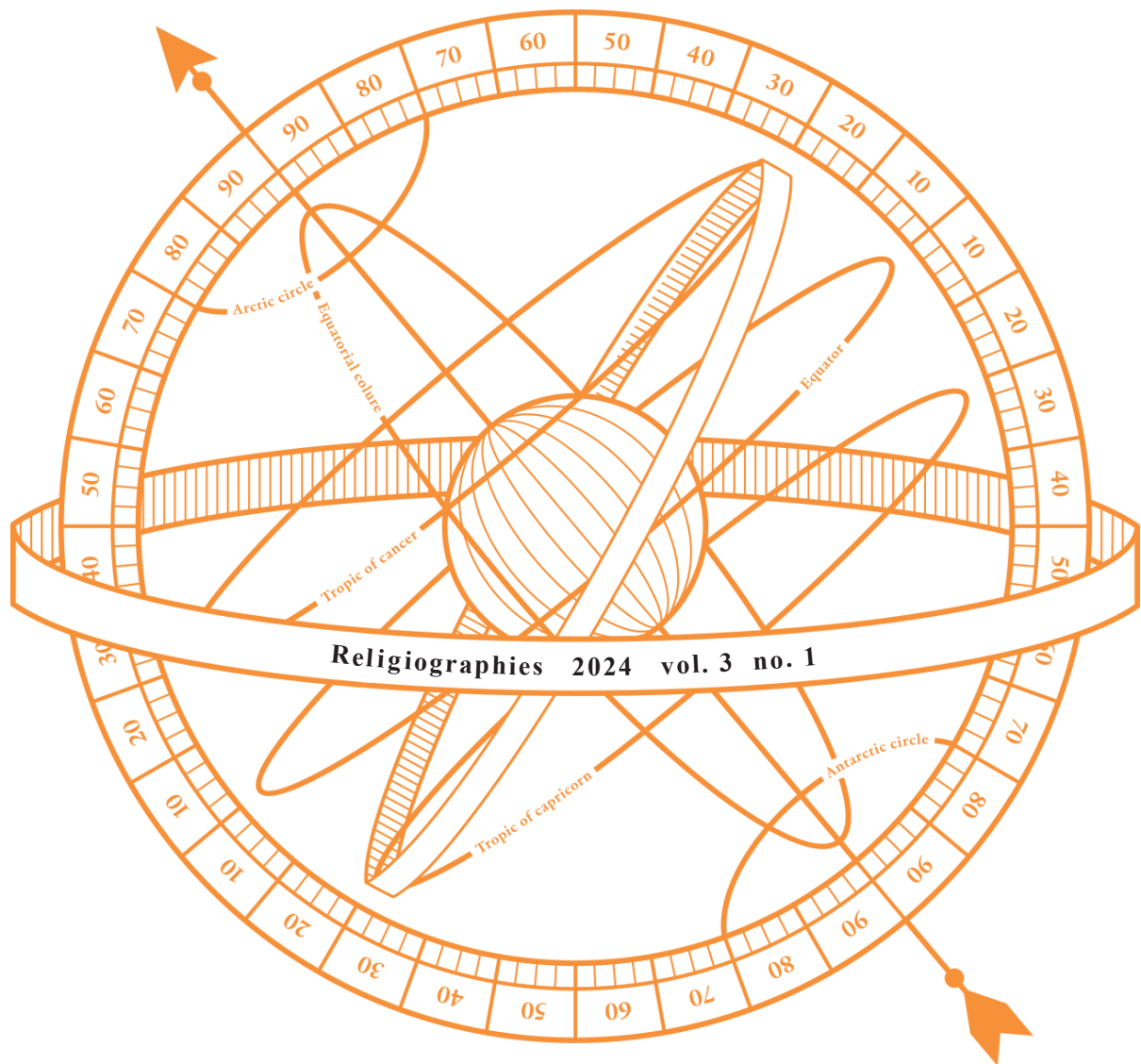


Religiographies



Special Issue

“Zoroastrian Esotericism”

edited by

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What is Zoroastrian Esotericism? Towards an Ontological Approach

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Keywords:

Parsi, Zoroastrian, Esotericism, Freemasonry, Theosophy, Ilme Kšnum, Ontology, India, Persianate

To cite this:

Errichiello, Mariano. "What is Zoroastrian Esotericism? Towards an Ontological Approach." *Religiographies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2024): 56–74.

Abstract

Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, different interpretations of Zoroastrianism began to emerge among the Parsis of India. Some of these interpretations were based on ideas that Parsis defined as “esoteric.” This article examines the participation of Parsis in Freemasonry, the Theosophical Society, and *Ilme Kšnum* (“Science of Bliss”) in modern India. The analysis of primary and secondary sources, combined with the examination of ethnographic data, leads to a definition of “Parsi esotericism” as a heuristic category. This proposal is in discontinuity with the deductive approach that has characterised the study of esotericism in Zoroastrianism and has been largely inspired by a Western conceptualisation of esotericism.



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Introduction

Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the encounter with colonial modernity had a huge impact on the way Zoroastrianism was understood by its practitioners in India, also known as Parsis. Having built long-standing ties with the Persianate world and having been thoroughly exposed to the Western world and compelled by the proselytising activities of Christian missionaries, Parsis began to propose different interpretations of Zoroastrianism in a quest for religious authenticity. Such a plurality of interpretations found its expression in the printing press which became the space of social debate. Numerous English and Gujarati publications, supporting either one or the other religious views on Zoroastrianism, emerged in India. The protagonists themselves defined some of their interpretive ideas with the English term “esoteric.” What did they mean by it?

Secondary sources that engage with esotericism and modern Zoroastrianism fail to answer this question. Publications that describe the impact of Freemasonry and the Theosophical Society on Zoroastrians; the emergence of *Ilme Kṣnum*, Pundolism, and the Mazdaznan movement; as well as claims advanced by public figures like Pavel Global, Meher Master-Moos, and Alexander Bard, among others, constitute significant contributions to scholarship on modern Zoroastrianism.¹ However, they are often informed by a historiographical approach based on the diffusionist model and West-East acculturation. As a consequence, the participation of Parsis in these organisations and movements is often framed as the result of a Westernisation process. I also find it problematic that these organisations, movements, and people are all situated on the margins of the Zoroastrian community, which is described as split between orthodoxy and reform. Such a dichotomous classification of religious communities in colonial India has largely been problematised by scholars like Nile Green.² This approach, in effect, perpetrates a Weberian view of society that sees human development as a linear progression and is articulated around binary oppositions, a legacy of Orientalism.

A publication that provides valuable reflections on the question of esotericism and modern Zoroastrianism is that of James Russell on mysticism and esotericism.³ However, the scholar adopts a deductive approach inspired by a Western connotation of esoteric ideas and practices. Russell identifies three features (i.e., non-ordinary experiences, acquisition of special knowledge, and emotional fulfilment) as criteria to assess the eventual presence of esotericism in Zoroastrianism. This deductive analysis clearly carries the heavy baggage of “Western” esotericism which does not fit the way modern Zoroastrians understand it, as this paper shall show.

By combining analysis of primary and secondary sources with findings of ethnographic research,⁴ this article examines the meaning conferred by Parsis to the term “esotericism” through the study of their participation in Freemasonry, the Theosophical Society, and *Ilme Kṣnum* (“Science of Bliss”). As this contribution gives particular emphasis on the constructivist approach emerging from interdisciplinary research, I adopt Niklas Luhmann’s operational conceptualisation of first- and second-order categories.⁵ It differs from the emic/etic distinction, which is common in anthropological literature, inasmuch

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Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1979), 205; John R. Hinnells, “The Parsis” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Stausberg, Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina, and Anna Tessmann (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 168–69; Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Shehnaaz N. Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis Speak about Their Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 231–75; Tanya Luhrmann, “Evil in the Sands of Time: Theology and Identity Politics among the Zoroastrian Parsis,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 3 (2002): 861–89; Jesse S. Palsetia, *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 264; Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Rituale*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 123; Michael Stausberg and Anna Tessmann “The Appropriation of a Religion: The Case of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia,” *Culture and Religion* 14, no. 4 (2013): 445–62; Anna Tessmann, *On the Good Faith: A Fourfold Discursive Construction of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia* (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2012); Michael Stausberg, “Para-Zoroastrianisms: Memetic Transmissions and Appropriations” in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams (London: Routledge, 2007), 236–54.

2

Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the Western Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 105–6.

3

James Russell, “On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians,” *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (1993): 73–94; Shaul Shaked, “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3 (1969): 175–222.

4

Fieldwork research conducted in India from 2019 to 2023 consisted of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, filming, and a survey. Research participants were recruited through snowball sampling.

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Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000).

as first-order observers are considered unaware that their production is being contextualised. Second-order categories are built by putting first-order insights into perspective. The former thus result from “observations that observe observations.”⁶ Emic and etic instead refer to different standpoints. Often equated with insider/outsider perspectives, they are the result of second-order observations and examine how an object of knowledge is conceived.⁷

Given the challenges and limitations of interdisciplinarity, Luhmann’s approach seems more appropriate for this article’s endeavours. The sociohistorical contextualisation provided at the beginning of this contribution sets the ground to appreciate the extent to which Parsis were primary actors in modern India, rather than passive recipients of a Western acculturation. In this vein, I intentionally avoid conceptualising esotericism in order to let it emerge from Parsi “voices.” I then conclude by proposing a second-order definition of “Parsi esotericism” in dialogue with scholarship on esotericism.

Parsis, the Persianate World, and Colonial India

In the nineteenth century, while a nationalist discourse was gradually developing in Iran, India was already central to the colonial interests of the British. Parsis were influential social actors between these two worlds. The Zoroastrian religion and myths became pivotal in the narrative of the glorification of the pre-Islamic past which characterised the Iranian nationalist discourse. Literary works portraying the allure of an Iranian intellectual supremacy before the Arab conquest acquired the value of “national artifacts.”⁸ This narrative massively circulated across the Persianate world, especially in India, through the significant development of Persian print culture.⁹

In this context, Parsis harked back to the glory of their ancestry in Iran. In nineteenth-century India, the activities of the European traders and later the British Rāj furthered a significant transformation in local society. Surat and Bombay, the main economic centres of Western India, became hubs for intellectual exchange. These cities were home to the largest number of Parsis who rapidly became major players in international commerce and enjoyed a close relationship with the British. While the ties of Parsis with the Persianate world facilitated the transition from an Indo-Persianate to a reconstructed pre-Islamic Persian identity, as Daniel Sheffield suggests,¹⁰ their proximity to colonial power exposed them to Western customs and forms of knowledge.

In those years, the Zoroastrians of India accumulated great wealth, established economic empires, and became pioneers in various sectors of social and economic life such as shipbuilding, textiles, infrastructure, print media, education, and scholarship. When Christian missionaries began to promote moral and religious activities in India, they attempted to convert local communities, including the Parsis. Missionaries described non-Christian religions as irrational and superstitious. Likewise, Zoroastrianism and its scriptures became the preferred ground of contestation for the Scottish missionary John Wilson (1804–1875).¹¹

The heterogenous response of Parsis to these attacks exposed their theological vulnerability, a vulnerability informed by the absence of

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Luhmann, *Art*, 56.

7

See Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1999); Steven J. Sutcliffe, “The Emics and Etics of Religion: What We Know, How We Know It and Why This Matters,” in *The Insider Outsider Debate: New Perspectives in the Study of Religion*, ed. George D. Chryssides and Stephen E. Gregg (Sheffield: Equinox, 2018), 30–59.

8

Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870–1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 60.

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Farajollah Ahmadi, “Communication and the Consolidation of the British Position in the Persian Gulf, 1860s–1914,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 10, no. 1 (2017): 73–86; Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 319; Marashi, *Nationalizing, 57–65*; Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 77–123; Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, “Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the ‘Aryan’ Discourse in Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011): 445–72.

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Daniel J. Sheffield, “Iran, the Mark of Paradise or the Land of Ruin?,” in *On the Wonders of Land and Sea: Persianate Travel Writing*, ed. Roberta Micallef and Sunil Sharma (Boston: Ilex Foundation and Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University, 2013), 14–43.

11

Teresa Albuquerque, *Urbs Prima in Indis: An Epoch in the History of Bombay 1840–1865* (New Delhi: Promilla & Co., 1985), 2, 133–38; Mary Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 132; Ian Copland, “The Limits of Hegemony: Elite Responses to Nineteenth-Century Imperial and Missionary Acculturation Strategies in India,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 3 (2007): 637–65; Christine Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India: Politics and Communities in Bombay City 1840–1885* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 2–17; Green, *Bombay Islam*, 105–06; Hinnells, “The Parsis,” 157–72; Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 44–47; Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, 40, 112; John Wilson, *The Parsi Religion: As Contained in the Zand-Avastá, and Propounded and Defended by the Zoroastrians of India and Persia, Unfolded, Refuted, and Contrasted with Christianity* (Bombay: American Mission Press, 1843).

a normative religious authority within the community. What emerged was a need for religious authenticity that favoured the development of distinctive and competing interpretations of Zoroastrianism. Elements of the Iranian nationalist discourse and Western colonial disciplines served as resources for groups of Parsis to articulate what “authentic” Zoroastrianism was, often associating antiquity with authenticity in an Orientalist fashion. Ideas labelled as “esoteric” by Parsis became resources for emerging claims of authenticity.

Parsis exchanged these resources in “relational spaces” which were favoured by the colonial enterprise, like Freemasonry and the Theosophical Society, or established by Parsis themselves, like *Ilme Kṣnum*. The entanglement of Parsis with the West and the Persianate world provided Parsis with the resources to construct truth-claims offering distinctive interpretations of Zoroastrianism. The emergence of a plurality of these claims, differentiated based on “hermeneutics,” gave rise to what I define as a “hermeneutical polyphony.”¹²

In the following sections, I analyse the findings of the ethnographic research I conducted between 2019 and 2023 in India, during which I met Parsis involved in Freemasonry, Theosophy, and *Ilme Kṣnum*. Although access was difficult, I was able to participate in some of their activities, especially those organised by adherents to *Ilme Kṣnum*. Upon request, I anonymised the markers of identification of some participants; this is signposted with footnotes.¹³ The examination of the sociohistorical drivers behind their participation complements these sections. Finally, I discuss how modern Parsis developed an esotericism that could be identified as “Zoroastrian.”

Parsi Freemasons

During my time in India, I found that people taking part in the activities of masonic lodges rarely like to speak publicly about their affiliation. A few Parsis I met disclosed their “initiation into the Craft” only after some time. Even after having revealed this, their answers to my questions were often evasive. This observation forced me to reconsider my positionality and the expectations about the researcher/participants dynamic. The sensation of “being assessed” gradually emerging in me was counterbalanced by the impression that Parsi Freemasons enjoyed being perceived as holders of unutterable truths. Such a layer of secrecy and concealment, however, was not entirely unexpected as it has historically characterised the brotherhood and esotericism in its Western contours, as Jessica Harland-Jacobs and Kocku von Stuckrad suggest.¹⁴

After several attempts, I succeeded in setting up a meeting with Yazad Mehta,¹⁵ a Parsi Freemason from Mumbai. This was possible through the referral of a common acquaintance, a Parsi Freemason herself, whom I had known for a few years. Such a “referral mode” echoes the way the brotherhood invites new members for initiation, transcending the fieldwork’s boundaries and reverting the asymmetry between researcher and participant. I met Yazad on a Wednesday in a Starbucks in Bandra, a residential neighbourhood of Mumbai popular among Bollywood stars. However, with the recent establishment of the Bandra Kurla Complex, Bandra is shifting from being a residential

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For further details on Parsi politics of authenticity, relational spaces, and hermeneutical polyphony please read Mariano Errichiello, “Beyond the Theosophical Paradigm: Ilme Kṣnum and the Entangled History of Modern Parsis,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 16, no. 2 (2024): 245–69.

13

Please note that I address anonymised research participants with their first name.

14

Jessica Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire: Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717–1927* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 122–23; Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

15

The identity of this research participant has been anonymised.

area to one of the main corporate centres of the city.

We met at 6pm, right after Yazad finished work at his office job. While savouring an iced Frappuccino, he shared the story of his initiation into Freemasonry. Yazad joined the brotherhood because he thought it was the ideal place to pursue his quest for hidden truths. In fact, the popular reputation of Freemasonry for harbouring secret networks of power and for playing a central role in many conspiracy theories was a hook for him. Aware of his curiosity, one of his friends, a Mason himself, invited Yazad to be initiated into a Delhi lodge more than ten years ago. After the initiation, however, he found out that all the stories about hidden power and conspiracies were made up. The only thing that met his expectations was a consistent degree of secrecy. In fact, Yazad recounted that Freemasons in India are warned not to share details about the ceremonies and activities that take place in masonic gatherings. By contrast, disclosing one's own affiliation is a personal choice. Yazad, for instance, has never told his parents he is a Freemason, fearing a negative reaction.

Freemasonry has almost 300 years of history in India. In 1729, Captain Ralph Farrwinter, an officer of the East India Company, established the country's first masonic lodge. In eighteenth-century South Asia, Freemasonry was instrumental in connecting high-ranking British officers operating in the region with the centre of the Empire. The kernel of this organisation rested upon the principles of charity, benevolence, and universal brotherhood, embedded in ritual symbolism and masonic ceremonies.¹⁶ Yazad confirmed that the focus of today's Freemasonry in Mumbai is, for the most part, unchanged: morality and charity are still at the centre of the brotherhood's activities. The emphasis on these values was reiterated by other Freemasons I met in India, though they are not Zoroastrian and are affiliated with different lodges. Yazad added that Freemasonry endows its members with a moral code that they apply gradually in everyday life, transforming themselves into better human beings. "It's like carving the self out of a stone," he remarked.

The way these principles are put into practice, however, may vary from one lodge to another, shedding light on a certain degree of heterogeneity in Indian Freemasonry. The first lodge that Yazad joined in Mumbai was largely composed of Muslim Masons, he recounted, adding that many of the lodge's charitable activities were directed towards the Muslim community. Yazad found this to contrast with his idea of the universality of the brotherhood's masonic principles, so he switched to a new lodge in South Mumbai where he is currently a Master of the 3rd degree. The vast majority of members of the new lodge are Parsis. Here, he continued, they promote many charitable initiatives for the wider community. During the Covid pandemic, for instance, they financially supported hospitals and funded the construction of health infrastructure to help tackle the virus.¹⁷

While universal brotherhood is a core value of Freemasonry, it is interesting to note how a clear ethnoreligious distinction emerges from the account of Yazad. I observed that it is common for Parsi Freemasons to join lodges with which a large number of their co-religionists are affiliated. However, these ethnic boundaries are not a masonic specificity but rather a characteristic Parsi orientation. Such boundaries

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Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire*; Jessica Harland-Jacobs, "Freemasonry and Colonialism," in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Jan A. Snoek (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 439–60; Jessica Harland-Jacobs and Jan A. Snoek, "Freemasonry and Eastern Religions," in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, 258–76.

17

I cannot disclose further details on the lodges and the related charitable activities to keep the identity of the research participant anonymous.

materialise even when approaching Zoroastrian sacred spaces in India, as shown in Fig. 1.

Although the participation of a large number of Parsis in Freemasonry may not be surprising for a minority elite of a former colonial city, for a long time access to the brotherhood remained exclusive to British men. In particular, adherence to a monotheistic religion was required for new initiates. British Freemasons made a few exceptions for individuals with a strategic role in the colony, such as Umdat-ul-Umrah Bahadur (1748–1801), the governor of the Carnatic region, who joined the brotherhood in 1775.¹⁸ Access for women has never been allowed, though they played a significant role in the activities of Freemasonry, as found by Harland-Jacobs.¹⁹

Parsis became involved with Freemasonry when the Grand Master of all Scottish Freemasonry in India, James Burnes (1801–1862), invited Manekji Cursetji (1808–1887) to join the brotherhood. Cursetji was a businessman, judge, philanthropist, and a distinguished member of the Parsi community in Bombay. His initiation into the *Lodge Perseverance* of Bombay, however, was rejected. On a journey to Paris in 1842, Cursetji was initiated as a Freemason and, on returning to India, he again requested admission to the *Lodge Perseverance*. But he was again rejected.²⁰ Refusing the admittance of individuals thought to show high moral standards and to profess a monotheistic faith contradicted the ideals of equality and universal brotherhood. It was also detrimental to the reinforcement of ties with local influential people. Simon Deschamps suggests that, in 1843, the compatibility of Zoroastrianism with masonic values led some British Freemasons to partner with Cursetji and establish the masonic lodge *Rising Star of Western India* (henceforth *Rising Star*).²¹

The requirements to join Freemasonry today are still very similar. Yazad illustrated how members are required to believe in one God and uphold high standards of morality. But how is morality assessed? Yazad related that the referral system serves as the initial selection process. Then, Parsi candidates are usually asked if they wear the white undergarment (*sudreh*) and girdle (*kusīr*), accessories that they are given at their initiation into Zoroastrianism (*navjote*). “This is the way Masons assess whether the candidates are good Zoroastrians,” Yazad added.

He went on to describe how, during the performance of masonic ceremonies, all members refer to God as the Great Architect, regardless of their own faith. Yazad asserted that this embodies a non-dogmatic approach towards the belief in a higher divinity, mitigating the risk of falling into the contours of a specific religion and ensuring inclusivity towards all the faiths represented in the masonic assembly. As a Zoroastrian, when he was initiated, Yazad took the oath on the Avesta. He recounted that the ritual of the oath varies according to the religion of the new initiate. Christians take the oath on the Bible; Hindus on the Bhagavad Gita; Muslims on the Koran; Jews on the Torah; Sikhs on the Guru Granth Sahib; and so forth.

The first report of a masonic assembly incorporating the Avesta goes back to the second half of the nineteenth century.²² In 1854, the Parsi scholar Kharshedji Rustomji Cama (1831–1909) joined the *Rising Star*. His efforts to associate Zoroastrianism with Freemasonry in a



Fig. 1. Banner placed at the entrance of the *Ustād Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff Daremeher* fire temple, Mumbai, India, 2023. Photograph © Mariano Errichiello.

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Henrik Bogdan, “Freemasonry and Western Esotericism,” in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Jan A. Snoek (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 277–305; Simon Deschamps, “Freemasonry and the Indian Parsi Community: A Late Meeting on the Level,” *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism* 3, no. 1 (2012): 60–71; Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire*, 18, 72; Harland-Jacobs, “Freemasonry and Colonialism,” 439–60.

19

Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire*, 16–22. In 2011, the Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons established the Lodge Bharati 56 in New Delhi, the first women’s lodge in India. Although it is not recognised by traditional lodges, female Parsi Freemasons are well connected with and highly regarded by the male “brothers.” That is how I was introduced to Yazad Mehta.

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Deschamps, “Freemasonry and the Indian Parsi Community,” 60–71; Antonio Panaino, “Zoroastrians and Freemasonry,” in *Freemasonry and Religion: Many Faiths, One Brotherhood*, ed. Trevor Stewart (London: Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, 2006), 51–67.

21

Deschamps, “Freemasonry and the Indian Parsi Community,” 60–71.

22

Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 1–40.

universalist fashion were manifold.²³ Besides presenting a copy of the Avesta to the lodge and probably introducing the practice of taking the oath on this Zoroastrian text, the Parsi scholar established the celebration of the *Jamshedi Navroz Masonic Festival* in Parsi masonic lodges. Cama's proposals all aimed to establish the glorious past of pre-Islamic Zoroastrianism as a universal heritage.²⁴ In his discourse of 1874, Cama attempted to demonstrate that the *Jamshedi Navroz* was based on annual cycles of nature which were universally accepted. In the pamphlet *A Discourse on Zoroastrians and Freemasonry* published in 1876, the scholar argued for similarities between masonic symbolism and Zoroastrianism. Cama's career in the brotherhood was marked by prestigious honours, including the rank of Honorary Depute Grand Master of the Provincial Grand Lodge of All Scottish Freemasonry of India in 1876.²⁵

By 1864, all the available positions in the *Rising Star* were held by Parsis. The initiates spoke both Persian and Gujarati alongside English during the lodge's meetings. Notable Parsi Freemasons include the philanthropist Kharshediji Nasarvanji Cama (1815–1885), the textile entrepreneur Dinshaw Maneckji Petit (1823–1901), the "architect" of the Parsi *baugs*²⁶ Muncherji Cowasji Murzban (1839–1917), the politician Pherozeshah Mehta (1845–1915), and the "great old man of India" Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917).²⁷ In 1899, Jivanji Jamshedji Modi (1854–1933) was initiated into the brotherhood through an inspiring conversation with Cama.²⁸ The participation of two of the most important Parsi scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Freemasonry informs the impact of universalism and comparativism on the development of Zoroastrian studies as a field.

With the development of Freemasonry and the increased participation of Zoroastrians, lodges whose initiates were exclusively Parsi began to emerge, revealing the tension between ethnoreligious boundaries and the ideal of a universal brotherhood. In these lodges, masonic rituals were adapted to be acceptable to both Freemasonry and Zoroastrianism. The dedication of some lodges to Zoroastrian figures like Cyrus the Great and Zarathustra illustrates the extent to which masonic spaces made it possible to reconstruct a pre-Islamic identity in the Parsi community. Tallin Grigor found that the inclusion of motifs recalling ancient Iran was a wider architectural trend in colonial Bombay, emblematic of a "Persian revival."²⁹ Yazad explained that, today, some Parsi Freemasons wear masonic paraphernalia that include Zoroastrian symbols, like the pin that combines the masonic triangle and the Persian winged disk with a figure in the centre (*fravahar*).

Yazad recounted that initiates are instructed on the meaning of the brotherhood's symbols and rituals as long as they progress through the masonic degrees. He added that, in the past, they were given many readings, in particular those associated with Western philosophy. Today, they only read masonic ritual books. Through the participation in masonic ceremonies and personal study, Yazad began to examine religions from a comparative perspective. "All of them offer an interpretation of the underlying universal nature. For instance, Hinduism had a great influence on Zoroastrianism, in particular on the worship of fire and on the performance of some ceremonies. Once, Zoroastrians were Hindu; in fact, Persian names proceed from Vedic Sanskrit," Yazad remarked.

23

Panaino, "Zoroastrians and Freemasonry," 51–67.

24

Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 1–40.

25

Kharshedji R. Cama, *A Discourse on Jamshedi Naoroz* (Bombay: n.p., 1874); Kharshedji R. Cama, *A Discourse on Zoroastrians and Freemasonry* (Bombay: n.p., 1876); Harland-Jacobs and Snoek, "Freemasonry and Eastern Religions"; Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 96–97, 140.

26

This term refers to housing colonies.

27

Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 24–35, 96, 138–47, 266.

28

Harland-Jacobs and Snoek, "Freemasonry and Eastern Religions"; Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 323–26.

29

Talinn Grigor, "Freemasonry and the Architecture of the Persian Revival, 1843–1933," in *Freemasonry and the Visual Arts from the Eighteenth Century Forward: Historical and Global Perspectives*, ed. Reva Wolf and Alisa Luxenberg (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 159–180; Talinn Grigor, "Time of Historicism, Print Revival, and Parsi Patronage of Architecture, 1887–1936," *Iranian Studies* 56, no. 1 (2023): 9–36.

When I asked him to expand on the concept of esotericism, Yazad mentioned that he applies the “first principle’s thinking” to everything he experiences in life. He described this method, drawing upon the Aristotelean concept of the first cause, as a way of deriving knowledge from its fundamental axioms in a given field. This exercise is then followed by checking whether the conclusions violate any fundamental laws, to confirm their validity. Through the lens of this “Aristotelean” form of esotericism, Yazad considers all religions as systems embedding fundamental laws that enable humans to live in harmony with nature. The application of this method led him to believe that all religious teachings convey the same message of “diversity” and “morality.” “The problem of modernity,” he added, “is that the process of individualisation is stretched, causing the fragmentation of communities. In this context, religions lose relevance but they are not replaced by systems conveying the same messages. That is why our societies are experiencing a decline all over the world.”

When explaining how Freemasonry informs the way its initiates look at religions, Yazad emphasised the importance of individual freedom of thought. On the other hand, the contributions of Cama and Modi as well as records of masonic activities indicate that universalism and comparativism shaped a common religious orientation among Parsi Freemasons.³⁰ The esotericism described by Yazad lies exactly at the intersection of this tension between individual freedom and collective religious orientation; it endows him with the possibility of deriving principles from every field of knowledge, and then synthetising them into fundamental laws which are universally valid.

Parsi Theosophists

Adil Nariman³¹ is a Parsi from Mumbai in his 70s who has been involved with the Theosophical Society since he was a young priest. I arranged to meet him at the Horniman Circle Garden, in Kala Ghoda, South Mumbai. Adil prefers to meet in the early morning, before the unbearable heat rises. Having arrived at the venue, a small green park set at a very busy roundabout of the city, I found Adil waiting for me on a bench. He wore a white garment with a white cap, which form the Parsi priestly attire for formal occasions. As we started speaking, I soon realised that Adil had a unique ability to convey difficult religious concepts in simple English. We easily dug into esotericism and he explained to me his view that every religion needs its esoteric side. In particular, he lamented that Zoroastrianism is merely studied through textual works and, while he admires philologists for their valuable contribution to the understanding of the Avestan and Pahlavi scriptures, he remarked that this is not enough to fully comprehend a religion.

Adil believes that the teachings spread by the occultists Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) contain a spiritual truth applicable to every religion. In 1875, Blavatsky and Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in New York to revive ancient wisdom and form a universal brotherhood. Inspired by the way Freemasonry was organised, the Society was structured in lodges. In 1879, Blavatsky and Olcott established the Bombay Branch of the Theosophical Society, later known as Blavatsky lodge, and soon gained a large following.³²

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Kharshedji R. Cama, *A Discourse on Freemasonry among the Natives of Bombay* (Bombay: n.p., 1877), 5–6; Jivanji J. Modi, *Masonic Papers* (Bombay: Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, S.A., 1913), 245–53; Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 272.

31

The identity of this research participant has been anonymised.

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Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 1; Julia Chajes and Boaz Huss, introduction to *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julia Chajes and Boaz Huss (Jerusalem: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016), 9–29; Joscelyn Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophy,” in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 13–31; Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 61; John R. Hinnells, “Contemporary Zoroastrian Philosophy,” in *Companion Encyclopedia of Asian Philosophy*, ed. Brian Carr and Indira Mahalingam (London: Routledge, 1997), 59–84; Paul K. Johnson, *The Masters Revealed* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 1; K. J. B. Wadia, *Fifty Years of Theosophy in Bombay* (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1931), 21–50.

The Parsi Kavasjee Mevanjee Shroff (1852–1903) was among the founders of the Blavatsky lodge. Besides Shroff’s contribution to the establishment of the Theosophical Society in India, other Parsis made financial endowments for the organisation. From 1880 to 1909, the Blavatsky lodge had two Parsi Presidents, eight Parsi Honorary Secretaries, eight Parsi Treasurers, and fifteen Parsi Honorary Librarians. The leadership of Parsi Theosophists was so influential that Avestan verses were chanted during the celebration of the Society’s gatherings. Jehangir Khurshedji Daji (n.d.), Nasarvanji Framji Bilimoria (1852–1922), and Bahman Pestonji Wadia (1881–1958) were the editors of the lodge’s magazine. In 1900, Bilimoria and his son Ardeshar (n.d.) started the bilingual (English and Gujarati) monthly magazine *Cerāg* (“lamp”) for the Parsi readership. This magazine examined Zoroastrianism under a theosophical lens and significantly contributed to the revival of the teachings of the early modern mystic Āzar Kayvān (942–1027 AH/1533–1618 CE).³³

Adil is well versed in the literature produced by the *ābādīs*, the religious group founded by Āzar Kayvān. He remarked that recent editions of the *ābādī* treaties do not exist, but thanks to the work of Parsi Theosophists, he could access many of them. He used to read passages from the English translations of the *Jām-i Kaykhusraw* (*The Goblet of Kaykhusraw*), published in *The Theosophist* in 1880, and the English translation of the *Dasātīr-e Āsmānī* (*The Heavenly Regulations*) translated by Dhunjeebhoy Jamsetjee Medhora in 1888. Inspired by these readings and reflecting on the figure of Āzar Kayvān, Adil came to the conclusion that the Persian mystic was a sage gifted with the power of ubiquity who spread pre-Islamic Zoroastrian wisdom through his teachings.

Like Adil does today, early Parsi Theosophists regarded contested texts such as the *Dasātīr-e Āsmānī* and the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (“The School of Creeds”) as authentic Zoroastrian sources.³⁴ Blavatsky herself, who took part in the construction of a theosophical Orientalism, as suggested by Christopher Partridge, associated the *ābādī* literature with Zoroastrianism in theosophical circles.³⁵ In effect, Blavatsky’s ahistorical approach that situated India as the birthplace of ancient wisdom informs a romanticised view of local religions.³⁶

Blavatsky gradually combined Indian religious concepts with ideas based on Western esotericism. Scientific advancements of the time like evolutionary theory and thermodynamics were used to explain and legitimise some of her teachings. For instance, she held that the mechanisms of evolutionary theory were spiritually driven, influencing the Theosophists’ understanding of race as a hierarchically ordered manifestation of the universal spirit.³⁷ In this vein, while Blavatsky designated the mythological people of Atlantis and Lemuria as the ancestors of human progeny, Olcott encouraged Parsis to consider themselves as “heirs of the Chaldean lore.”³⁸

Adil was inspired by Blavatsky’s race theory to make sense of the ethnocentric character of Parsis in India. He remarked that those who are born Zoroastrian are the result of the incarnation of souls that are spiritually advanced. “Parsis have a chance to elevate their spirit by practicing the Zoroastrian liturgy, which harmonises the practitioners with the surrounding nature,” he added. This approach also reiterates

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Wadia, *Fifty Years*, 8–18, 49–51, 113–15.

34

Anonymous, “Reviews,” *The Theosophic Gleaner* 7, no. 2 (1897): 53–54; Dhunjbhoy J. Medhora, *The Zoroastrian and Some Other Ancient Systems* (Bombay: Indian Printing Press, 1886), 55–66.

35

Christopher Partridge, “Lost Horizon: H. P. Blavatsky and Theosophical Orientalism,” in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 310–33.

36

Karl Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer: Annotations on the Appropriation of the Cakras in Early Theosophy,” in *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julia Chajes and Boaz Huss (Jerusalem: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016), 309–54; Isaac Lubelsky, “Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy,” in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 335–55; Partridge, “Lost Horizon,” 310–33.

37

Egil Asprem, “Theosophical Attitudes Towards Science: Past and Present,” in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 405–27. Lubelsky, “Mythological,” 339–46; Partridge “Lost Horizon,” 330; James Santucci, “The Notion of Race in Theosophy,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 11, no. 3 (2008): 37–63.

38

Henry. S. Olcott, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1913), 4.

the strict endogamy practised by a large part of the Parsi community in India. “Parsis are like water in a bottle in the middle of the ocean: by opening it, the water will dilute with the ocean.” As inter-marriage would “dilute” the spiritual kernel that Parsis are born with, he used this metaphor to firmly state his view on the preservation of customary forms of religion.

However, Adil’s views on race and marriage are not representative of what other Parsi Theosophists believe and practise. During a residency at the Zoroastrian College in Ghimaniya, a village in Gujarat, I attended a few classes that Meher Master-Moos delivered to a small group of students. Master-Moos is a Parsi public figure in her seventies who practises astrology and divination. Over the last few decades, she has been at the centre of polemics for promoting conversions of Tajiks and Russians to Zoroastrianism, a form of heresy for a large part of the community.³⁹ Inspired by a mystical vision that involved the *Kṣnumist* Behramshah Naoroji Shroff, she established the Zoroastrian College in 1986. Although she often refers to the teachings of Blavatsky as spiritually significant and considers herself a Theosophist, Master-Moos has adhered to *Ilme Kṣnum* since the 1970s.⁴⁰ She does not care much about endogamy. Rather, she is preparing for the imminent advent of the Zoroastrian saviour who will put every human being under his aegis, acting as an “equaliser.”

The Zoroastrian College hosts students who pursue research on Zoroastrianism and/or esotericism. The classes focus on subjects that help students’ individual projects. When I was there, a student was working on *vāstu śāstra*.⁴¹ Master-Moos advised her on how to frame the research, moving from one topic to another with extreme ease and demonstrating her broad knowledge of esoteric currents, often unrelated to Zoroastrianism. Between lessons in the morning and the afternoon, we usually had lunch all together. Right before eating, Master-Moos asked us to form a circle, hold hands, and synchronously intonate a short prayer in English to express our gratitude to the creator. We then shared a variety of carefully prepared dishes of vegetables, legumes, and fruits.

Following a vegetarian diet is a practice shared by many Parsi Theosophists I met in India. In this regard, Master-Moos and Adil share the same eating habits. Interestingly, both explained to me that vegetarianism represents a natural inclination deriving from the degree of spiritual advancement as indicated by their individual stage of reincarnation. Although the founders of the Theosophical Society advocated this practice, Parsi Theosophists following vegetarianism gradually distanced themselves from the Society. In 1903, a group of them founded the *Zoroastrian Jashan Committee* (ZJO). Following Olcott’s death in 1907, the disputes on the relocation of the Society’s headquarters and the Hindu dominance within the organisation led various ZJO members to resign from the Society. A few years later, they began to publicly attack Theosophists.⁴²

In that same period, the global temperance movement advocated the banning of alcohol, and hundreds of organisations emerged in colonial India under its umbrella. One of these was the *Parsi Vegetarian and Temperance Society* (PVTs), founded in 1907 by the Parsi priest Phiroze Shapurji Masani (1887–1942) and his brother Dinshaw (d.

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For further details on Meher Master-Moos, please read Stausberg and Tessmann, “The Appropriation of a Religion,” 445–62; Tessmann, *On the Good Faith*.

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I use the term *Kṣnumist* to indicate those Parsis who follow the teachings of Behramshah Naoroji Shroff.

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Vāstu śāstra is a Hindu system of architecture that combines ancient beliefs with principles encouraging harmony with nature and functionality.

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John R. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 103; Wadia, *Fifty Years*, 66, 88–90.

1965). The PVTs campaigned for the adoption of vegetarianism and the banning of liquor, tobacco, and narcotics in the Parsi community. Through its emphasis on vegetarianism, this organisation became the new home for many Parsi Theosophists.⁴³

The PVTs still operates in today's Mumbai and Adil is one of its members. On a Wednesday morning, I ventured into the streets of South Mumbai where the PVTs offices are. After having entered an old building and climbed the stairs, I saw a person locking the door of the PVTs office; he kindly gave me the phone number of the Managing Trustee with whom I arranged a meeting. When I returned that afternoon, four people were waiting for me around an old wooden table. The image of this handful of elders, who administrate what once was a vocal organisation in the community, clashed with the large portraits of distinguished Parsis hanging on the walls of the room. A few shelves arranged all around the office displayed the historical PVTs print production of the early- and mid-twentieth century.

The Managing Trustee inquired about the reasons for my visit and everybody patiently listened to my research plans. He then advised me to liaise with Marzban Palsetia,⁴⁴ a PVTs staff member. Having arranged a meeting with Palsetia via phone, I returned a third time to the PVTs. The first thing that Palsetia asked when he saw me was, "Have you ever experienced God in your life?" This question instantly reconnected me with the sensation of "being assessed" that I felt when trying to meet Freemasons.

Palsetia has been a member of the PVTs for a long time but is also a connoisseur of the life of Behramshah Naoroji Shroff and *Ilme Kṣnum*. Marzban reiterated the words of Adil and Master-Moos regarding the spiritual reasons behind vegetarianism. Further, he recounted that when a person is born, parts of the soul are scattered between the mineral, plant, animal, and human kingdoms. The purpose of incarnation is to reunite these parts. An individual who craves meat, for instance, still needs to connect with the related part of the soul sedimented in the animal world. By contrast, someone practicing vegetarianism is closer to the full reunification of the soul's parts. Palsetia added that this mechanism is governed by *jīram*, one of the laws of *Ilme Kṣnum*.

This short conversation with Palsetia echoes what I soon realised to be a recurrent insight of my research: placing Freemasonry, Theosophy, PVTs, and *Ilme Kṣnum* and their members into defined categories does not really work. These organisations did not claim exclusive affiliation; thus, ideas about reincarnation, race, vegetarianism, endogamy, and so forth were constantly exchanged and used to advance claims of religious authenticity. The perseverance of such a "religious brokerage" in today's Mumbai is one of the most emblematic findings of this research. In practical terms, it shows how interpretive approaches to Zoroastrianism emerge and inform religious claims in the context of an ongoing Parsi hermeneutical polyphony.

Adil and Palsetia confirmed that several PVTs members are also part of the Theosophical Society, though the contiguity between the two organisations is much less explicit than a hundred years ago. Adil participates in the activities of the PVTs and uses its library to find answers to questions on Zoroastrianism. He often flips through the pages

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John N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1915), 421–22; Marzban Hathiram, *A Wondrous Life: The True Story of the Master Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff* (Bombay: n.p., 2013), 99; Phiroze S. Masani, *Zoroastrianism Ancient and Modern* (Bombay: Parsee Vegetarian & Temperance Society, 1917); Ian R. Tyrell, "India," in *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: An International Encyclopedia*, ed. Jack Blocker, David Fahey, and Ian R. Tyrell (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 308–11.

44

Marzban Palsetia passed away in 2021.

of issues of *Cerāg*, difficult to find otherwise. Adil spoke fondly of the scholar-priest Phiroze Masani. His contribution to the study of Pāz-and⁴⁵ literature, for instance, still represents a valuable legacy of Parsi scholarship that emerged in colonial India. Such an intellectual approach characterises the esotericism of Adil. However, being a priest, he combines his numerous readings with first-hand experiences.

When I asked him about esotericism, Adil remarked, “I go by my experience. When I am in the temple to perform the last prayers of the day, around midnight, I am alone in darkness with the fire. I cannot put in words what I feel, but the fire speaks and gives me clarity of mind, solving my doubts and answering important questions of life. The fire of the temple is a divine being, and we keep it alive through our prayers and rituals.” Reflecting on these experiences, Adil observed that “one needs to study, acquire practical knowledge, and receive wisdom from the forefathers. Religions and rituals are explained to priests through material examples but their meaning lies in the spiritual world. If one does not go into the esoteric understanding of things, then one knows nothing.”

By integrating theosophical and *Kṣnumic*⁴⁶ notions, Adil draws upon race theory and the law of *jīram* to make sense of Parsis’ customary endogamy and the practice of vegetarianism. The efforts of searching for spiritual meaning beyond the philological interpretation of scriptures and the mechanical performance of rituals inform the esotericism practised by Adil. He sees esotericism as the understanding of hidden forces that govern existence beyond the literal meaning of scriptures and the mere performance of rituals. Adil does not regard Blavatsky, Olcott, or Shroff as holders of the ultimate truth but finds the application of some of their teachings useful in a universalist way. Nevertheless, in light of the religious ethnocentrism for which he advocates, such a universalism takes the shape of a hierarchical inclusivism where Zoroastrianism is placed at the top of the spiritual chain.

Parsi Kṣnumists

Khojeste Bharucha⁴⁷ is a staunch follower of *Ilme Kṣnum*. When I first contacted him, Khojeste refused to meet. He was puzzled by a request coming from a non-Zoroastrian who claimed to be interested in knowing more about *Ilme Kṣnum*. He decided it was not worth his time to speak with me. However, through perseverance and the good offices of a common acquaintance, Khojeste changed his mind. He invited me to his home in Tardeo, a residential and commercial locality in South Mumbai. He lives on the first floor of a 2-storey building in one of the Parsi colonies of the area.

Wooden chairs and tables in the living room and the ticking of a pendulum clock in the hallway gave a colonial allure to Khojeste’s house. While his wife was preparing a *chai*, we went into a private room and began to speak. Khojeste told me that he learned about the existence of *Ilme Kṣnum* about twenty years ago thanks to a neighbour who invited him to attend a talk of Kaikhushru Navroji Dastoor (1927–2019). Dastoor was a lawyer and worked for many years in the banking industry. He published a few books on Zoroastrianism, but his main contribution was the launch of three magazines dedicated

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This is a writing system for Middle Persian developed from the Avestan alphabet.

46

I use *Kṣnumic* as a qualifier deriving from *Ilme Kṣnum*.

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The identity of this research participant has been anonymised.

to *Ilme Kṣnum*. Khojeste was very impressed by Dastoor's religious fluency and charisma. Since that first talk, he began studying books explaining what *Ilme Kṣnum* is. "The more I read, the more my thirst for knowledge grew," he commented.

Ilme Kṣnum was introduced to the Parsi community by Behramshah Naoroji Shroff in 1906. After his public debut, Shroff soon earned a large following among Parsis, including scholars, Freemasons, and Theosophists. Interested in learning more about *Ilme Kṣnum*, even Cama chaired some of his talks. *Kṣnumists* believe that Shroff was initiated by the *sāheb delān* ("master-hearts"), mythical masters who are thought to live in seclusion in the paradisiac community of Firdos, located on Mount Damāvand in Iran. *Kṣnumists* recount that they isolated themselves in a hidden mountain village a few centuries after the Arab conquest of Iran in order to preserve Zoroastrianism. Today, there are probably around three hundred *Kṣnumists*. However, there are many more who believe in the existence of Zoroastrian sages hiding in Iran. The narrative theme of the "nostalgia of origins" that characterises this diasporic community favoured the integration of the myth of secluded masters into the Parsi collective memory.⁴⁸

In our conversation, Khojeste commented that "*Ilme Kṣnum* explains nature through a set of laws. It is not something you can change, it is difficult to explain, one has to adapt. Nature goes as it has to go, and *Ilme Kṣnum* tries to teach us the laws that we as individuals have to follow." This definition of *Ilme Kṣnum* is similar to that provided by Shroff himself in his first book *jarthoṣṭī dharm samajavā māṭe ilme kṣnumnī cāvī* (*The key of Ilme Kṣnum to understand the Zoroastrian religion*), published in 1911. This publication, through the use of a large number of *logato* (Guj. "technical terms"), lists a number of *kudarātnā kāyado* ("laws of nature") that are believed to govern existence. These laws advance an emanationist theory of cosmogenesis;⁴⁹ a monistic dualism that solves the problem of evil by turning it into "necessary evil"; the concept of reincarnation; and a cyclical view of time. Further, Shroff firmly advocated for customary forms of religion and used to emphasise the importance of the daily performance of *tarīkato* ("religious observances").⁵⁰

In line with this orientation, Khojeste performs *tarīkato* as prescribed in Zoroastrianism. He explained that, when he cuts his nails or hair or takes a bath, he performs a set of small rituals whose purpose is to reduce the risk of his soul becoming polluted. Khojeste believes that the recitation of the Avestan prayers forms an invisible defensive wall around the practitioner. This wall protects them from the attacks of contaminating agents proceeding from evil forces. While we spoke about *tarīkato*, our conversation reached a level of complexity that I struggled to follow. Khojeste employed an abundance of technical terms I was largely unfamiliar with. To make a point regarding the importance of following *tarīkato*, he cited a number of chakras, their correspondence with the spiritual world, and how mundane activities affected them. He then concluded by remarking that ritual performance produces electric and magnetic forces that interact with the subtle world.

Using language evoking scientific concepts such as electricity and magnetism as a means of explanation, however, is not peculiar to

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Hathiram, *A Wondrous Life*, 25–32; Meher Master-Moos, *Life of Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff* (Bombay: Mazdayasnie Monasterie, 1981), 11–23.

49

This refers to the idea that all created things are the product of a series of emanations proceeding from a creative principle. In this vein, all created things carry within themselves a manifested degree of the creative principle.

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S. N. Banaji, "śeth beherāmsāh navarojī śarāphe jarthoṣṭī ilme-kṣnumnī pehel muṃbaimāṃ kevī rīte karī?" (How did Sheth Behramshah Naoroji Shroff commence the Zoroastrian *Ilme Kṣnum* in Mumbai?), in *Behramshah Shroff Memorial Volume*, special issue, *Frasho-Gard* 17–18 (1930): 331–46; Behramshah N. Shroff, *tāvīl-ī-sudreh* ('interpretation of sudreh'): *The Inner Deep Scientific Rationale of the Sacred Shirt "Sudreh"* (Mumbai: Cerāg Prīntīng Pres, 1913), 39–41; Behram J. Unwalla, "beheṣṭ-behereh mānavāṃt ustād sāheb beherāmsāh navarojī śarāph: teo sāthno paṃdar varṣno māro samāgam ane tethī thayalā mane phāyadā" (Respected Late Ustad Sāheb Behramshah Naoroji Shroff: My 15 Years-Association with Him and Its Benefits to Me), in *Behramshah Shroff Memorial Volume*, special issue, *Frasho-Gard* 17–18 (1930): 113–18.

Khojeste; nor is it a special feature of *Ilme Kṣnum* or Theosophy. Michael Bergunder shows how, in the nineteenth century, the *Materialismusstreit* (“materialism controversy”) and the spread of scientific theories triggered the emergence of the debate about religion and science. In this context, esotericism as an instrument to mediate between science and religion impacted India to the point that Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam were classified as scientific religions.⁵¹ Likewise, Shroff and today’s *Kṣnumists* consider Zoroastrianism to be the most scientific religion of all.⁵²

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi shows how the Iranian nationalist discourse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries situated *vatan* (“homeland”) as a territory battered by Arab rule, and the acquisition of *ilm* (“knowledge”) as the way to restore the past glory of Iran.⁵³ In the same way, Shroff situated *Ilme Kṣnum* as a scientific knowledge deriving from the wisdom of ancient Iran, offering Parsis an *ilm* to re-establish the *vatan* undermined by colonial modernity.

By attending a talk on *Ilme Kṣnum* in Mumbai today, one can learn about an esotericism built around a number of *logato* and scientific concepts that nostalgically evoke the Parsi *vatan*. One Sunday morning, I went to the Sohrab Palamkote Hall at Dadar Parsi colony. The audience were mainly old Parsi women diligently wearing the customary scarf to cover their head. Marzban Hathiram, a Zoroastrian priest in his 50s who has long been one of the public voices of *Ilme Kṣnum*, began to speak about the esoteric meaning behind some passages of the *Šāhnāme*, the famous Persian epic. He skilfully managed to combine Avestan, Pahlavi, and Persian terms with Gujarati *logato* and scientific ideas. This gifted and charismatic orator wove a thread that brought the audience back to the mythical *vatan*, between Persian kings and heroes. A round of applause followed the end of the talk. While some attendees encouraged Hathiram to come back for another talk, others queued to receive spiritual advice on private matters.

The links of *Ilme Kṣnum* with Iran and the broader Persianate world go beyond the Iranian nationalist discourse and the reference to *vatan*. The *logato* employed by Shroff in his publications and by Hathiram in his talks largely correspond to religious terms and ideas that thrived across the Persianate world after the seventh century CE, through Ismā‘īlīs, Twelvers, Ahl-i Ḥaqq, *išrāqī*, and other *ḡolāti*⁵⁴ groups, including the *ābādī* sect of Āzar Kayvān.⁵⁵ When I shared this finding with Khojeste, he claimed that the Persianate character of *Ilme Kṣnum* was unequivocal evidence that Shroff did not make up his esoteric ideas, as many of his opponents have argued for years. Khojeste situates *Ilme Kṣnum* in pre-Islamic times, suggesting that the religious groups I referred to drew upon the teachings of the mythical masters of Firdos.

The way Khojeste articulated the relation between *Ilme Kṣnum* and the religious diversity of the Persianate world illustrates the extent to which antiquity is still an important marker of authenticity. What is more, Shroff’s life story illustrates how *Ilme Kṣnum* was more than an initiative to spread esoteric ideas; it was, in fact, a religious project whose purpose was to reestablish practices deemed to be authentically ancient. In this vein, one of the most ambitious initiatives of Shroff was the incorporation of the Fasli calendar⁵⁶ in the Parsi liturgy.

51

Michael Bergunder, “‘Religion’ and ‘Science’ within a Global Religious History,” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 16, no. 1 (2016): 86–141.

52

Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 48; Bergunder, “Religion,” 88–132; Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 167.

53

Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning*, 116–23.

54

The term *išrāqī* (“illuminationist”) refers to the school of thought introduced by the twelfth-century Persian philosopher Šehāb-al-Din Yahyā b. Amirak Sohravardi (1155–1191). The term *ḡolāti* proceeds from the noun *ḡolāt* which is the plural form for *ḡhāl* or “exaggerator.” It was used by Islamic theologians to classify those groups that believed in heretical ideas such as reincarnation.

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Errichiello, “Beyond the Theosophical Paradigm,” 245–69.

56

The Fasli (from Pers. *faṣl* or “season”) calendar requires the intercalation of a day every 4 years. It is based on the Iranian *Jalālī* calendar which drew upon astronomical observations of the solar transit.

Hathiram, *A Wondrous Life*, 131–54, 200–201; Masani, *Zoroastrianism*; Master-Moos, *Life*, 140–71; Behramshah N. Shroff, “daštān-suvāvādnī hālat” daramyān jālavvānā asal jarthoštī kāyadāo” (part of “*darūjī from menses*,” also known as authentic Zoroastrian laws to observe during “the condition of menstruation-confinement”), (Mumbai: Ilme Kṣnum Īnstītyut, 1919); Behramshah N. Shroff, “jarthoštī daennām asal šikṣaṇ mujab phasalī roj-māhnī gaṇatrī” (Calculation of the Fasli Roj-Mah according to the original teachings of the Zoroastrian religion), *Frasho-Gard* 11, no. 3–4 (1922); Phiroz N. Tavarria, *A manual of “Kshshnoom”*: *The Zoroastrian Occult Knowledge*, (Bombay: Parsee Vegetarian & Temperance Society and Zoroastrian Radih Society, 1971), 82.

On 1 April 1923, Shroff led a ceremony to lay the foundation of a temple according to the Fasli calendar, which was thought to be the ancient liturgical system of Zoroastrianism. This temple would have served a colony of Parsi *Kṣnumists* built on a plot of land that Shroff had purchased. He engineered this initiative in collaboration with the PVTs. However, it failed due to clashes with the Masani brothers. Nevertheless, in 1997, the project was revived and a Fasli temple was established in Behram *baug*, the plot Shroff purchased more than seventy years earlier. The construction was concluded in 2001 and the temple is named the *Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff Daremeher*, in honour of Shroff (see Fig. 2).⁵⁷



Fig. 2. *Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff Daremeher* fire temple, Mumbai, India, 2023. Photograph © Mariano Errichiello.

On a hot day in March, I went to see the *Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff Daremeher*. The main entrance of the temple opens between two slightly inclined walls depicting impressive motifs based on Persian iconography. While I was looking around, a young priest saw me and came out of the temple. Having learned about my interest in *Ilme Kṣnum*, he invited me to see a small memorial erected a few meters away from the temple (see Fig. 3). That is the place where Shroff had placed the foundation stone of the *Daremeher* in 1923. Together with this memorial, I noticed that each building of the colony is named using a religious nomenclature that recalls *Ilme Kṣnum*, such as “Damavand” (see Fig. 4). The architecture of Behram *baug* materialises the legacy of Shroff’s teachings.



Fig. 3. Memorial erected in honour of Behramshah Naoroji Shroff, Mumbai, India, 2023. Photograph © Mariano Errichiello.



Fig. 4. Entrance of a building in Behram baug, Mumbai, India, 2023. Photograph © Mariano Errichiello.

The young priest proudly shared that a commemoration ceremony is performed annually in memory of Shroff. He went on to state that he follows the teachings of *Ilme Kṣnum*, though he also lamented that Parsis living in Behram baug did not properly adhere to the *tarīkato* performed in a *Kṣnumic* fashion. Only a few elders remained loyal to Shroff’s teachings and showed rigorous discipline in the performance of the *tarīkato*. Khojeste is one of them. He attends Fasli functions but principally follows the *Šahanšāhī* (“royalist”) calendar, which is the most common for the Zoroastrians in India. He explained that, in practice, it is hard for him to completely adhere to the Fasli liturgy because, unlike Behram baug, all the fire temples established in the area where he lives follow the *Šahanšāhī* calendar. However, Khojeste confirmed that he performs the *sarošnī kṣnuman sāthnīj kustī* (“Kusti with the propitiation of Saroš”) daily. This way of tying the *kustī* is characteristic of Parsis adhering to *Ilme Kṣnum* and makes this small ritual last longer.⁵⁸

By calling for special attention to rituals and by situating its knowledge back in the glorious pre-Islamic past, *Ilme Kṣnum* provided Parsis with an esotericism that combined Persianate religious ideas and scientific discoveries. In this way, Shroff contextualised *Ilme Kṣnum*

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Marzban Hathiram, “How to do the right kusti,” accessed December 27, 2022, <https://www.fra-shogard.com/how-to-do-the-right-kusti/>.

in colonial modernity and considered Zoroastrianism as a “scientific religion” on a par with Western forms of knowledge. *Ilme Kṣnum* was not just an intellectual exercise but also a project of religious militancy. It implied the construction of sacred spaces for its followers and the reintroduction of religious practices performed in the past. While aspects of this project have been realised, only a tiny number of Parsis intellectually adhere to *Ilme Kṣnum*, and the number of those practising the liturgy as prescribed by Shroff seem to be on the decline.

However, *Kṣnumic* ideas are still very influential in the community at large, to the point of becoming an asset in legal debates. One of the most recent examples is that of the construction of a metro line that was supposed to run beneath two fire temples in South Mumbai. A group of Parsis, including some who did not necessarily adhere to *Ilme Kṣnum*, petitioned the court to move the construction site, as it would affect the vibrational power of the fires enthroned in the temples and their spiritual integrity. Nevertheless, the court ruled against them because it considered these arguments to be merely an interpretation of Zoroastrianism; hermeneutical polyphony does not always pay off.⁵⁹

Esotericism as an Ontological Instance

The search for authentic Zoroastrianism that arose among Parsis in colonial times triggered the emergence of a hermeneutical polyphony. Freemasonry, Theosophy, and *Ilme Kṣnum* offered relational spaces where resources for authentication were negotiated and exchanged. In his research on the transculturation of *cakras* in the theosophical context, Karl Baier stresses the importance of acknowledging the heterogeneity of the Theosophical Society’s membership.⁶⁰ Likewise, the Parsi variable membership to Freemasonry, Theosophy, and *Ilme Kṣnum* generated entanglements between universalism, inclusivism, ethno-religiosity, and monogenism.⁶¹ While Parsi Freemasons attended and chaired Shroff’s lectures, many of the PVTs members proceeded from Theosophy, whose members were also attracted by the teachings of Shroff.

By acknowledging the generative role of entanglements in global religious history, Giovanni Maltese and Julian Strube suggest that “different understandings of religion were produced and constantly negotiated through global exchanges during the nineteenth century.”⁶² Their approach overcomes the idea of “the West influencing the East” and decentralises agency, succeeding in moving beyond a Western-bound esotericism, as urged by Egil Asprem.⁶³ Likewise, Parsis were not mere passive recipients of colonial power, but “brokers of ideas” and primary actors in the construction of Zoroastrianism as a “modern” religion. Inspired by Michael Bergunder’s research on esotericism, religion, and science,⁶⁴ I situate esotericism as a mediative instance that helped Parsis to make sense of their religion. In the context of the community’s hermeneutical polyphony, esotericism was therefore a form of knowledge that contributed to the reconstruction of an ancient Iranian identity. From a sociological perspective, it became a currency that conferred authenticity in the economy of power relations of the Parsi community, rather than an instance of “rejected knowledge” as long theorised in the context of Western esotericism.⁶⁵

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For further details on the metro case, read Vevaina, Leilah, “Two Fire Temples and a Metro: Contesting Infrastructures in Mumbai,” *Space and Culture* 26, no. 2 (2023): 242–52.

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Baier, “Theosophical,” 309–54.

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This term refers to the idea that humanity descends from a common ancestor.

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Giovanni Maltese and Julian Strube, “Global Religious History,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 33, no. 3–4 (2021): 229–57.

63

Egil Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 3–33.

64

Bergunder, “Religion,” 86–141.

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Cf. Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The ethnographic findings enrich the understanding of Parsis' esotericism as a form of knowledge that endows actors with social capital, adding glimpses into the subjective domain of its practitioners. The esotericism of Yazad, driven by a quest for power and knowledge, is reflexive and extractivist inasmuch as it aims to methodically "extract" universal principles from readings and personal observations, an approach that leads the practitioner to consider religions as different expressions of the same nature. By embodying study as practice, the esotericism of Adil integrates intellectual knowledge with praxiological intuitions deriving from a dialogical relation with the sacred fire, which helps him make sense of nature. The esotericism of Khojeste is characterised by strict adherence to the laws of nature to revive ancient practices and reconstruct the glorious pre-Islamic past.

Yazad, Adil, Palsetia, Master-Moos, Hathiram, and Khojeste often refer to nature in their conception of esotericism. This is not surprising since the ethnographic findings indicate that they experience esotericism as a method to apply every day, as a practical exercise and a way of life. Esotericism is also visible in the way Parsis design urban spaces and turn them into sites of memory production. By informing religious ideas, claims of authenticity, daily practices, and urbanisation, esotericism contributes to embodying the nature of being in practitioners. Thus, while the study of history and society by means of textual analysis sheds light on the epistemological and sociological aspects of esotericism, ethnography illustrates how esotericism is a mode of existence, an expression of a given ontology. Such an "ontological" approach moves along the lines of recent research on esotericism conducted at the Center for Advanced Studies ("Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective") at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg in Germany.⁶⁶

Ethnographic research also shows the limits of the researcher in defining the boundaries of the organisations examined and in translating the research participants' experiences. Difficult access to some participants, initial refusals, and appointments agreed upon only through referral prompted observations on the rhetoric of secrecy and reflections on the researcher/participant dynamic.

Secrecy as a feature of Western esoteric currents, including Freemasonry, has been extensively studied. Von Stuckrad's research epitomises esotericism as a discourse claiming higher knowledge in a rhetoric of secrecy.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, I do not consider the concealment prompted by organisations like *Ilme Kşnum* as a marker a "Western" esotericism. In fact, the *Kşnumic* use of a complex language, while historically contingent on the Iranian nationalism's revivalism, is largely based on concepts proceedings from the Persianate world, such as *bāṭin* ("inner, hidden, esoteric") and *ta'wīl* ("esoteric, inner interpretation").⁶⁸ As demonstrated elsewhere, this evidence points in a direction other than the West.⁶⁹

By contrast, the concealment I experienced triggered the adoption of a "slow fieldwork" approach.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, rather than considering this concealment as a discursive feature, I look at it as a social practice. In the context of the competitive landscape of the Parsi religious marketplace, and given how publicly claims of authenticity based on esotericism are voiced, I argue that such a concealment is intended to target

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An edited volume showcasing the contributions of the first cohort of research fellows is on its way.

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Kocku von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation," *Religion* 35, no. 2 (2015): 78–97.

68

See Liana Saif, "What is Islamic Esotericism?," *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–59 for a genealogical analysis of these terms.

69

Errichiello, "Beyond the Theosophical Paradigm," 245–69.

70

This not only refers to the idea of conducting field research over an extended period of time, but also pertains to the ethnographer's process of maturation and trust-building with the research participants. See Paul Stoller, *Wisdom from the Edge: Writing Ethnography in Turbulent Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023), 29–43. For further details on the limitations and problems of ethnography, see Martyn Hammersley, "Ethnography: Problems and Prospects," *Ethnography and Education* 1, no. 1 (2006): 3–14.

a specific segment of practitioners to increase affiliation. Certainly, I was not a target, due to the ethnoreligious boundaries. However, as suggested by Stausberg and Vevaina, scholarship is often a currency sought after by Zoroastrians for the validation of religious claims,⁷¹ an observation that impeccably explains my experience. These findings can also inspire textual studies in that the debate on these limitations and experiences would constitute an interesting research subject, as suggested by Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina, who prompts philologists of Zoroastrianism to reflect on their positionality when engaging with texts.⁷²

Recent developments in the study of esotericism show how the field is very active and moving towards a more global and interdisciplinary approach.⁷³ In such an evolving context, I do not find the use of the qualifiers “Zoroastrian” or “Parsi” as conceptually problematic for the construction of a second-order category, as long as they typify an esotericism practised by individuals who self-identify as Zoroastrian or Parsi. Informed by the analyses adduced in this article and the characteristic ethno religiosity of the research participants, I propose to look at the esotericism of modern Parsis (rather than Zoroastrians) as a resource to construct hermeneutical voices resulting from the mediation between relational spaces, organisations, and people, between different epistemologies, between multiple ontologies.

The study of the ontological domain of esotericism leads to a programmatic reflection on the field of Zoroastrian studies. This proposition raises both a methodological and a theoretical question. Textuality and ethnography, I argue, can work together in an interdisciplinary enterprise that enriches scholarly outputs. By expanding the study of the reception and performativity of texts in contemporary communities around the world through anthropological analysis, Zoroastrianism can be studied as a living religion, as a way of life, as a mode of existence, perhaps making research on Zoroastrian ontologies the long-sought theoretical thread in our field.

Acknowledgments

Part of the ethnographic fieldwork was conducted as part of the doctoral research at SOAS University of London funded by a Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarship and a Kamran Djam Scholarship. The most recent fieldwork was conducted as part of the research project overseen by the Center for Advanced Studies (“Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective”) at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg in Germany.

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Michael Stausberg and Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina, introduction to *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Stausberg, Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina, and Anna Tessmann (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 15–17.

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Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina, “No One Stands Nowhere: Knowledge, Power, and Positionality across the Insider-Outsider Divide in the Study of Zoroastrianism,” in *The Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History and Tradition*, ed. Sarah Stewart, Alan Williams, and Almut Hintze (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 27–58.

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Julian Strube and Egil Asprem, eds., *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Marco Pasi, “Il Problema della definizione dell’esoterismo: Analisi critiche e proposte per la ricerca futura,” in *Forme e correnti dell’esoterismo occidentale*, ed. Alessandro Grossato (Milan: Edizioni Medusa, 2008), 205–28; Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, “Introduction: Occultism in a Global Perspective,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 1–15; Asprem, “Beyond,” 3–33.