsis praying to the peepul tree also, it is a Hindu belief because Shiva is supposed to be in the peepul tree. To me, Yoga has taught that Shiva is your superconsciousness! Shiva is not a god, he is your superconsciousness! And what is Ahura Mazda but your superconsciousness, your cosmic consciousness, your light? So Shiva and Ahura Mazda and Cosmic Consciousness is all the same! And what harm is there if a Parsi goes and tends the tree? It is so nice! He is looking after the tree, so indirectly he is doing (it for) Bahman Amesha Spenta Yazad!<sup>124</sup> ... We have a cosmopolitan crowd here, somebody will go to Sai Baba and bring me a little statue ... if they bring me little gods - they brought me a Krishna, they brought me an Om, they brought a Mother Mary, they brought me Christ, they brought me a Shiva - I am lucky!<sup>125</sup>

One prominent phenomenon of modern Indian religious milieu are the so-called Babas. This term denotes various figures who are the target of devotion of their followers. While the Babas are typically not Parsi,<sup>126</sup> they attract significant following in the

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<sup>119</sup> Jamsheed K. Choksy, "Religious Sites and Physical Structures" in M. Stausberg, Y. S. Vevaina and A. Tessmann (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, Oxford: John Wiley, 2015, p. 401. Choksy's article may also serve as an introduction to the history and evolution of Zoroastrian religious sites in general.

<sup>120</sup> Vevaina, "She's Come Undone", p. 44–45.

<sup>121</sup> Michael Stausberg, "Monday-Nights at the Banaji, Fridays at the Aslaji: Ritual Efficacy and Transformation in Bombay City", in M. Stausberg (ed.), *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2004, p. 654.

<sup>122</sup> It is naturally difficult to provide exact number, but Stausberg estimates that around half of Parsi population of Mumbai is involved in the practices of other traditions (Ibid, 714).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 654–656.

<sup>124</sup> A Zoroastrian divinity.

<sup>125</sup> Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, p. 210–211. Similar influences can be seen throughout the whole book, especially in the passage featuring people deemed to have eclectic religious views (Ibid, 205–230).

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 50.

community, some of them even among its leaders. Sai Baba is arguably the Baba with the largest Parsi following.<sup>127</sup>

## Parsi responses

There are also similar figures originating from the Parsi community. One of those is Kookadaru, a man with alleged miraculous powers, who has gained fame largely after his death due to the activity of Ervad Aibara.<sup>128</sup> Another one is Homaji, a man from the 18<sup>th</sup> century executed after allegedly hurting a pregnant woman in a communal fight. The side he was fighting for celebrates him as a martyr.<sup>129</sup>

Some of the figures from Parsi background attract audience from other communities as well. Such is the case of the “Snake Queen” Nagrani who uses Zoroastrian symbolism, but whose followers are usually lower-class people from various backgrounds.<sup>130</sup> Another example is Jai Gururani Nagkanya and Jai Gurudev Sri Jimmy Yogiraj, who lead a group of mostly non-Parsi followers, perform miracles and bless their followers through their *darshanas* and *shakti*. It is worth noting that they are still considered Parsi Zoroastrians, live in a Parsi colony and visit fire temples.<sup>131</sup>

Overall, there seems to be growing attraction of a big part of the Parsi community towards some forms of new religious movements, from the aforementioned collection of miracle doers to astrology. The important condition for a movement to be relevant to Parsis is that it does not mandate conversion, which few Parsis would undergo.<sup>132</sup> Sometimes, such movements are even exclusively Parsi, as in the case of the two ritual events studied by Stausberg,<sup>133</sup> which both take place at a fire temple and therefore are not accessible to a wider audience.

## Other modern developments

While the previous passage dealt with the various new religious forms that influenced the modern Parsi religiosity, it also has sources that are somewhere on the edge of the concept of religion. In this section, I will briefly look at two of them that have notable influence in the Parsi community, namely Indian philosophy and irreligion.

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<sup>127</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 109.

<sup>128</sup> Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, p. 50. For more information, see also the interview with Aibara’s son (Ibid, 258–271).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 50. The fight was provoked by disagreement about the religious calendar. For more on this dispute, see Daniel J. Sheffield, “Primary Sources: Gujarati”. in M. Stausberg, Y. S. Vevaina and A. Tessmann (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, Oxford: John Wiley, 2015, p. 545–546 and also Rose, Jenny. “Festivals and the Calendar.” In M. Stausberg, Y. S. Vevaina and A. Tessmann (eds.). *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*. Oxford: John Wiley, 2015, p. 379–391.

<sup>130</sup> Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, p. 51.

<sup>131</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 113.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 113–114.

<sup>133</sup> Stausberg, “Monday-nights at the Banaji”. I am not designating these ritual events as movements in the sense of organization and membership, but rather because their form is more akin the new religious movements of Mumbai than traditional Parsi ritual performance.

Although there has been contact with Sanskrit scholarship by Parsis in precolonial times, this did not leave much of a mark on the community's theology.<sup>134</sup> This somewhat changed after the establishment of independent India, when Parsi authors started to attempt more frequently a translation of their religious terms to those of the surrounding society. In this way was for example Dastur Bode able to use terms like *māyā*, *samskāra* and *Kundalini Shakti* when talking about *Amesha Spentas*.<sup>135</sup> But sometimes the authors go further, like when J. K. Wadia interprets the Zoroastrian traditions using the concepts of *karma* and reincarnation.<sup>136</sup>

Indeed, those ideas are quite current among the Parsis. As mentioned above, the belief in reincarnation is part of the teaching of the esoteric groups, but it is also quite common with people who would not count themselves among followers of these groups.<sup>137</sup> The concept appears repeatedly in the interviews conducted by Kreyenbroek and Munshi and the conviction is so widespread among the Parsis that the popular Parsi periodical *Parsiana* sent a question to Western scholars, asking whether reincarnation is a part of Zoroastrian tradition.<sup>138</sup>

Another important aspect of modern religiosity is the tradition of secularism and atheism. As Vevaina notes,<sup>139</sup> there is a notable gap in our knowledge on the topic, because the researchers approach the Parsis mostly through its religious aspect rather than as an ethnic community.

To some extent touching the topic, Hinnells mentions a work exploring the religiosity of Parsi university students, which concludes that only a small percent of those questioned evinced notable religious activity, which might be significant in a community with high levels of education.<sup>140</sup> Notably, in his study of the Parsi diaspora, Hinnells mentions cases where being atheist did not preclude the individual from being considered Parsi.<sup>141</sup>

## Opposition to foreign elements

So far in this section I have discussed what practices of a perceivably foreign origin succeeded in finding followers among the Parsis. On the other hand, it should also be noted that even in the orthodox section of the community these foreign elements were not always accepted without contestation. We have already seen that the Zoroastrian Studies group consciously tried to purify their practice from those aspects deemed non-Zoroastrian in their origin, but they were not the first to do so.

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<sup>134</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 101.

<sup>135</sup> A group of Zoroastrian divinities.

<sup>136</sup> John R. Hinnells, "Contemporary Zoroastrian Philosophy", in J. R. Hinnells, *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies: Selected Works of John R. Hinnells*, Kindle ed., Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, chapter "Zoroastrian Philosophy in a Hindu Setting".

<sup>137</sup> Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, p. 54.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 299 reference 41.

<sup>139</sup> Vevaina, "No One Stands Nowhere", p. 39–40.

<sup>140</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 114–115.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, 410, 595.

In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the BPP made attempt at banning practices which were seen as Muslim or Hindu in origin, as well as prohibiting Parsi attendance at other groups' holy days.<sup>142</sup> It is possible that this happened in reaction to European conceptions of religion, in which it was seen as improper to participate in rituals of other religions.<sup>143</sup>

In recent times, while some practices like the veneration of Virgin Mary are not usually seen as problematic, other, like the cult of the Babas, were criticized heavily in the press, which may attest to the measure of its popularity, but also to their uncertain position as a Zoroastrian practice.<sup>144</sup> The debate surrounding the question of whether reincarnation is an element of Zoroastrian tradition also implies that not everyone is willing to accept it.<sup>145</sup>

Taking this into account, the premise of Parsis as a caste applies only partially. While we have seen throughout the whole chapter that the ethnic aspect is predominant in the sense that one may pray to Virgin Mary, believe in reincarnation or be an atheist and still be considered Parsi, there is also a different tendency, which sees Zoroastrians as more distinct from the surrounding communities on the grounds of their religious identity, a view most clearly formulated by the reformists, whom we will meet in the next chapter.

## An Indian tradition

As we have seen throughout this chapter, there are many aspects of local culture which go quite well together with a stance prohibiting conversion. It is both financially and politically beneficial for the community not to allow converts, and they have never been expected by the surrounding society to give up their unique culture themselves.

At the same time, the cosmopolitan nature of Mumbai allows the Parsis to search for options other than what provides their classical ritual tradition, while at the same time staying within the pale of Parsi identity. In this way, one may pray to Virgin Mary, revere various Babas or even identify as atheist and still be considered a member of the community.

This would suggest an ethnic conception of Parsi identity, in accord with the proposed caste character of the community within Indian society, as was proposed at the end of the previous chapter. This conception is certainly of great relevance, and it is not surprising that after living among the Hindus for centuries the acculturation level is high.

However, this view fails to address all aspects of Parsi identity. As we have seen, they have always stayed aware of the distinction between them and the surrounding population, which itself is certainly aware of the difference between Parsi minority and Hindu majority. In the debates taking place in the Parsi press on whether reincarnation or Baba worship are compatible with Zoroastrian tradition, and also in the purism of Zoroastrian Studies we see a reaction against what is seen as excessive acculturation.

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<sup>142</sup> Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 89–90.

<sup>143</sup> Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, p. 54–55, reference 63.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 299 reference 41.

As it was noted above, the colonial rule may have strengthened the distinction between Parsis and their neighbors. The colonial administration brought about the Western conception of religion, which strengthened the borders between traditions deemed distinct, and indeed the Western scholarship perceived Zoroastrianism as apart from the various Indian traditions that were subsumed under the term Hinduism.

In the light of this, it seems appropriate to now turn to the reformist tradition. As we have already seen it has roots in the early debates with agents of colonial power and so the analysis of their position might give us more complete picture of the sources of identity of Indian Zoroastrians.

## Reforming Zoroastrianism

As we have seen above, the reformist movement was formed in a time of rising contact between the Parsi community and the Western colonial scholarship. It has also been seen as the movement in the Parsi society that professes the possibility of conversion to Zoroastrianism.<sup>146</sup>

However, such formulation seems insufficient when we consider the social reality of this group, especially the fact that a majority of them does not accept converts as members of the community.<sup>147</sup> In this chapter I will explore the function of proclaiming the possibility of conversion but denying the practice in its various contexts in modern times, and also the occasions in which the current practice of non-acceptance is questioned the most.

## The evolution of the reformist thought

The first relevant theological positions for this topic were formulated after the conversion of two Parsi boys by John Wilson in the year 1839. I have mentioned these reactions in the chapter on the early orthodox ideologies, and indeed they do not present a reformist argumentation in the later developments thereof, but there are already elements present that will later characterize the reformist position, such as the formulation of theology in accordance with the Western conception of religion.

## A response to Protestantism

As mentioned before, the Parsi community valued Western education greatly and the reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were usually members of the new economic elite of Bombay who attained Western education and their work on the Zoroastrian religion was intended not only for their coreligionist, but also for the European audience.

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<sup>146</sup> For example in Pargol Saati, "Conversion vii. To the Zoroastrian faith in the modern period," in E. Yarshater, *Encyclopaedia Iranica* Vol. 6, Fasc. 3, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 242-243. Accessible from:

<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/conversion-vii> (Accessed 1. 1. 2020).

<sup>147</sup> Gauthier, "Zoroastriens et néo-zoroastriens en diaspora", p. 82.

In this way, they sought to prove that their religion is at least as valid as Christianity and closer to the European idea of true religion than to the surrounding Oriental faiths.<sup>148</sup> This also conformed to the general effort in the Parsi community to present themselves as the most Western of the Indians, and as the natural partners of the British in the otherwise backwards setting of the Indian environment.<sup>149</sup>

In their interpretation of religion, the reformists adopted the methods of Western scholarship of their time, and searched for a pure and authentic Zoroastrianism under the perceived sediments of later tradition or foreign influences. The attempts of the BPP to limit the Parsi participation in the rituals of other communities may be seen in this light.

The reformists also revised the ritual side of the religion. Influenced by the Protestant conception of religion, they refused the formulaic character of Avestan prayers, for they felt that praying in a language almost no one in the community understands precludes a true spiritual connection with God. They also rejected the majority of the traditionally authoritative texts, leaving only the Gathas, which were seen by Western scholars as the only authentic work of Zoroaster. Another point was a change of the role of priests, as the reformists imagined them more as spiritual guides and scholars than liturgical performers.<sup>150</sup>

In the eyes of the reformists, the original Zoroastrianism was a pure monotheism, only later changed to a ritualistic and dualistic tradition. Rather than ritual, the basis of this original monotheism was spirituality and morality. With such conception, the Parsis countered the European conviction of the superiority of Christianity, because there is no need to become Christian when salvation comes from a good conduct, and Zoroastrians follow the oldest prophetic ethical teaching.<sup>151</sup>

## Second generation of reformists

Crucial for the thought of the next generation of reformist was the appearance of Parsi scholars of Zoroastrianism educated in the tradition of Western religious studies. In the period from the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the field was dominated by evolutionary theories, in which religions formed a hierarchical system that was unconsciously built on a Protestant notion of religion.<sup>152</sup> The new Parsi authors were thus not obliged to explicitly compare their religion to the Abrahamic faiths any more, but the implicit values remained similar.

In some of the most prominent reformist figures of this time, we may see an interesting blurring of lines between an orthodox and a reformist. The first of such examples is J. J. Modi, whom we met during the Parsi Panchayet Case, where he served as an important specialist for the orthodox side. That being said, his own conception of religion was much in accordance with the reformists, as witnessed by the fact that in the Zoroastrian

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<sup>148</sup> Ringer, *Pious Citizens*, p. 76–78.

<sup>149</sup> Luhrmann, “Evil in the Sands of Time”, p. 867–868.

<sup>150</sup> Ringer, *Pious Citizens*, p. 71–76.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 78–85.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 91–92.

catechism written by him there is no insistence on the ritual, and instead the maxim of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds is given as the basis of all Zoroastrian practice.<sup>153</sup>

Another remarkable case is that of Dastur D. Sanjana. Considered a leading figure in the orthodox camp, he nonetheless professed a significant influence of reformist thought. He shows an utilitarian view of the ritual, in the sense of focusing the individual on ethics and spirituality, and he also held a historicized view of the tradition, another feature of reformist ideology.

Nonetheless, he was critical of the reformist movement, which he saw as weakening the Zoroastrian identity to the point where, if all of the reformist goals succeeded, the unique identity would disappear. Therefore he insisted on following the traditional Parsi practice.<sup>154</sup> In this way, he provides an interesting argument for the conception of Zoroastrian orthodoxy as orthopraxy, for even when an individual holds a predominantly reformist ideology, as long as he keeps the ritual practice, he is considered to be orthodox.

Arguably the most famous proponent of reformism is Maneckji Nusserwanji Dhalla. A priest from an orthodox family, he became reformist during his studies on Columbia University. Throughout his work, he advocated historicism, which he saw as a method to uncover the truth in the sacred texts, vehemently criticized holding on to tradition without scientific basis, and called for a reinterpretation of prayer and ritual.<sup>155</sup>

Yet, while Ringer puts Dhalla and Sanjana in a direct opposition,<sup>156</sup> his position is not that different from Sanjana, as he does not call for a cessation of ritual and prayer, only for an interiorization of piety, and just as Sanjana, Dhalla was also wary of the negative effects of the reformist movement, albeit not on the community, but rather on the personal piety.<sup>157</sup> He also served for years in the position of Dastur in Karachi, where he adhered to the traditional ritual practice.<sup>158</sup>

I certainly do not mean to imply that their positions were identical, but it is worth noting that while the first generation reformist, recruited from educated members of the newly dominant merchant class, presented considerably more radical ideas of reform of society and religion than the next generation, represented by members of both laity and priestly class, who were typically scholars educated at Western universities, and manifested more socially conservative ideas.

## The role of conversion

Overall, the practical refusal to accept converts might be clearer now. While the reformists subscribed to an individualistic conception of religion which incorporates free choice, the reasoning behind the denial of conversion can be seen in the reformist response to Christian missionaries' claim of exclusivity.

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 116–117. For his role in the trial, see Sharafi, “Judging Conversion to Zoroastrianism”, p. 165–170.

<sup>154</sup> Ringer, *Pious Citizens*, p. 119–125.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 126–134.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 134–141.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 133. Notably, Luhrmann links the appeal of movements like Ilm-e Khshnoom to the excessive rationalism of the reformist movement (Luhrmann, “Evil in the Sands of Time”, p. 872).

<sup>158</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 215–216.



While the Parsi apologists were mainly concerned with convincing their own that there is no need to convert to another faith, this implies also the same for the other direction. In this view as long as one's religion induces ethical behavior and monotheistic spirituality, there is no need to change it, as the traditional differences are secondary. While everyone should have access to the teaching of Zoroaster, there is no need to formally join the Parsi community to be his follower.

In some way, the desire for conversion may be seen as a misunderstanding of the religion by both the orthodox and the reformists. For the former, the error lies in the fact that the tradition does not include such an act, while for the latter the demand for conversion shows a misunderstanding of the fact that such act is, being an empty ritual, ultimately meaningless. Moreover, over the time prominent reformists came to be more concerned with the stability and continuity of Parsi culture and the challenge to extant rules of the community therefore somewhat subsided.

Nevertheless, there are situations in contemporary Parsi community where the need to revisit those convictions is acutely felt. I will examine some of such occasions in the rest of this chapter.

## Demographical concerns

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Parsis were one of the most successful communities in India. These times are still fondly remembered among the Parsis of today as their golden age. However, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a growing feeling of crisis and loss of the prosperity and influence that marked the community in the preceding era.<sup>159</sup>

## A dwindling community

One area where the decline is most tangible is demographics. Always a small minority, the Parsis of India counted over one hundred thousand members in the Indian census of 1961. Since then, a dramatic decrease occurred, and so in 2001 the total was only 69,601<sup>160</sup> which further dropped to 57,264 in the 2011 census.<sup>161</sup>

There has been a strong reaction to this development across the diverse ideological groups in the Parsi community with various solution proposed to this perceived crisis. Even the Indian government got involved,<sup>162</sup> which led to a somewhat paradoxical situation in which the country is financing a fertility program for one of its most affluent communities.

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<sup>159</sup> This shift is analyzed in Tanya Luhrmann, *The Good Parsi: the Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society*, Cambridge–London: Harvard University Press, 1996, 332 p.

<sup>160</sup> Zubin Shroff and Márcia C. Castro, "The Potential Impact of Inter-marriage on the Population Decline of the Parsis of Mumbai, India" *Demographic Research* 25.17 (2011): 549. Accessible from: <https://www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol25/17/25-17.pdf> (Accessed 27. 12. 2020).

<sup>161</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/Parsi-population-dips-by-22-per-cent-between-2001-2011-study/article14508859.ece> (Accessed 25. 12. 2020).

<sup>162</sup> Through a program called Jiyo Parsi. See <https://jiyoparsi.org> (Accessed 25. 12. 2020) for information on their mission and activities. For a report on their activities see for example <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-40628310> (Accessed 25. 12. 2020).

The diminishing numbers also led to a reevaluation of some of the Parsi trusts' activities. Some of them were even forced to change from being exclusively intended for Parsis to providing their services to all communities due to the lowered demand over the years.<sup>163</sup>

Others, such as the BPP, changed their focus from protecting the poor and elderly of their community to reversing the unfavorable demographical trend.<sup>164</sup> Thus a Parsi couple can get free IVF treatment, free treatment related to pregnancy and the BPP also covers the cost of education and even provides a monthly allowance for those with more than one child. Housing, the most important asset of the BPP, also did not escape the push to provide support for the community continuation, and so today the priority is given to prospective parents.<sup>165</sup>

## Intermarriage

While the orthodox camp relies on the efficacy of such measures, the liberals see another way to raise the diminishing numbers. For some of them, accepting all the children from intermarriages, or even the non-Parsi spouses, may be a way to protect the community from extinction.<sup>166</sup> The debates on this topic raise a lot of passion, which is notable for the current topic even more so considering that the real change of demographical trends in the case of accepting children from all of the mixed marriages does not seem to be that significant.<sup>167</sup>

At first sight, the question of intermarriage might seem marginal in the debate about conversion, but the exact opposite is true in the Parsi conversion discourse,<sup>168</sup> and the reasons are not that hard to uncover. As we have seen, proselytism was never really a goal for the reformists, so the reason they are traditionally connected to conversion lies rather with their support for accepting people with ties to the community, such as the children of out-married Parsi women. Meanwhile the orthodox side, with stronger insistence on the ethnic character of the community, sees even such acceptance as a conversion of an alien and therefore impermissible.

## The question of equality

While some oppose all kinds of mixed marriages, like for example the aforementioned Dastur Kotwal, the standard Indian practice follows the ruling of Justice Davar, which defined the community in a patrilinear manner. With the rising occurrence of mixed marriages, this has led in recent times to a feeling of injustice on the part of women thus excluded from the community.

We already discussed the case of Roxan Shah, which provoked a passionate debate in the Parsi press in the beginning of the 1990s. In a more recent case, a woman named

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<sup>163</sup> Vevaina, "Good Deeds", p. 256.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 258–259.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 259–264.

<sup>166</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 729.

<sup>167</sup> Shroff and Castro, "The Potential Impact of Intermarriage".

<sup>168</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 642.

Goolrukh Gupta sued her local Parsi association of Valsad after it declared a ban on intermarried women entering the sacred spaces administered by the corresponding trust. In her view, this went against equality before the law and freedom of religion established by the Indian Constitution.

The court eventually ruled that by marrying a Hindu, Gupta effectively converted to Hinduism and ceased to be a Parsi.<sup>169</sup> Gupta appealed to the Supreme Court of India, which allowed Gupta and her sisters the access to the holy sites. Furthermore, the court is slated to decide at a later date whether a woman can be considered converted to her husband's religion.<sup>170</sup>

However the court may decide, the conversation about the rights of women married out of the community is likely to continue, given that one third of marriages are intermarriages,<sup>171</sup> and the result of those debates will have crucial impact not only on the position of women in the Parsi community and even the Indian society, but also on the question of identity and community borders.

In a sign of this development, a fire temple was recently consecrated in Pune, which not only allows the children of all intermarried Parsis to enter, but also everyone interested in the religion, in a striking contrast to all of the previously established temples.<sup>172</sup>

## The Rest of the World

The focus of this work is on Parsis living in India and Pakistan. This is not misplaced, as India is a traditional homeland of the Parsis and a country a majority of contemporary Zoroastrians call their home.<sup>173</sup> But as we have seen in the case of Joseph Peterson, events and debates taking place in the diaspora can have a large impact on the debate happening in India.

Not only that, but some members of the diaspora also participate in the debates in the Indian Parsi press themselves.<sup>174</sup> Therefore it seems judicious to examine the positions of the most important communities existing outside of India, especially those that are relatively numerous and whose approaches differ from their Indian coreligionists more markedly.

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<sup>169</sup> Vevaina, "She's Come Undone".

<sup>170</sup> <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-apex-court-gives-parsi-woman-interim-relief-2567790> (Accessed 25. 12. 2020).

<sup>171</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 133.

<sup>172</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-s-first-open-fire-temple-in-pune-breeds-new-hope-for-zoroastrianism-parsis/story-dKPI9W25NF649IAMnxvsXL.html> (Accessed 26. 12. 2020). Certainly notable is the characterization of Zoroastrianism as a "revealed universal religion" by a proponent of the center, resonating the reformist conception of Zoroastrianism discussed above.

<sup>173</sup> For a recent attempt to estimate the number of Zoroastrians living today see Dinyar Patel, "Jaago/Bidaari: Rescuing Our Community from a Demographic Crisis," Conference Paper - *North American Zarathushti Congress*, Houston, 2010. Accessible from:

<http://heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/pdf/patelDemographics.pdf> (Accessed 27. 12. 2020).

<sup>174</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 109.

## Iran

As we have seen, Parsis kept contact with the Zoroastrians of Iran even before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In those times the Iranians were seen as an authority, as witnessed by the religious correspondence. But by the time of the dynamic rise in wealth and influence of the Parsi merchant class, the fortunes of the Iranian community continued to diminish.

This led the Parsis to organize help for the Iranian community, which also resulted in the spread of Parsi religious ideas among the Iranian Zoroastrian elites. As the reformists were more invested with the well-being of the Iranian community, their ideas were the ones that had a real impact in Iran.

As we have seen, the reformists aimed at proving equality with the British, and one of the means they created was founded on the link with a great empire of the ancient time, the Persian Empire of Cyrus and Darius. This narrative proved attractive for the Zoroastrians of Iran, and influenced the nascent Iranian nationalism in the Qajar Empire.<sup>175</sup>

## The Zarathushtrian Assembly

Under the Pahlavi dynasty, which based their legitimacy on Iranian nationalism to a large extent, some Iranians of a Muslim origin decided to forsake Islam, seen as foreign and oppressive, for Zoroastrianism. This trend continued even after the revolution that deposed the last Pahlavi ruler. The original Zoroastrian community has looked at this development with skepticism, and although there exists a contact between the two Zoroastrian groups of the country, members of the original community do not see the new converts as one of their own.<sup>176</sup>

The most important personage among the new converts is Ali Akbar Jafarey. Born in Kerman to a Muslim family, he spent years in Karachi, where he met Dastur Dhalla, whom he considers as one of his teachers. After his return to Iran, he was forced to emigrate after the Islamic revolution and subsequently settled in California, where he became one of the founders of the Zarathushtrian Assembly, a group which promotes Jafarey's version of Zoroastrianism, based solely on the *Gathas*,<sup>177</sup> a modernistic and ethical interpretation of the religion.

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<sup>175</sup> For the analysis of the influence of Parsi reformists on Iran, and the response of the local Zoroastrian community, see Ringer, *Pious Citizens*, p. 142–195. For an overview of the current Iranian community, see Janet Kestenberg Amighi, *The Zoroastrians of Iran: Conversion, Assimilation, or Persistence*, (AMS Studies in Anthropology, 3), New York: AMS Press, 1990, 416 p.

<sup>176</sup> Gauthier, "Zoroastriens et néo-zoroastriens en diaspora", p. 88–89.

<sup>177</sup> A part of the Zoroastrian sacred texts which is considered to be a work of Zoroaster himself. For recent academic discussion of the topic see H. Humbach, J. Kellens, P. Taylor, M. Schwartz and P. O. Skjærvø, "Interpretations of Zarathustra and the Gāthās," in M. Stausberg, Y. S. Vevaina and A. Tessmann (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, Oxford: John Wiley, 2015, p. 39–67.

Naturally, Jafarey's teachings allow conversion,<sup>178</sup> which is indeed practiced by the movement, mainly targeting people from Iranian Muslim background,<sup>179</sup> but they succeeded in finding adherents even among South Americans or Europeans.<sup>180</sup> Although, as expected, the reaction of traditional Parsis to Jafarey's activities has been largely negative,<sup>181</sup> he influences the debate even in India, as witnessed by the fact that he counts among the aforementioned diasporic contributors to the Parsi press.

The converts also pose a challenge for the traditional Zoroastrian communities in the diaspora, as seen in the case of France, where an influx of Iranian converts to Zoroastrianism that occurred after the Iranian revolution effectively led to a transformation of the local Zoroastrian association to a purely social organization, and the ethnic Zoroastrians have turned to the community in the UK for their ritual needs ever since. In the Great Britain itself, where the convert community is comparatively much smaller there exist parallel institutions, one for the converts and one for the original community.<sup>182</sup>

## North America

The North American Zoroastrian community is the most significant diasporic group in the debate about conversion. Not only is it numerically superior to the other groups outside of India and Iran, but it has also challenged the leadership position of the Indian Parsi community the most<sup>183</sup> and so it creates a more autonomous space for debate than those communities that rely on Mumbai for leadership.

Ideologically, the North American community also differs strongly from the Indian one. While the reformist movement characterized by adherence to a Westernized version of Zoroastrianism subsided substantially in India after the independence,<sup>184</sup> it has been the dominant version of the religion in the USA and Canada.<sup>185</sup> This can be to some extent explained by a relatively significant number of Iranian Zoroastrians, who, as we have seen, came to be influenced by the Parsi reformist movement,<sup>186</sup> but this is not sufficient to account for the fact that, for example, the association of Chicago, comprised mostly of Parsis,<sup>187</sup> is the most liberal on the continent.<sup>188</sup>

In America, with its protestant background, the community feels compelled to show once again that their religion is not "superstitious", i.e. ritualistic, especially in the field of

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<sup>178</sup> Albeit that it takes the form of "acceptance", probably due to the negative connotation of the term conversion (Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 525).

<sup>179</sup> It should be noted that the Assembly also counts individuals of Zoroastrian origin among its members, as most of the founders were ethnic Zoroastrians (Michael Stausberg, "Para-Zoroastrianisms: Memetic transmissions and appropriations," in J. R. Hinnells and A. Williams, *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 246).

<sup>180</sup> Stausberg, "Para-Zoroastrianism", p. 246–248.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, 246.

<sup>182</sup> Gauthier, "Zoroastriens et néo-zoroastriens en diaspora", p. 94–95.

<sup>183</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 483–489.

<sup>184</sup> Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, p. 48.

<sup>185</sup> Gauthier, "Zoroastriens et néo-zoroastriens en diaspora", p. 96.

<sup>186</sup> Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, p. 489–494, with an overview of the Parsi–Iranian relations in America.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, 490.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, 508–511.

prayer. The work of Dastur Dhalla is an important source for many American Zoroastrians as well.<sup>189</sup> A tendency on the part of the North American community to strive for a positive public image of Zoroastrianism<sup>190</sup> might be a further motivation to explain the religion in a way appealing to the general public.

### Conversion debate in America

Already mentioned here, the conversion of Joseph Peterson was the most prominent case of an initiation of someone with no genetic ties to any Zoroastrian group. This did not happen out of nowhere, and indeed the American community's stance on conversion is more flexible than the one we have met in India.

The question of conversion was already discussed during several congresses that took place before Peterson's conversion.<sup>191</sup> In the same year the initiation took place, there was a meeting of practicing priests, which resolved that in the future, the initiations shall be performed for all seeking to join the religion, including children of intermarriage and even people originally from non-Zoroastrian families.<sup>192</sup>

The conversion itself was most vehemently defended by Kersey Antia, a priest of the community of Chicago, which is probably not surprising due to the liberal character of the Chicago's association, exemplified by the fact that during an Open Forum on conversion, a convincing 86 percent of those present voted for accepting anyone with an honest conviction in the religion.<sup>193</sup>

However, this is certainly not to say that conversion is something ordinary in the American community. There are also strongly conservative associations, especially in Houston and in California,<sup>194</sup> and most associations avoid the question of who is a Zoroastrian. The only one to explicitly state that it accepts people of non-Zoroastrian origin is the one in British Columbia, but even there has been no case so far where this definition would be applied.<sup>195</sup>

While Hinnells mention no conversion of outsiders after the Peterson case,<sup>196</sup> Saati gives an account of two such conversions, albeit the convert in the both cases was a spouse of a Zoroastrian.<sup>197</sup> To my knowledge, these cases did not cause any public outrage akin to the initiation of Peterson, probably because they were much less publicized. Nonetheless, any public case in the future is bound to have an appreciable impact on the debate in India, and due to the rise of influence of the American community the leadership in Mumbai may eventually lose their dominant position in the worldwide Zoroastrian community.

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<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, 499–501.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, 501–502.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, 477–478.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*, 469–470.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*, 483.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, 509–510.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, 527–528.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>197</sup> Saati, "Conversion vii".

## A dialogue with the West

As we have seen in this chapter, the Parsis' intensive contact with the West resulted in an interpretation of Zoroastrianism where the religion was conceived in categories of Western spirituality, at first mainly those of Protestantism and the Enlightenment and eventually of the tradition of Religious Studies.

In this worldview, the ethnic aspect of the community was less prominent than we have seen among the orthodox, but proselytism was nevertheless not something the reformists would attempt, as in their eyes the membership in a specific community was secondary and what counted was the spirituality and ethics.

Another area beside religion in which the reformists wanted to show parity with their British rulers was the aptitude for creating empires, which contributed to Iranian nationalism and its idealization of the country's pre-Islamic past. Some of the Iranians took their appreciation for Zoroastrianism a step further and the Parsis eventually got into contact with Iranian converts to Zoroastrianism in the diaspora. There they also met Iranian Zoroastrians by birth, who are also greatly influenced by the Parsi reformist thought.

Another important voice in the Parsi conversion debate has appeared in the form of the Zoroastrian community of North America. While the Parsis of India shifted away from the Protestantized version of the religion towards more Indian forms, the American Zoroastrians found themselves in an environment where the former was more meaningful and indeed today the American community is a bastion of liberal thought in the Zoroastrian religion, and their stance towards conversion tends to be more open, albeit real conversions are still extremely rare.

Despite the lack of proselytism, the lesser importance ascribed to the ethnic aspect of the community can be seen in the reformist response in the debate about intermarriage, where they suggest accepting children from all mixed marriages as a solution to the demographical problems facing the community.

But in the situation where mixed marriages are more and more common, an impetus for reevaluation of the Parsi identity may come from those traditionally excluded by its patriarchal definition, be it through the children of intermarried women, or especially through these women themselves, as can already be seen today in India in the cases of Roxan Shah or Goolrukh Gupta, and in the fact that recently the first ever Indian fire temple open to everyone was consecrated in Pune.

## Conclusion

We have seen throughout this work that for a large majority of modern Parsis it is impossible for an outsider to join their community. However, this does not mean that the distinction between the orthodox and the reformist group is meaningless, even when it comes just to the question of conversion.

However, rather than simple extremes on some range between an emphasis on ethnicity or spirituality, I would see them as a two major ways of response to a challenge of modernity. As we have seen, both of these stances developed in a close contact with

Western colonialism and resulted from a need to respond to the Western claim on modernity and progress.

In this view, the orthodox sought to reinterpret the existing tradition and practice in Western terms, while the reformists wished to reshape the elements of their tradition in a way conforming to the Western conceptions of religion. These efforts of the reformists aimed at establishing of parity between the Parsis and the British, which explains the lack of an incentive for proselytism. While the other religious groups sought numerical strength at the time, the Parsi reformers, who wanted to prove they are more British than Indian, would find little advantage therein.

The need to present themselves positively to the Europeans diminished greatly after the independence, and so did the reformist movement in India. On the other hand, the Parsis living in North American diaspora adopted many of its positions. In India, the orthodox side proved more prepared for the new trends in religion, likely because it was already closer to the various surrounding Indian traditions.

Due to the organization of the Parsi community in India, the question of identity has also strong material implications. Owing to the widespread use of the institution of the trust for managing religious sites and charity, joining the community would provide access to housing and various other benefits. Because of this, the most important decisions in the question of identity were those of the various courts who decided on matters related to the trusts.

Recent times also brought a noteworthy development in the question of conversion. Ever since the departure of the British, a decline has been felt throughout the community, exacerbated by a grim demographical trend. This led to anxieties about the survival of the religion and also in more practical aspect, to a proliferation of mixed marriages.

With the rising number of voices of those excluded from the community on the account of its patrilinear rules, combined with the growing independence of the American diaspora, the next major debate is bound to appear sooner rather than later. Together with the strengthening of the orthodox position in India, it is hard to foresee the results, although probably not as difficult to predict the strength of the debate, as the community's identity definition is at stake.

As the cultural environment has proven to be a large factor in the convictions and practice of the Parsis, it is even more obvious that the researchers should look further than the essentialized conception of Zoroastrianism and examine the Parsis as an urban Indian community, for example by comparing their ideologies to those of the communities living in the same milieu, rather than with the society of Avestan and Middle Persian texts.

Another meaningful endeavor would be the exploration of the relationship of the scholarship on Zoroastrianism with the ideologies of the Zoroastrians themselves. As we have seen, the contact has been close and in both ways. Some authors naturally noted this close relationship,<sup>198</sup> but a thorough examination would certainly help to realize the various ways in which Zoroastrians and Western scholars of Zoroastrianism influenced each other.

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<sup>198</sup> For example Vevaina, "No One Stands Nowhere".



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