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Evil in the Sands of Time: Theology and Identity Politics among the Zoroastrian Parsis

T. M. LUHRMANN

THE GREAT TEXTS OF THE GREAT TRADITIONS are in some sense unchanging, but as Milton Singer pointed out, the anthropologist's task is to "find for these ideas a local habitation and learn how they operate in the lives of ordinary people" (1972, 39). What I wish to present here are the changing meanings of texts that are thought to form the core of the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism and the story of how their interpretations have altered as the South Asian community of Parsi Zoroastrian interpreters has changed. Much about this story echoes the experience of other South Asian communities: as the British rose to dominance and their missionaries strove to teach Parsis that theirs was an inferior, weaker faith, Parsis began to represent their religion as similar to that of the Protestant Christians, even while steadfastly refusing (for the most part) to convert. Some parts of this story, however, are different, because they reflect the complex fate of a diasporic group that left its traditional homeland of Persia a thousand years ago, but whose members have never forgotten that they are outsiders in an adopted land. In the late twentieth century, Khojeste Mistree, a charismatic, brilliant teacher, began to teach that the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism is strikingly different from either Christianity or Hinduism, and that the Parsis must claim the distinctiveness of their own tradition. He acquired the intellectual tools to do so from his Oxford training, and many Parsis are outraged by what they regard as his foreign heresies. But the young appear to have listened.

In fact, this story of changing theological interpretation is the story of two different impulses in diasporic groups. The first is centrifugal and assimilationist. Although they arrived in India hundreds of years before the British, Parsis made efforts to represent themselves as being like the British, and they did so more diligently and effectively than perhaps any other South Asian community. In recognition of that assimilationist desire, they have been called the most westernized indigenous community under the Raj. This impulse is well understood in the anthropological literature as the phenomenon of native identification with the colonizer. The structure of that elite identification and its complex socio-psychological consequences have been

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presented, in differing ways and with distinctive contexts, by Mannoni (1956), Memmi (1965), Fanon (1967), Kelly (1991), Suleri (1992), Bhabha (1994), Stoler (1995), and others. The tragedy of this impulse in a colonial context lies in its fundamental failure, for rarely did the colonial authorities accept the westernized elites as genuine members of their own group. Postcolonial theorizing has focused on the result of that ultimate rejection and the "hybrid consciousness," to use Bhabha's phrase, of the people who came of age within these circumstances.

The second, centripetal impulse is the antidote to the first: it is the move inwards to reaffirm identity in the face of diffusion. We see it in the charismatic teacher, through whom an active, youth-driven movement has emerged to teach what it is to be a "true" Zoroastrian to Parsis who feel they never knew what it meant, and who have now spread across the globe. This centripetal impulse is less well studied, at least in the ethnography of South Asia: it is the impulse of those who return (or claim to return) to what previous generations have abandoned.¹ Yet the "return" is not a repetition. In its self-consciousness, its deliberateness, its choice, the return can never recapitulate the original state. Those who have left can never truly go home again.

Neither the centrifugal nor the centripetal impulse is specific to diasporic groups, but both impulses are particularly important in such groups because they create problems of survival as a distinct group within a larger society. This article begins with an account of the way Parsis reinterpreted their religious texts to make them more modern, more British, more appropriate to the status to which they aspired. Then the article turns to a phenomenon that may resonate with other communities elsewhere: that a religiously defined ethnic group, at risk of losing its distinctiveness, produced an orthodox movement that claimed to return the group to the original, true religion and thus to regenerate its essential vitality. In the Parsi case, that orthodox movement has certain characteristics that set it apart from earlier religious practices. First, theology becomes more important to the everyday practitioner, because the movement is course and lecture driven. Second, the theological texts are made personally meaningful to the participants. Third, the personal response to the text becomes more privileged than textual scholarship. Fourth, the movement acknowledges that while being born Parsi just happens, becoming a religious Zoroastrian requires a conscious act. These characteristics result from the very modern need to "sell" the religion, from the recognition that the movement's version of the religion is one choice among others for those whom they are trying to attract.

The Community

Bombay is home to the great majority of the seventy-six thousand or so Parsis in India, and symbolic homeland, perhaps, to another twenty or more thousand who have spread in the diaspora to Britain, Hong Kong, East Africa, Canada, and the United States.² They are primarily a middle-class, well-educated community, often involved in the professions: law, medicine, and banking. They are descendants of the Zoroastrians who escaped an Islamicized Persia in the tenth century C.E. Those Zoroastrians arrived eventually in Gujarat, where they settled into an agricultural life,

¹These two themes of centripetal and centrifugal impulses can be seen, however, in a discussion of religious revival or "fundamentalism" which has received a great deal of attention in other settings, e.g., Howell 2001, Mahmood 1998.

²The 1991 India census identified 76,392 Parsis (*Parsiana* 1995:18[4]14-17).

with some weaving and trading. When the British arrived, and particularly after the British acquired Bombay in the seventeenth century, the Parsis became involved with them as financiers and mediators and established their reputation for great business and political success during the following centuries. They are noted as well for their remarkable religion, one of the oldest monotheisms.

Zoroastrian theology is usually understood as the creation of one man, Zarathustra, thought to have been a priest of the early Indo-Iranian religion over three thousand years ago.³ Central to that religion was the concept of *asha* (Sanskrit *rta*, later *dharmā*), meaning righteousness or—as scholars and some followers describe it—natural law.⁴ The term is thought to have implied order and right working, and it remained central to Zarathustra's understanding of religion as he reformed it (see Boyce 1975, 27 and Zaehner 1961, 34 ff.). It still is salient for the contemporary Zoroastrian. The central foci of the early Iranian cult were fire and water; these elements, particularly fire, remain at the heart of Zoroastrianism past and present. Tradition says that revelation came to Zarathustra when he was thirty. He had left his parents' home at age twenty, against their wishes, to seek for truth (*Zadspram* 20.7).⁵ He waded into the depths of a river to fetch water for a seasonal ceremony. Upon emerging on the bank of the river (and having bathed, thus being ritually pure), he saw on the bank a shining figure—a man, handsome, brilliant and elegant, who wore his hair curved-tailed, because the curved tail is an indication of duality (*Zadspram* 21.8)—who led him into the presence of God (Ahura Mazda) and five other radiant beings, before whom “he did not see his own shadow on the earth, owing to their great light.”⁶ Zarathustra's teaching about these beings is not clear: preserved in seventeen hymns known as the *Gathas*, found in a body of texts called the *Avesta*, they are elliptical and obscure. Long passages refer to cattle herding. The following excerpts are typical of the whole, translated by Insler, a careful but not entirely literal scholar:

With hands outstretched in reverence of him, our support, the spirit virtuous through truth, I first entreat all (of you) Wise One, through this act, for (that) through which Thou may satisfy the determination of (my) good thinking and the soul of the cow.
(*Yasna* 28.1 [Insler 1975, 25])

By whichever action, by whichever word, by whichever worship, Wise One, Thou didst receive for Thyself immortality, truth and mastery over completeness, let these very things be given to us by Thee, Lord, in the very greatest number.
(*Yasna* 34.1 [Insler 1975, 55])

³In the *Gathas* he refers to himself as a “zaotar,” a term used to describe a fully qualified priest (Boyce 1979, 18). The date of Zarathustra is a matter of controversy; standard scholarly agreement settles on some time between 2000 B.C.E. and 1500 B.C.E. and ties the composition of Zarathustra's hymns, the *Gathas*, to the rough period in which the *Vedas* were composed.

⁴The association with science grows powerful in the nineteenth century. By now the importance of natural law is well incorporated into the religion. A teaching course for North American Zoroastrians includes an article on *Asha* whose first paragraph begins “*Asha* denotes righteousness, justice and the divine/natural law that governs the universe.”

⁵The *Zadspram* is one of the Pahlavi texts. The Parsis I knew were likely to read the *Zadspram* in Mistree 1982 and Müller [1880–97] 1987.

⁶Passage paraphrased and last quote from Boyce 1979, 19; also found in the *Zadspram*. I rely on Boyce rather heavily because she was treated as the leading scholar by many of those with whom I discussed the texts; she was Mistree's teacher.

Wise One, therefore tell me the best words and actions, namely, those allied with good thinking and truth, as the just claim for my praises. By your rule, Lord, Thou shall truly head this world in accord with our wish.

(*Yasna* 34.15 [Insler 1975, 59])⁷

At the heart of the uncertainty is the degree of God's power in the universe. Perhaps the most famous passage in the *Gathas* is this:

Truly there are two primal spirits, twins, renowned to be in conflict. In thought and word and act they are two, the good and the bad. . . . And when these two spirits first encountered, they created life and not-life, and that at the end the worst existence shall be for the followers of falsehood (drug), but the best dwelling for those who possess righteousness (asha). Of the two Spirits, the ones who follow falsehood chose doing the worst things; the Holiest Spirit, who is clad in the hardest stone [i.e. the sky] chose righteousness, and (so shall they all) who will satisfy Ahura Mazda continually with just actions.

(*Yasna* 30.3 [Boyce 1979, 20])⁸

A leading western scholar, Mary Boyce, argues that these words indicate that early Zoroastrianism was dualistic. There were two spiritual beings, one good, one evil, utterly opposed to each other, and equally powerful. She points out that a later body of Zoroastrian texts is unambiguously dualistic. In the beginning, explains a later Pahlavi (Middle Persian) text, the *Bundahishn*, there were both God (Ahura Mazda) and evil (Ahriman), both uncreated, both infinite, with a void between them. God knew that he must destroy the evil but that he could not do so in its spiritual form, so he created the material world as a trap for the evil, in the same manner, say the texts, that a gardener sets a trap for the vermin in his garden. Human beings, God's creations, by choosing good action over bad, can force the trapped creature to expend its power in a futile struggle to escape. Death, pain, and suffering have an independent and external cause; God is responsible for none of the sorrow which grips this planet. Boyce argues that these later texts merely elaborate the dualistic themes already present in the *Gathas*: she calls this the "continuity thesis." Many modern Parsi scholars dispute the continuity thesis and argue that the *Gathas* are not dualistic.

In any event, modern Zoroastrian theology was shaped by the community reaction to Christian missionizing during the colonial period, and in particular, to a powerful Scots Presbyterian named John Wilson, who arrived in Bombay in 1829. Wilson would have found a Parsi community that was somewhat larger than it is today. That community was deeply involved with the British in symbiotic patron/client relationships in which Parsis would advance the capital and the British would advance their name, apparently a profitable connection for them both (David 1973). Some Parsis became quite wealthy. One, Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, became the first Indian to be given a baronetcy. From 1735 to 1885 the only large dockyard in India was commissioned in Bombay to the Parsi Wadia family (Wadia 1983). By 1813 there were twenty-nine large Bombay ships in trade with China (although Torri [1991] points out that these numbers may be low estimates): of these, twelve were Parsi owned and seventeen British owned. The ships seem to have been phenomenally successful, no doubt in part through the opium trade. Reports on the community in

⁷Insler's version was often treated as authoritative, particularly by younger Parsis, during my time in India. The other likely alternatives were Taraporewala's translation (1951) (sold at the 1994 North American Zoroastrian Congress) and that of Humbach and Ichaporia (1994).

⁸Other translations differ somewhat, e.g., Insler 1975, 33; and Taraporewala 1951, 136.

the early nineteenth century praise its industry, intelligence, wealth, and enthusiasm for acquiring European manners and customs.⁹

Wilson seems to have been a charismatic man. He was certainly determined and energetic. He learned Sanskrit, Gujarati, and Marathi—his wife was reportedly the first white woman to speak fluent Marathi¹⁰—the better to understand India and to spread the Christian faith. His reputation was considerable and has been memorialized; to this day the Wilson College takes students through their undergraduate careers (David 1975). In 1839 he converted two Parsi boys. As the late-nineteenth-century Parsi historian Karaka records: “The feelings of the entire Parsi community were never more outraged, nor were the Parsis ever more excited since their arrival in India, than when two Parsi youths named Dhanjibhai Naorozji and Hormasji Pestanji were induced by the later Rev. Dr. Wilson to change their religion for Christianity” (1884, 291).

Wilson gave a famous lecture on this occasion. One might have thought that since Scots Presbyterianism was not averse to talk of a powerful Satan, he would be sympathetic to the basic framework of Ahura Mazda and an evil Ahriman. But Wilson reacted strongly to the notion that God was not omnipotent and in complete control. He focused his theological attack on dualism, prefacing the sermon with Isaiah 45:5–6: “I am Jehovah, and there is none else, there is no God besides me. . . . I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil,” and continuing on to attack the confusion and falsity of a belief in Ahriman and the multiple gods which the Parsis appeared (to Wilson) to have.¹¹

Jehovah, in the passage before us, demands exclusive recognition as the Divinity. “There is none else” he declares. “There is no God besides me”. . . . Forgetful of these indubitable principles and incontrovertible facts, the Parsis . . . have made to themselves lords many and gods many.¹²

(1847, 43–44)

⁹See, for example, *Description of a View of the Island and Harbour of Bombay, Painted by R. Burford* 1831, 12. This is a pamphlet-like book that extols the virtues of Bombay to Englishmen at home.

¹⁰Tindall (1982, 86–87) remarks that until 1980 the tombstone recording this fact stood in the unused Scots cemetery in Bombay. It is now in the compound of a girls' school she helped to found.

¹¹Some have argued that Wilson's understanding of the religion was guided by Zurvanism, an esoteric Sassanian interpretation of the religion in which Ahura Mazda and Ahriman descend essentially as twins from one father, who is Time (Boyce 1984, 132); on Zurvanism see Zaehner 1955; Boyce 1984, 96–99; Choksy 1989. Certainly Wilson (1847, 16) refers to the chief deity as Zurvan, and his two products as Hormazd (Ahura Mazda) and Ahriman. This, however, is relevant neither to his condemnation nor to the community's response. Wilson attacked the concept of an external evil; they responded to that attack by defending a concept of Ahriman as a metaphor for internally generated evil.

¹²He goes on to describe their devotion to the seven *Ameshaspentas* (now understood to be aspects of God), to the elements, to the stars, and so forth. Boyce describes the *Ameshaspentas* as beings venerated as individuals, not as aspects of the divine: “that the Prophet himself venerated all these beings as individuals, together with Ahura Mazda, has the unwavering support of the whole Zoroastrian tradition down to the nineteenth century” (1975, 202). Zaehner, with some hesitation, describes these as aspects of God in which humans too can share (1961, 46). Mistree sees them essentially as attributes, as the ethical framework for Zoroastrianism, in which most Parsis concur—if their theological knowledge extends to understanding these beings. Most Parsis now will describe their veneration for water, stars, the sun, and so forth as veneration for God through his creations.

[T]he monstrous dogma of two eternal principles, which, though not unknown to the ancient Persians, is altogether unreasonable, as inconsistent with the predominance of order, regularity and goodness in the system of the universe, and altogether impious

(1847, 65–66)

We can, of course, have no dispute with them as to the fact that much evil exists in the world. Our controversy with them refers to the nature of evil, and the arrangements under which it is produced.

(1847, 67)

The argument is presented clearly and at some length: the “true” God is omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent, unlike the Zoroastrian Ahura Mazda; it is human sin which is responsible for suffering, usually by God’s explicit punishment, not an external devil-like, evil being such as Ahriman. Parenthetically, later missionaries sometimes saw the Parsis as particularly desirable converts, in part because they were well-to-do, but also in part because their theological beliefs were so close to Christianity. “There are few communities as intensely interesting as the Parsi community,” one late-nineteenth-century pamphlet for the Missionary Settlement for University Women reads. “They profess to believe in one God, a belief which grows hopelessly confused in the endeavor to account for the origin of evil” (Missionary Settlement for University Women).

Langstaff (1983) argues that the priests and intellectuals were unable to respond coherently to Wilson’s charges, and that this was what threw the community into chaos. Yet, at least some of the priestly responses were elaborately reasoned. In a later volume Wilson ([1843] 1989) cites several responses. The most serious ones—at least, of those now available and known—seem to be the *Talim-i-Zurthoost* (The doctrine of Zoroaster) by Dosabhai Sohrabji (1840) and the *Hadie Gum Raban* (Guide to those who have lost their way) by Aspandiarji Framjee (1841).¹³

These two mid-nineteenth-century texts adopt a common argument. There is no external evil—the evil spirit is a metaphor which refers to an individual’s bad thought—and there is no other god but Ahura Mazda. The elements and the stars and various other “angels” who receive prayer in the Zoroastrian texts are not actually divine beings. “Hormazd . . . is omniscient and omnipotent . . . Hormazd is pure; and holy; He is formless, self-existent and eternal; He is lord over all the creatures in the whole universe . . . He keeps no partner or companion in his works” (Framjee 1841, i). Sohrabji addressed the young converts: “We would like to tell you that if you believe all the four elements to be God himself and recognize them as such, then none is a greater fool than you. . . . These are the signs of the Creator’s wonderful magic and through them we affirm the goodness of God and the power of his creation” (1840; Munshi n.d., 13–14).

Framjee in particular was a resourceful and subtle thinker. He used Luke 8:4 to point out that Jesus often spoke in parable: “And when much people were gathered together, and were come unto him out of every city, he spoke by a parable” (1841, 37); and then argued that the talk of Ahriman as an opposite to Ahura Mazda was merely a parable for good and evil in human minds: “Our friend must remember that

¹³Other responses included the *Maujarat Zarthosti* (Reverence to Zarathustra) by a head priest, Dastur E.D.R. Sanjana (Wilson claims that in many places it contradicts the *Talim*), the *Nirangha* of Kalamkas, and a number of questions posed in newspapers to Dr. Wilson. I was unable to locate copies of either of these. Wilson also discusses at length a Parsi journalist writing under the name of Navroz Goosequill.

the sayings of our Lord Zoroaster are full of divine and philosophic truths, buried in some mystic terms. . . . Ahriman has no real being but is merely an emblem of vice or evil as above described. . . . [W]herever an allusion be made that 'when Hormazd created anything good, Ahriman was sure to create something evil,' it must be understood that there must be some hidden truth referring, in some way or other, to the good or evil nature of man" (1841, 36–37). This view of Ahriman as metaphor became the dominant Parsi interpretation of the faith in the mid-nineteenth century. Many writers argued for the position in both Gujarati and English from this time on (cf. *The Polytheism of the Parsis* [1851]).

Did the Parsis, as a community, really change their views in the nineteenth century from a genuine dualism between opposing external spirits, one creative and the other destructive, to a moralistic metaphor about the nature of the human mind? The evidence is sparse, but it points consistently in that direction. Wilson thought that the Parsis were dualists, not only because of the ancient texts but from his conversations with them. And later in the nineteenth century, when European scholars wrote about the religion, they sought to deny its dualism explicitly. The most famous of these scholars was Martin Haug, a learned German Orientalist, who delivered lectures in Bombay in 1860. He explained Zoroastrianism as follows: "The opinion, so generally entertained now, that Zarathustra was preaching Dualism, that is to say, the idea of two original independent spirits, one good and the other bad, utterly distinct from each other, and one counteracting the creation of the other, is owing to a confusion of his philosophy with his theology" (Boyce 1984, 133, quoting from Haug [1878] 1978, 303). Jamshed Choksy, a scholar with an unrivaled grasp of Parsi Zoroastrian history, concludes that "only with the advent of Protestant Christian missionaries to Iran and India did the doctrine of cosmic dualism, and the elaborate rites it had spawned, slowly begin to attenuate" (1996, 104; see also Maneck 1997).

I, too, have concluded that Wilson's take on Zoroastrianism, coupled with the discussion of the religion among nineteenth-century western scholars, suggests that Parsi Zoroastrianism indeed had a more dualistic quality prior to Wilson's arrival in Bombay, and that the Parsi response to his attacks indicates a shift towards Christian theology in an attempt to persuade themselves, Wilson, and the wider world that their religion was not barbaric by western standards. Such a shift was not uncommon among Hindu elites throughout the nineteenth century, the most famous instance being the Brahmo Samaj, a Hindu reform movement which emerged from the Bengali elite in the first third of the nineteenth century. A deliberately modernizing transformation of Hinduism along Unitarian lines, the Brahmo Samaj held that rational faith should replace myth- and ritual-filled popular religion and that joining social reform to rational religion would lead ultimately to the perfectability of humankind (Kopf 1979). Like the Parsis, those Hindus involved in the Brahmo Samaj movement deeply respected selective portions of their own tradition, but were eager to interpret its texts from a modern and western perspective.

Indeed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Parsis seem to have been strikingly eager to assert a westernized identity, and they may have been particularly zealous as a community in proclaiming their religious appropriateness to a modern, rational age. In Parsi literature of the period and at least some British literature, Parsis were consistently presented as the most westernized community in India (see Luhrmann 1996). In perhaps the most famous text, Karaka's 1884 *History of the Parsis*, the Parsis are presented as rational, progressive, worthily prosperous, and non-Indian. Persian ancestry, in Karaka's eyes, spurred Parsis to rise above and beyond a land he almost calls barbaric. But they did so only because they were inspired by

the British. Under the British their natural nobility sprang forth and soon, Karaka speculated, they would be indistinguishable from the Europeans.¹⁴ In his closing paragraph he remarked: “to [British power] [the Parsis] owe everything and from it they hope to gain still more” (1884, 2:295). A Parsi journal made statements like these: “The complete Europeanization of the Parsis is now a mere matter of time” (*The Parsi* 1905, 8:324); “The Parsis are the one race settled in India . . . that could for a moment be called white” (*The Parsi* 1905, 3:132); “The Parsis are so differently constituted from the rest of the Indians that any close union of the two is well nigh impossible” (*The Parsi* 1905, 5:8); “[Parsi] destiny is bound up with the British in India” (*The Parsi* 1905, 2:62).

What becomes clear in these publications and in others like them is that the rhetoric of asserting similitude to the European entails the assertion of distance from non-Parsi Indian communities. They become other: barbaric, uncivilized, non-rational, dark-skinned, essentially different in their constitution. Some Parsis chastised the community for this separatist sensibility, but it is undeniably present in the texts and in what we know of the practices of at least the Parsi elite. Parsis lived in Anglicized houses; they became active as liberal reformists, often attempting to reform “backward” Hindu customs; they wrote about the “rational” quality of Zoroastrian religion, its lack of ritualism, and its compatibility with science, which they saw as a contrast to Hinduism. By 1901 25 percent of the community spoke English, as compared to less than 1 percent of the Jains and .5 percent of the Hindus (Axelrod 1974, 31).¹⁵

By the turn of the century, Zoroastrianism was equated by many Parsi authors with an ethical system alone. God exists, but he is worshiped through the doing of good deeds. Increasingly the argument developed that ceremonies are distracting accoutrements to the true religion, which is the rational, ideal union of scientific secularism and spirituality (Luhrmann 1996; Masani 1938; Vimadlal 1979, 1985; Bode 1960). In 1918, for example, one Miss B. A. Engineer explained in an essay entitled “Advancement of Religion” that:

We now turn to the highest stage of religious culture. The mental caliber of the people of this stage does not require the props of religious rites and ceremonies for the maintenance of the religious sentiment, but is strong enough to presume that sentiment without this aid. It entertains higher ideas, and abstract conceptions appeal to it. The theoretical part of religion comprises highly philosophical ideas based on abstract notions, whilst ethereal principles form the richness of the practical part, and the two parts conform so closely together that the distinctiveness between the two is one only in name. It is in this stage of human culture that a complete union exists between religion and life.

(1918, 10)

¹⁴Karaka remarked upon the shift in attitude towards the Christian missionaries: “Dr Wilson and the Christian missionaries were considered ‘devils in human shape’ who had come to Bombay to desecrate the hearths of families, to import misery and unhappiness among the people, and generally to sow disaffection in the public mind towards the government. Half a century of education and increased intercourse with Europeans and a better understanding of the labors of the missionaries have brought about a wonderful change in these views of the Parsis” (1884 2:293–94). The quotation provides no evidence for contemporary beliefs, dualist or not, but it does suggest that in 1884 Parsis no longer felt under threat from Christian theological criticism.

¹⁵An example of Parsi protest against separatism can be found in Bengalee n.d.; the most famous reformer was Behramji Malabari. On Parsi style, see Luhrmann 1996 96ff.; see Comaroff and Comaroff 1992 for a discussion of the colonization of space.

Writing in 1887, the English author Andrew Laing remarked admiringly that “[i]n its fundamental ideas and essential spirit, [Zoroastrianism] approximates wonderfully to those of the most advanced modern thought, and gives the outline of a creed which goes further than any other to meet the practical wants of the present day and to reconcile the conflict between faith and science” (1887, 198).

Because I am inclined to believe that this theological style was shaped by the encounter with Protestant missionizing, I call it “Protestantized Zoroastrianism,” a nomenclature that follows Gombrich and Obeyesekere’s (1988) description of “Protestant Buddhism” in Sri Lanka. Those authors use that term because they wish to depict a religiosity arising out of the encounter between Sinhala society and British colonial power, dispensing with the need for the monastic order as intermediary between the individual and salvation. My own use is somewhat different, as I wish to call attention to the demythologizing and depersonalizing of Zoroastrianism in this period. To be brief, Protestantized Zoroastrianism has three components in keeping with the rationalization of the religion in the face of missionary attack. First, dualism is denied. There is said to be no “real” Ahriman, although the emphasis on the opposition of good and evil remains. Second, the religion is understood as scientific and nonritualistic. Third, the only religious texts understood to be genuinely true to the spirit of Zoroastrianism are the *Gathas*, the seventeen hymns attributed to Zarathustra in the *Avesta*. Other texts in the *Avesta* and later Middle Persian texts, which are often more colorful, more folkloristic, and unambiguously more dualistic than the *Gathas*, are discounted.

This is the interpretation of the religion that has the greatest currency in the modern Bombay community. Most Parsis, in my experience, think that non-Parsis associate the term *dualism* with Zoroastrianism and explicitly reject its application to their beliefs, although, as we will see, there are notable exceptions to these views. Most Zoroastrians now hold some version of the Protestantized ethical understanding of Ahriman as a metaphor for bad thoughts. Almost all popular books on Zoroastrianism discuss the opposition between good and evil. Most deny the external reality of evil and see it as generated by the human mind. A typical book, *What a Parsee Should Know*, asserts: “the so called Dualism . . . merely denotes the tendency in the human soul to deviate from the path of righteousness” (Vimadlal 1979, 73–74). My sense is that the implicit, gut-level Parsi response to God, for the majority of modern Parsis, is that God is wholly good, that there is evil in the world, and if responsibility can be attributed, it is the human mind which is at fault—or, that the suffering must be good, and be God’s work. Most Parsis will also reluctantly admit to a belief in reincarnation, which usually implies a belief in karma as the best account of human suffering. They will usually acknowledge that karma is not a Zoroastrian concept, though some will point at length to improbable references in the *Gathas*,¹⁶

¹⁶One of the great Parsi scholars, in his translation of the *Gathas*, remarks with respect to the verse *Yasna* 49.11, “Many Zoroastrian scholars have seen in this verse a clear reference to the doctrine of reincarnation. Many years ago (1908) Ervad Khurshed S. Dabu of Surat published an article in the monthly magazine *Cheraq* commenting upon this verse. And he has come to the conclusion that the doctrine of reincarnation is clearly indicated in this verse, a conclusion with which I agree. But I must admit that in the Zoroastrian books (both Av. and Pah.) accepted as authentic and authoritative, this is the solitary direct reference to Reincarnation. . . . In any case Reincarnation is not mentioned as clearly, specifically and emphatically in Zoroastrian theology as it is in Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism” (Taraporewala 1951, 730 n).

but they say, how else do you explain a child's blindness? God is good.¹⁷ But whatever the explanation of suffering, the metaphorical interpretation of evil as human thought is very common.

In keeping with the emphasis on science and rationality, the ritual practice in much of the contemporary community has become quite limited and its Zoroastrian content sparse. Most community members wear a special shirt and cord associated with the religion, say a daily prayer associated with tying the sacred cord, and visit a Zoroastrian temple at least once during the year.¹⁸ But few follow the same number of elaborate purity rituals common in the early nineteenth century (Modi 1885), and the textual knowledge of the religion is extremely limited. In my time in Bombay I was struck by the number of Parsis who spontaneously reported dissatisfaction with their own level of knowledge of the faith. Many said with dismay that they did not know the meaning of the words they recite in prayer, and many reported that they found the faith spiritually anemic.

The next phase of theological innovation, which also has adherents in the contemporary community, rose again out of the colonial encounter, in part, one suspects, to meet that need for "richness." Like Protestantized dualism, it is an assimilationist move which reconfigures Zoroastrian theology in western terms (in this case, theosophical) without actually converting to the western religion. At the same time, it is also a reaction to the dry result of that original assimilationist impulse. Most followers, however, do not see themselves as challenging mainstream (Protestantized) Zoroastrianism but rather as enriching their knowledge and experience of that Zoroastrianism. This theological innovation has never had as many adherents as the mainstream. Nevertheless, it is a significant part of the Zoroastrian story.

In 1882 Colonel Henry S. Olcott presented a lecture entitled "The Spirit of the Zoroastrian Religion" in Bombay. Theosophy, which he had created with H. P. Blavatsky, already had a sizable following in America and India. Theosophy was a western occult religious philosophy which claimed to divine the deep truths of all religions, using Tibetan and Indian mahatmas, great souls from other "planes," with whom the theosophical leaders had been in contact. Olcott's lecture, rich in Victorian pomposities, argued that from a theosophical perspective Zoroastrianism contained the seeds of the true wisdom hidden by later populist religions (in theosophy, Christianity was a late, encroaching upstart), and also that Zoroastrianism was deeply scientific (1882). Some fifteen hundred listeners, mostly Parsi, received him with prolonged cheering. The *Bombay Gazette*, reporting the occasion, apparently commended theosophy as aspiring to "a universal brotherhood of race, creed and color" (Olcott 1882, 10). For the many Parsis who aspired to westernize, this western

¹⁷I heard this kind of comment from very many people: a high priest, a "Sunday school" teacher (Zoroastrian children sometimes attend Sunday school to learn their prayers before the *navjote* [an initiation ceremony] and also to learn about their religion), a priest's daughter, a sophisticated middle-class peer, a poor, badly educated woman, and so forth.

¹⁸A 1987 dissertation at the University of Bombay (Taraporevala 1987) sampled two hundred Parsis enrolled in southern Bombay colleges. Ninety percent reported that they wore their *sudreh-kusti* (a special shirt and cord worn by Zoroastrians and for many emblematic of their faith) all the time, and 75 percent wanted their bodily remains consigned to the Towers of Silence, the place where Parsis leave their dead to be handled in the traditional way; over 50 percent visited a fire temple six to thirty times a year. Eighty-nine percent said their *kusti* prayers at least once a day, but 70 percent of those said that they had no understanding at all of what they prayed (prayers are said in the original languages, Avestan and Pahlavi) while another 20 percent said that they knew only the general theme of the words.

interpretation that derived from the Zoroastrian faith must have been deeply attractive. Indeed, when the Bombay Theosophical Society was founded in 1879, 50 percent of its members were Parsi (Langstaff 1983, 1). Many of the books on Zoroastrian theology in the Cama Oriental Institute, the largest Zoroastrian library, are theosophical in tone or content.

Bombay was not the only place, nor Parsis the only group, from which Olcott won adherents. Olcott also traveled to Sri Lanka, arriving in 1880. (For a while, his arrival day itself was celebrated in independent Sri Lanka as Olcott Day.) His impact on different communities varied considerably, however. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988, 205) regard Olcott as the patron of Protestant Buddhism. In Sri Lanka, Olcott's influence led to a more restrained, inwardly directed Buddhism. Among Parsis, however, the reason for Olcott's warm reception seems to have been that the religion he encountered was the child of late-nineteenth-century rationalism. Zoroastrianism had already been Protestantized, and the resulting faith was rather sterile. Theosophy encouraged a mystical, symbolic treatment of the *Gathas* and yet defined these interpretations as scientific. Olcott enabled Parsis confronted with a secularizing, rationalizing tradition to reinterpret that faith with more warmth, despite the secular, rationalizing tone of his claims, because he gave Parsis an interpretive method that gave their distant texts personal immediacy and intellectual depth. In fact, one of the most important kshnoomic texts, Masani's *Zoroastrianism Ancient and Modern* (1917), was written as a book review of Dhalla's *Zoroastrian Theology* (1914), a progressive text which de-emphasized traditional ritual. Masani urged the necessity of following all rituals elaborately and provided a method for textual interpretation.

A few decades later the Parsi interest in theosophy gave rise to Ilm-e-Kshnoom. Students of this esoteric Zoroastrianism resist the association of their enterprise with theosophy. Kshnoom however is theologically quite similar to theosophy and followed immediately in theosophy's wake, and so it is hard for an outside observer to deny the association. Kshnoom is founded on the legend that a Parsi boy—an uneducated, stammering eighteen-year-old—went to Iran, entered into ancient mountains and there, protected from death and the outer world by a magnetic curtain, found sages who had known the mighty Zarathustra and who explained to the young boy Zarathustra's true intentions and knowledge. The boy, now a man, returned from Iran and toured India, but for years he kept quiet about his experiences. In 1906, at a lecture in Navsari, he revealed his knowledge and kshnoom was born.

Ilm-e-Kshnoom¹⁹ is an extremely intricate, esoteric interpretation of the rituals and texts. It holds that Zarathustra was an angel (a *yazata*) who came down to earth in human form as a message from God. At first Zarathustra spoke literally the words of God. The words of the *Gathas*, then, have a magical, divine power. Kshnoom followers (and indeed many Zoroastrians) see their prayers as able to shield them from accidents, heal them of suffering, obtain for them jobs and good examination results, and so forth. But kshnoom does more than this. It also holds that certain words in the *Gathas* have hidden meanings, meant to be understood only by those with higher knowledge. The *Gathas*, for instance, speak of the "cow": kshnoom holds—as do most Zoroastrians—that the word refers not to a horned ungulate but to the Good Mind, an aspect of Ahura Mazda which is also part of the human mind. There is a story in the *Gathas* of Zarathustra's request for eleven animals: "this is I ask Thee. How shall

¹⁹*Ilm-e-Kshnoom* means knowledge of kshnoom. The word *kshnoom* is meant to imply an occult knowledge of the laws of nature through Zoroastrianism. The word is said to appear in crucial passages of the *Gathas*. See Masani 1917, xlii.

I win through truth this prize, namely: ten mares together with their stallions [or ten pregnant mares] and a camel, a prize which is to inspire completeness and immortality in me, just as Thou hast received these two for Thyself?" (Insler 1975, 73). According to a canonical kshnoomist text: "It seems quite ridiculous for a lay reader to think for one moment that Zoroaster is anxious for obtaining these eleven animals as a reward from Ahura Mazda. Hence a little reflection convinces us that these words camel, mare and moreover pregnant mare, must have some inner signification of some higher spiritual powers desired by Zoroaster in return for and as a natural result of his living a life of austere purity and holiness" (Masani 1917, 192).²⁰ Or take another example from another canonical text: *kbaethvadatha* is a word of much controversy. It appears in the ancient texts and some western scholars have interpreted it as a reference to incest.²¹ The kshnoomist author interprets the word as meaning a union of "related drug-free entities and souls" into one whole, the "union with God" (Chiniwalla 1942, 21).

Certainly kshnoom appeals to modern Parsis as a counterbalance to the over-rationalized religion that emerged from the colonial encounter. It should be said as well that the nature of the appeal is distinctly modern. Parsis not infrequently remarked to me that they had tried to read the English translations of the abstract prayers and found them dull and irrelevant. A highly educated middle-class woman explained to me that it was hard to appreciate the Avestan and Pahlavi texts on their own. Kshnoom is trying to get a key to the deep meaning of things, she said. "When the *Avesta* talks about cows and horses, what does it really mean? Kshnoom shows you the inner meaning, the depths." Or as a less well-to-do young man explained to me, people read their prayers in the original language, and they read the literal translation, and they get frustrated, because they find that the prayers are about thousand-eyed Gods and cows. "But the esoteric meaning, the real meaning, is beautiful," he said. "You have to show that to people."²²

Kshnoomist lectures are elaborate textual interpretations. The lecturer will take a prayer, or a section of a sacred text, and explain its hidden significance with symbolism, numerology, geomancy, astrology—the armamentarium of the occult. The style is reminiscent of the complexities of kabbalistic interpretation and has much the same flavor. The experts enter an arcane world incomprehensible to others, and the joy of the lectures is the delight in seeing the experts spin out complex webs of interconnections and association. I quote at random a portion of a canonical text:

And lastly the knowledge acquired by the souls of the lowest order of the "Ashaonam" class by listening to the Dastur or Religious Instructor who possesses Asu-i-kherad is termed Gusho-srud-Kherad or wisdom heard by the ears. The Avestic "Asu-khratu" and "Gaosho-sruta khratu" of which the Pahlavi forms are "Asu-i-kherad" and

²⁰Like P. S. Masani, F. S. Chiniwalla is another prominent kshnoomist. Most of his writing is in Gujarati; the important English text is *Essential Origins of Zoroastrianism* (1942). Others include Tavaría (1971) *A Manual of "Kshnoom": the Zoroastrian Occult Knowledge*. Many of these books are published under the auspices of the Bombay Parsi Vegetarian and Temperance Society. Meher Master-Moos is a prominent contemporary kshnoomist and has published many authors under the auspices of the Mazdayasnie Monasterie.

²¹For example, Boyce 1975, n. 254. At least, it is interpreted as next-of-kin marriage: mother-son, brother-sister, etc. See Frye 1985 for an argument that the term may refer more to adoption practices than to marriage per se.

²²The conversations here were recorded during ethnographic fieldwork in Bombay, November 1987 through July 1988 and again in September through December 1990. A fuller account of that fieldwork can be found in Luhrmann 1996.

“Gusho-srud-kherd” are always found connected with the function of the archangel Vohu Mananagha and the angel Manthra Spenta in the Avesta Siroja Yasht which contains appellations and functions and epithets of all the thirty-three intelligences.
(Masani 1917, 384)

The sophisticated kshnoomist relishes these complexities. In one kshnoomist lecture about the consecrated grounds for the dead (they are exposed to vultures in high towers called *dokhmas*), the lecturer gave a history of *dokhma* building and explained the esoteric significance of the process, quoted from an abstruse text called the *Vendidad* and elucidated its complex passages, and unpacked a diagram of the *dokhma* with elaborate numerological symbolism. Whatever its scraggy edges, kshnoom is ultimately about intense, mystical knowing.

These days kshnoom is the intellectual home for many of the more politically powerful orthodox members of the community. Kshnoomists founded and now run the Council of Vigilant Parsis, a politically effective vehicle for orthodox reform that can initiate meetings attended by hundreds, mobilize workers, and generate passionate discussion around a community cause.²³ Yet kshnoom is often seen as lowbrow and, like the Council of Vigilant Parsis, its very name provokes quiet chuckles from many Parsis. Its leading members are respected, but often regarded as quirky—as is true for those who follow the esoteric in many religious settings.

However, it is impossible to estimate accurately the number of Parsis involved with kshnoom. I attended lectures and courses given by several kshnoomists. Rarely more than fifty people came to a lecture, but in every lecture there were new faces; there are several kshnoomist publications and a kshnoomist institute, and there are people who attend no kshnoomist activities but read Masani and Chiniwalla (the core texts) privately. Lectures on kshnoom are usually delivered in Gujarati because practitioners say that Gujarati has a more powerful vibratory frequency than English; it is also said that kshnoom sounds silly in English, language of science and western education. Because of the Gujarati, many Parsis have difficulty understanding kshnoom—in a recent survey, 44 percent of the elders and 52 percent of the youth said that they thought only in English (Writer 1994, 253)²⁴—and lecturers lament that the young in particular cannot understand their talks. Parsis sometimes generalize that only the elderly are interested in kshnoom. Indeed, most of the lecture attendees were elderly. But not all. And when a major crisis drew a meeting of hundreds sponsored by orthodox kshnoomists (a young girl who had married out of the community had been taken to the *dokhma*, as if she were a traditional Parsi, and many Parsis protested), the room held people of all ages, genders, and classes.

Let me illustrate the way kshnoom works within the framework of Protestantized Zoroastrianism while offering an escape from its secularism. Adi Doctor is one of kshnoom’s most accomplished exponents, a compelling speaker, gripped by his subject. When we met, he explained in detail how it was possible that God was omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent, and yet there could still be evil. In the beginning, he explained, God was pure, but somehow as He evolved He produced entities which somehow were not entirely pure—as in Neoplatonism, God’s goodness

²³For instance, it was the mobilizing power behind an October 12, 1990 meeting to affirm the importance of orthodox tradition in refusing entrance to the Towers of Silence for a woman who had married out of the faith. I estimate that three to four hundred people attended the meeting. Similar meetings, also organized by the kshnoomists, were held elsewhere in the city.

²⁴Eight percent of the youth and 11 percent of the elders reported that they thought in Gujarati, while the rest reported that they thought in a combination of the two.

“overflowed” into evil—and those entities evolved into the sources of evil. God is omnipotent; He could have cleansed them. But they chose to be cleansed their own way, through exposure to the world. The world, Doctor explained to me, functions for the most part as a washing machine with human beings as the dirty clothes.

Before he learned of kshnoom, Doctor had been a clerk in the Central Bank—this is the classic Parsi job—but in the process, he completed his Masters degree with one of the high priests on Avesta and Pahlavi. The thesis work was a great shock to him, he said, because it enabled him to understand the translations of the prayers. And more than half of the prayers were about the history of the Iranian kings: so and so, son of so and so, born in such a place, leading a battalion here and there. “I still remember the shock of studying the *Aban Yasht*. I said, what am I praying? This is only history, this is not prayer. When I was young I would pray very fervently. I had always been orthodox. But as a result of my Masters, I abandoned religion and attended more to the physical world. I took trips to Europe, and swung from being religious to the opposite pole. I went to the Salzburg festival, I went to Norway.”

Back in Bombay, still apparently drawn to religion but distanced from his own, he borrowed books from a friend at the bank who was also a member of the Rosicrucian society:

For a year I read them, and I realized that there is something beyond the senses. Then I spoke casually to a friend about experiments in talking to the dead. My friend got very upset. There are innumerable dimensions, you do not know what you are doing, he said. And he lent me a booklet, *Mazdayasni Mystic Monasterie*, and said, let me know what you think. Usually I commute by bus, from Narriman point to Dadar. That day I missed my stop because the book was so engrossing. I got gooseflesh reading it. There were masters, in retreat in Iran, still existing although not visible to us because of the magnetic circuits they use to protect themselves. This is fantastic, I thought, give me more. Then there were Gujarati books and *Dini Avaz* [a kshnoomist journal], and I never looked back. What has it given me? Not exactly the third eye, but it has opened vast vistas, new horizons. I look at religion from totally a new angle now. I see that many of the translations were superficial, that there are mystic meanings to the words. It have given me more faith in my life.

Like many kshnoomists, Doctor is now far more ritualistically inclined, even though he called himself orthodox before. He says many prayers each day, performs a variety of rituals in his house, and visits the fire temple frequently. With kshnoom, he sees himself as adding to the mainstream understanding of Zoroastrianism, not challenging it, and he continues to assert that Zoroastrianism is scientific, rational and non-dualistic.

There is a Hindu flavor to kshnoom, and throughout Parsi history Hinduism has not surprisingly been a profound presence (less so Islam, in part because of the Parsi perception that Islam was responsible for the Zoroastrian departure from Persia, but see Maneck 1997). The ease with which Parsis admit to a belief in reincarnation reveals some of this influence, as do the meditational, master-focused elements of kshnoom. Over the years Vivekananda, Krishnamurti, and Sri Aurobindo appear to have been widely read within the community. There have been Parsi followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and many other gurus. Over the last few decades there has been a great deal of interest in Sai Baba. Sai Baba is a living man said to be the incarnation of a nineteenth-century saint, a saint whom some Zoroastrians believe to have been Parsi. He has a very wide following in India and abroad and is a miracle worker: most famously, he produces ash from his palm. Many Parsis will pay homage

to his shrine, visit his ashram, and hang his picture in their houses. His importance to them does not usually deflect the followers' sense of being Parsi Zoroastrian. However, specifically Hindu concepts have not been borrowed to create a significant theological innovation in Zoroastrianism, though the influence of Hinduism is pervasive.

The next major theological innovation within Zoroastrianism arose thirty years after Independence. The years around 1947 were a difficult time for many Parsis. Despite the participation of many elite Parsis in the Independence struggle, the majority of Parsis seem to have been quite uneasy about the break with Britain. Even in the early days of the struggle, many Parsis considered emigrating rather than remaining in a world where Hindus would be dominant, and there was considerable interest (never acted upon) in relocating the community to Iran. Parsi emigration picked up during this period and became extensive during the 1960s. Parsis gradually but continuously left India, and now many sizable communities are located in North America, Great Britain, Hong Kong, and Australia. Most of their members are strikingly successful. These are, by American standards, wealthy communities. The North American and British communities are so effective and so politically active that it is no longer even clear that Bombay is the political center of Parsi life, although emotionally and symbolically it remains so (see Hinnells 1996).

By the early 1970s Parsi culture in Bombay had become insecure. Since Independence, a spate of articles and texts criticized the community as backward, traditional, and inferior. The uneasiness and distress remained in literature produced by the community throughout the twentieth century, and Parsis continue to leave Bombay. When I lived in Bombay in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Parsis commonly castigated their fellow community members for their love of the West and of the British. They made jokes about Parsis who thought that the British had forgotten to take them with them when they left. They talked openly, frequently, and at length about feeling ill-at-ease in modern India, with its corruption and religious politics. The young, in particular, would say that their parents never got used to Indian ways, and wore western clothes and spoke English because they could not tolerate the "real" India. Their elders complained that the young were "not as they once were" and that the young men, in particular, were not the manly men that had made the Parsis great, but weak, effeminate, and passive. Many Parsis spoke enviously about Parsis who lived abroad, and many made casual comments to the effect that Parsis in general feel more at home in London or America than they do in Bombay. The older generation spoke despairingly about the fact that none of the young seemed interested in "being Parsi" at all. Indeed, many Zoroastrian fire temples now stand empty. Few priests can be recruited into what are now perceived as ill-paying, dead-end jobs, where they will be paid pittance for reciting prayers for people in a language few of them actually understand (see Luhrmann 1996).

These criticisms have accompanied a very real and noticeable drop in Parsi population figures in Bombay, and a noticeable drop in the rates of Parsi marriage. By the 1980s, one in five Bombay Parsis was over sixty-five, and figures suggested that 20 percent of the community never married anyone at all, and that of those who did marry, one in six marriages was an intermarriage. When a Parsi woman marries out, her children are not accepted as Parsi, although when a man marries out, his children are so accepted (see Luhrmann 1996).

It is during this difficult and self-critical time that an orthodox movement arose which promised to take the community back to its roots, to teach it the "true" Zoroastrian religion, and to revitalize the flagging community spirit. In 1977 a young,

charismatic lecturer exploded in the community like a rock-n-roll star. Khojeste Mistree was handsome, intelligent, dynamic; his accent very British; he had just returned to Bombay from Oxford where he had studied Zoroastrianism. With a friend, the scholar Alan Williams, he launched a series of talks on the religion that were phenomenally successful. Literally thousands of people crammed into the auditoriums. He spoke (in English) of Zoroastrianism's history and its importance for the modern Parsi. He explained, logically and clearly, in that appealing accent, the reasons behind the ancient prayers and rituals. "He would explain the *sudreh-kusti*," someone told me, "and why you should wear it, and you might accept the idea of the *sudreh-kusti* keeping away evil, and not quite accept evil as he saw it, and still be excited by his teaching." Khojeste became, and possibly still is, the most famous Bombay Parsi for Parsis. I never met a Bombay Parsi who did not have an opinion about his teachings.

Khojeste had trained in Oxford with the most recognized western scholars of ancient Zoroastrianism, and in particular with Mary Boyce. Following her understanding of the texts, he argued that the proper understanding of Zoroastrianism was dualist:

The prophet recognized the need for a fundamental dualism in the relative world, reflected through the existential paradoxes observable in life, such as those of light and darkness, truth and falsehood, righteousness and wickedness, order and disorder, life and death. The Bounteous Spirit, he taught, upheld the foremost principle of existence, that which is the life-enhancing, conserving force; whereas the evil spirit, he declared, came into a transient existence in the relative world as the agency of excess and deficiency, which he saw as the deviation from the "golden mean". Evil he thus held was a corrupt, destructive and life-negating force whose defeat, he promised, has been master-minded through the wisdom and all-knowingness of God. The concept of duality in Zoroastrianism, therefore, is not one based on mere physical power, nor one that alludes to the worship of two antagonistic spirits, but one that is founded upon the intrinsic contrasting natures of the two opposing forces in the relative world. Thus the role of man in this cosmic struggle is to assist God in bringing about the final annihilation of evil and the eventual triumph of the forces of good, through the ethical power of cumulative good thoughts, words and deeds.

(Mistree 1982, 14)

Khojeste taught as he had been taught in Oxford. He explained that there were two independent spirits, one of good and one of evil; he said that Zarathustra had three wives (this is a textual interpretation which Boyce believes); he said that Zarathustra was a mortal man, born four thousand years ago. All of these statements outraged members of the community, many of whom rejected dualism and regarded Zarathustra as immortal and monogamous, and the teachings quickly became controversial.

Khojeste taught an orthodoxy which is recognizably different from the orthodoxy of kshnoom. It does share certain similarities: Khojeste encourages a far stricter use of ritual than most Parsis practice, as the kshnoomists do, and like them he opposes intermarriage and conversion. (Both of these are hotly debated topics in the community. The liberal wing argues that without them, the community will die.) But unlike the kshnoomists, Khojeste explicitly opposes the standard theology of Protestantized Zoroastrianism and he does so with western-based, scholarly tools. Far more than the kshnoomists, he emphasizes that Zoroastrianism is different from Hinduism and Christianity (and certainly, by implication, Islam). He explains that Parsis should not believe in reincarnation because it is a Hindu concept and that they should not believe in the absolute omnipotence of God because it is a Christian concept. And he explicitly presents his theology and practice as a means to revitalize

a community he sees as at risk of assimilating out of recognition. It is this anti-assimilationist rhetoric, aimed at those who are too comfortable in their lives and not at those who feel dispossessed, that makes this orthodoxy more like other new orthodoxies among successful diasporic groups (for example, in American Judaism) and less like the communal tensions that dominate the South Asian political landscape.

Part of Khojeste's appeal was that you could be radical, youthful, and rebellious toward authorities by flinging yourself into religious practice. He founded an institute called Zoroastrian Studies and, in a community where religion was practiced by the old people, found himself surrounded by youth. Zoroastrian Studies has for many years been housed on the ground floor of a fine old Parsi library. When I was there in 1987 and 1990, it had a fluctuating core of perhaps five to ten members, most of them, like most Parsis, well-educated and elite. Their ages seemed to range from the early twenties on up into the forties, and a few were older. Most of the core was female, not surprisingly because their husbands took the primary responsibility as breadwinners, as lawyers, doctors, and computer specialists. Other people whose careers precluded full-time involvement would still drop by. In the late afternoon, there was rarely room to sit. These people regarded Khojeste as a learned and spiritual man, but not as a holy man in his own right.

There were many active consumers of the Zoroastrian Studies approach who did not join Zoroastrian Studies. The group organized lectures, classes, trips, conferences, and entertainments; they sold books and cassettes; they had a newsletter. There is no congregational aspect to Zoroastrian faith—visits to the fire temple are strictly individual—but there appeared to be hundreds of Parsis actively involved in Zoroastrian Studies in the late 1980s, and many more who had a casual interest. The primary job of the core, as of Khojeste himself, was to provide these classes and talks and to manage the organization. Khojeste taught people to write and deliver speeches, with the idea that they would multiply the speakers available to fill requests. During my time in India, I occasionally accompanied him and one of his students to a lunch or reception where the student, carefully coached, would rise to deliver the main presentation.

One such speech was on happiness. It began with the problem of happiness in the modern age. "A jet-setter gets bored after a time and seeks newer pleasures. A power seeker or moneymaker is not satisfied with what he gains and keeps striving for more and more to satiate his craving for happiness. Happiness," the student continued, "is not a commodity." She then discussed happiness in Buddhism and Hinduism and in the writings of Aristotle, and moved to the main message: that Zoroastrianism provides the ideal vehicle through which a Parsi can find happiness in his or her life. She gave a textural account of Ahura Mazda's plan for the universe, and quoted from the *Gathas*. She explained the blessing ritual which had opened the meeting (most people would have understood neither the words of the blessing nor the logic of various items used in it). Then she went on to argue that Zoroastrian rituals and prayers help Parsis to experience harmony and happiness within themselves. She closed by quoting the *Gathas* to the effect that happiness was the Zoroastrian's birthright. She did not argue that happiness could only be felt by living an orthodox life. She simply implied that being a good Zoroastrian would make you happy. And the seventy or so people in the audience applauded heartily.

The courses taught the very basics of Zoroastrian religion. I sat in on one offered by the woman who gave the speech on happiness. She began by explaining that she felt that Zoroastrianism was the best religion, but that she understood that a Hindu would feel that way about Hinduism. Each religion is different and acceptable on its

own terms, she said. But, she continued, it was better to stay with the religion you were born with, and it was just terrible to mix them together. Then she explained what the religious texts were, and that the *Gathas* were only one of the Zoroastrian texts available from antiquity. She presented the known history of Zoroastrianism. Then, over the next few weeks, she presented teachings on evil, rooted in the *Gathas* and in later texts, and explained what the texts said about Ahura Mazda, free will, Ahriman, and aspects of God. She drew a map of the Zoroastrian ideas about spirit, mind, and soul. She explained how to pray in a Zoroastrian way, and explained the structure of some major rituals. And while fewer than ten people attended this particular series (she taught other courses, elsewhere in the city), they came consistently from class to class.

Zoroastrian Studies was a deliberate attempt at community revitalization and identity building. Members feared that the community was at risk of dying out, not only because its numbers were dropping, but because of the apathy with which most Zoroastrians regarded their faith. Parsis were apathetic, they felt, in part because that faith was corrupted by other influences, and in part because Parsis were abandoning their faith through intermarriage. They saw Parsis who considered themselves Zoroastrian but prayed more to Sai Baba than to Ahura Mazda; they thought that kshnoom was a strange Christian-Hindu distortion of their texts; they thought that most Zoroastrians did not realize that what made their religion truly unique and important in the history of world religions was its dualism. They passionately believed that if they could only teach the true Zoroastrianism to Zoroastrians, Parsis would realize how beautiful their faith was, and would refuse to let their community dissipate into other groups. And so they offered classes, gave lectures, produced a delightful children's book explaining the religion, made a major studio movie with that same aim, recorded Parsi prayers and Gujarati songs. Zoroastrian Studies has reached thousands of Parsis, some of whom have experienced their lives as being profoundly changed. Not all of those Parsis whose lives have been touched by Zoroastrian Studies are located in India. Khojeste has an active travel schedule, and gives lectures, seminars, and classes to communities in North America and elsewhere. The books and tapes produced by Zoroastrian Studies can sometimes be purchased abroad. Community publications inform Parsis around the world of Zoroastrian Studies activities. Zoroastrian Studies scholars speak at many international congresses.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Zoroastrian Studies is that it teaches an orthodox Zoroastrianism which is unlike any Zoroastrianism ever before experienced, and for that matter is unlike religion as experienced by most South Asians. This is because it is shaped by the needs which gave rise to it, and those needs are deeply modern and specific to a community that fears its own extinction through dissolution into the larger societies in which its members are embedded.

The new orthodox Zoroastrianism has the following characteristics. First, it has a theological focus, far more so than a religion whose members do not need to rediscover it. Unlike many religious practitioners, Hindu or otherwise, people who go through Zoroastrian Studies training acquire a significant knowledge of their sacred texts. They do not simply learn to do the prayers and rituals; they participate in Zoroastrian Studies by reading the religious literature and talking about it. My fieldnotes are full of theology—arguments for dualism, arguments against; even if students disagreed with Khojeste's interpretations, they did so knowledgeably. Adi Doctor attended one of Khojeste's talks and, outraged, countered with a lecture on dualism which, because Khojeste was so famous by that point, was very well attended and gave way to a lively discussion. Even those who came through Zoroastrian Studies

and told me privately that they did not care about the theology did so by saying that they really did not care about Pahlavi this and that, naming the specific sources they had learned in class. Khojeste held his own classes for his inner circle, often consisting of text-based theological discussions. The year I was there, we read through the *Denkard*, a late-ninth-century Pahlavi text on ritual purity, and line by line we tried to puzzle out its meaning. It is unlikely that any member of this essentially non-scholarly group (with the exception of Khojeste) would have read the *Denkard* in any other context.

Second, the focus of that teaching is not to convey knowledge for its own sake, but to invest those texts, their theology, and their rituals with personal significance. This is done in a deliberate, self-conscious, and intimate manner. After our class spent an hour reading the *Denkard*, Khojeste led the group on a guided meditation using Zoroastrian imagery, which we would sometimes later discuss. This was scarcely traditional, but it did encourage a personalization of the more abstract images. And even though Khojeste was the acknowledged teacher, the discussion would be full of phrases like “what this verse means to me,” or “what this verse makes me think of is. . . .” When people told me why they found the Zoroastrian Studies approach so appealing, they cast their story in terms of the personal relevance of its theology. The woman who lectured on happiness said that the theology was the only thing that kept her going when her husband died. He had been ill and was on his way to recovery when he received contaminated blood in a transfusion and died of hepatitis. Before this event, she had understood the religion “intellectually”; now she had experienced it “in my heart.” “This was for me a personal experience that Ahura Mazda was not all-powerful, that the forces of evil can win. Temporarily, but it was a terrible victory. . . . The religion brought me out of the difficulty, instead of letting me get depressed, getting sucked under. I must fight it, I said. I had to affirm myself: as long as I stayed on the path of righteousness, I will get help, and I did.”

Another follower, Meher, explained that she met Khojeste when she interviewed to enter a class he was teaching. She had been raised in an orthodox family, saying her prayers daily and following the rigid rules which govern menstruation (sleeping in a special bed, not touching anything used outside of the menstrual period). Her mother’s death, when she was nineteen, was devastating. “I would go to the fire temple every day, I fought with God, telling him that he could not let her die. . . . I knew two other women who had been through the same operation and they had not died. Why should she be singled out? . . . Everyone said, it’s God’s will, she was so dear to him that he took her away. That didn’t make sense. It was a big problem for me. And I was totally shattered.” She was still thrilled by her memory of her first Zoroastrian Studies class. “I remember coming home,” she said, “so excited, this is what the religion has to offer, you can use your mind in it. . . . I remember clearly the scene that evening, [my son] as a small child on the sofa, as if someone had come in with a new discovery, although all the time it had been there. It was such a relief to know, looking at the dirt and sickness, that God was not responsible.”

Five months into my first stay in India, Meher was knocked off the back of a motorcycle and broke her collarbone, just after she had finished producing a cassette of children’s songs about Zoroastrianism. This, she now said, was the onslaught of Ahriman. He wanted to prevent her from doing anything else and he chose this way to attack. But she was not going to give in, she told me. She would start her second cassette before her collarbone had healed. This was not exactly the doctrine she was taught: in that teaching of dualism, evil is random. I have sat in class with this woman as the randomness of evil has been carefully explained. Nevertheless, by personalizing

what she saw as an attack she could think in terms of a counterattack, and she held an energetic and positive attitude towards her own healing: "I felt, and knew, that it was a bad force which had entered my life. . . . For this reason, I felt sure that I would be able to overcome it. Knowing that it was wrong, that there was imbalance, helped me to have the confidence to see it through to righting itself."

Third, this inner experience of the religion as personally meaningful is taught in these classes as more important than the actual knowledge of the texts or the practice of the ritual. This makes sense: the religion will only be motivational (so that one would only want to marry a Parsi) if its concepts are internalized and emotionally salient. It is, nevertheless, striking that this ancient religion, which does not textually emphasize a personal relationship to God, should be taught through experiential involvement. Zoroastrian Studies is more interested in getting Parsis to feel committed to their ethnicity than it is in producing orthodoxy: it is the orthodoxy which is the means to the end, and not the reverse. Khojeste travels widely and lectures to Parsi communities in which intermarriage is inevitable (many Parsi children living in the United States know very few other Parsis their age). In a recent Congress (the Second World Zoroastrian Youth Congress, held in London in August 1997), he was the person chosen for "damage control" in a confrontation between those who opposed intermarriage and those who saw it as inevitable, and he urged people to accept a "two-model, one-community set-up" (e.g., that those who were more conservative in beliefs and practices and those who were more progressive should accept each other and see themselves as part of one community) (*Parsiiana* August 1997, 92). The goal of the classes, lectures, tapes, movie, and other Zoroastrian Studies products is to "catch" people, or to allow them to catch themselves, before they wander outside the community.

For example, I spoke to one young man who was the kind of person who was at risk of feeling not very Parsi when growing up: he lived in a very secular household, did not feel attached to the faith, and could well emigrate and marry a foreigner. He agreed to go on a Zoroastrian Studies trip to see different fire temples in Gujarat, north of Bombay. He had never prayed with conviction before, he told me, but in the second fire temple (presumably the group leader had been giving lectures on how to pray and on the history of the temples) he did pray, and he felt that someone was listening. "It was a nice feeling," he said. He then explained that the priest (*dastur*) of that temple gave a talk about the fire as a person, and about Ahura Mazda as a friend (from a scholarly point of view, this stretches the texts). That really meant something to this young man. Now, he said, there is a subtle difference in his daily life. Among other changes, he wears his *sudreh-kusti* and he prays in a way he describes as personally meaningful, to someone he experiences as listening. He remains far from orthodox and is not engaged in the texts. However, he says that now he feels Zoroastrian in a way he never did before. This kind of testimony was not uncommon. While Zoroastrian Studies members were never comfortable with views they felt to be doctrinally false, they were obviously more interested in producing people who felt involved with Zoroastrianism than in producing scholars of Zoroastrianism.

Fourth, there is an explicit recognition on the part of Zoroastrian Studies that while being born Parsi just happens, being Zoroastrian is a conscious choice. This is not to say that members of Zoroastrian Studies seriously fear that Parsis will convert out of Zoroastrianism. They see, however, that many Parsis often find other faiths more emotionally gripping. They believe that the job of an organization like Zoroastrian Studies is to make the religion seem different from other choices and more desirable. Other Parsi organizations around the world have recognized this need, but

Zoroastrian Studies was one of the first to see the need so plainly. So Zoroastrian Studies makes Zoroastrianism fun. It leads group trips to fire temples that you want to go on because they are supposed to be great adventures. It printed a children's book that was full of information—but also beautiful, bright, and cheery. Out of necessity, the group sees itself as selling something to people who have to be persuaded that they want to buy it. The comparison I drew between Khojeste and a rock star was not my own, but a Parsi's. Khojeste founded Zoroastrian Studies with the knowledge that he could "sell" the religion more effectively than many of the priests, because his personal flair and his mixture of western sophistication and Bombay roots meant that he could reach the young in ways that no one else could. That was the reason he was funded by seniors in the community, and why his organization exists. His job is to reach out to those previously uninterested in the faith and to draw them into passionate engagement. The religion he teaches may indeed be an ancient one, but the manner in which these youngsters become engaged with it is very modern.

Discussion

I suggest that the new Parsi orthodoxy is the result of the inherent instability of a diasporic community. It is not a manifestation of the communal tensions that have swept the subcontinent and are particularly virulent in Bombay. Those communal tensions are above all political and conflictual. They assert the entitlement of one ethnic group to the privileges of another, and they express the hatred of the dispossessed for those who possess. They are often violent and driven by rage. None of these features characterize the ethos or practice of Zoroastrian Studies and its participants. On the contrary, these Parsis espouse no national politics, make no entitlement claims, express no hatred (apart from stern disagreement), and generate no violence. Their primary political agenda is to persuade Parsis to marry Parsis and increase the tribe, and on that front it is not clear how successful they have been. On the socioeconomic front they simply do not suffer the kinds of pressures that seem to be involved in the emergence of self-determination movements and Hindu-Muslim conflagration (see, for instance, Kohli 1997; Katzenstein, Mehta, and Thakkar 1997). One impact of the political instability in Bombay may have been to make Parsis more uncertain of their destiny within India: that may have spurred a group that seeks to generate a confident sense of identity, but not to the extent that it should lead an observer to describe the spur as the cause.

Nor is the Parsi religious revival much like the revitalization movements and cargo cults that sweep a devastated society in search of effective magic. The most famous of these is the Ghost Dance, a violent, self-mutilating ritual that spread throughout North American culture at a time of cultural collapse and promised a return to earlier times of plenty (the classic thesis can be found in Barber [1941] 1958 and La Barre 1970; more recent discussions include Smoak 1999 and Niezen 2000). These are cults of desperation. Their members fear extinction through starvation and death, not by loss to consumer culture. When Wallace (1969) described the death and rebirth of the Seneca, he wrote of the way the leader's vision helped to free them from poverty and humiliation. Most Parsis, by contrast, are still comfortably middle-class. They may feel the distress of emotional abandonment in the postcolonial wake of their divorce from British patronage, but they do not face the searing inevitability of homelessness. And the new Parsi orthodoxy does not promise salvation, redemption,

and return to the past. It suggests that being an observant Zoroastrian makes a Parsi happier and less likely to marry out.

Nor does the Parsi revival mimic the religious fundamentalism of Christianity and Islam, though the fundamentalisms are so various that such a claim cannot be confident. In Marty and Appleby's (1991, 1992) assessment, fundamentalism is a direct and self-conscious response to modernity. These movements applaud many of the products of modernity—its medicine, telecommunications, rapid transport, global network—but they distrust the secular values that, since the Enlightenment, have presumed to accompany these developments. “Fundamentalists would restore spiritual considerations to a central place in public and private discourse and would do so directly, by basing many of the laws and customs of society on the sacred scriptures or traditions which they believe to be the most authoritative guide to the Spirit who inspires all human goodness” (1992, 15). Zoroastrian Studies does not aim to restructure the laws and customs of Parsi society, however, apart from trying to persuade Parsis to marry within the community. Nor does Zoroastrian Studies really see itself in a battle with infidels. Instead, its members are trying to persuade other Parsis to be more religious in order to maintain their ethnic identity; they are trying to persuade people that Zoroastrianism offers happiness and peace. They are not trying to create a new political order. Their goals are the direct result of the risk of diaspora: to flourish effectively within a host community without losing their own distinctiveness.

Even though the analogy does not fit precisely, it seems helpful to think of this story in the context of a famous sociological thesis: that what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember. In 1938 Marcus Hansen delivered an address to the Augustana Historical Society in Rock Island, Illinois, entitled “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant.” In it he argued that members of the second generation of an immigrant family in America want desperately to forget their past, to be so American that no one would even think that their parents had come from a foreign land. They find their parents' accents and strange customs an embarrassment. They secularize, at least from their parents' religion. Caught between two worlds as children, as adults they flee from their ethnic ghettos, and reminders of their past make them feel inferior and non-American. They assimilate; they fling themselves—the centrifugal impulse—into the mainstream society, in the attempt to be absorbed as equal members within it.

The third generation, Hansen said, feels no such embarrassment. They are proud of how well they have done in this new land. They feel that they came from good stock, and they glorify it, so that their past will not be lost forever. They withdraw their identity, to some extent, from the mainstream—the centripetal impulse. They form Swedish societies and learn to dance polkas and even take college classes to learn their grandparents' tongue. Then, Hansen continued, as the third generation fades into the fourth, and the fourth into the fifth, the enthusiasm for the past diminishes, and they become indistinguishable from any others ([1938] 1968, 255–83).

The essay attracted little attention until Nathan Glazer discovered it in the New York Public Library in 1952 and arranged to have it published in *Commentary*. (With either optimism or modesty, Hansen had placed his seminal work in the *Augustana Historical Review*.) Three years later, in 1955, Will Herberg gave “Hansen's law” broad exposure in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, a widely read, popular book which used the third-generation hypothesis to explain the postwar revival of religion. In particular, he explained how such a religious impulse could emerge in an increasingly secularized society. Members of the third generation, he argued, fully Americanized and often

middle-class, could sort through their inheritance and choose the traits that please them, much as they chose whether to display their father's Dresden shepherdess or their mother's clock on the mantelpiece. Moreover, they found themselves in an atomized, anomic, urban industrial world. The religion of their ancestors, sanitized and made middle-class, gave them the emotional identity they needed. And Herberg, unlike Hansen, saw no necessary diminution of this religious impulse.

Sociologists and historians have chewed over these hypotheses of second-generation assimilation and third-generation differentiation for decades. The general consensus appears to be that as a precise claim, neither holds up particularly well. The historical story is often more variable than a strict generational account would allow, and even when the events fit the thesis, other historical factors may be responsible.²⁵ On the other hand, it is clear that Herberg's thesis in particular applied far more readily to Jews than to Catholics or Protestants, and while there are still skeptics, the amount of Jewish attention to the essay suggests that something about the argument struck home. The reason for this seems to be the far greater fusion between ethnicity and religion in Judaism than in Christianity. God's covenant with Abraham was a covenant with a specific people, and the practice of Judaism asserts membership in a people in a way that the practice of Christianity does not. The loss of Jewish practice implies the loss of that covenant.

Glazer (1990) describes *Commentary's* decision to reprint Hansen's essay as occasioned by the concerns of a second-generation Jew (as he sees himself) about the coming third generation: hope that the third generation might reverse his generation's striking abandonment of Jewish interests, fear that subsequent generations might assimilate out of existence. And there was, in fact, something of a measurable Jewish revival in that third generation. Glazer points out (as does Gleason 1990) that specific historical factors—the move to the suburbs, the specific protection of religious freedom in the postwar context, the post-Holocaust crisis of faith, the 1967 war in Israel—affected the shape and appearance of that apparent revival. Nonetheless, it is evident that in Judaism, religious revival is explicitly linked to the fear that Jews will assimilate completely. According to one survey, up to 70 percent of those raised as Jewish, usually in Reform or Conservative homes, have dropped out of religious practice (*Time*, 5 April 1993); the rapid rise of intermarriage, coupled with the likelihood that those children will not practice Judaism, has terrified many Jews. In that context, revivalist orthodoxies (in particular, the Chabad movement) try energetically to recruit young people to greater religious observance and to a Jewish way of life (Danziger 1989).

²⁵In 1961 John Appel tested Hansen's hypothesis for the historical societies of German, Irish, Italians, Scots, Swiss, and Jews and found that their membership had a mixture of first, second, and subsequent generations. He argued that at least the American Jewish Historical Society became less defensive when the third generation became heavily involved. Also in 1961, Gerhard Lenski found no decline in religious attendance between first- and second-generation Catholics and Protestants in Detroit; he argued that increasing Americanization led to increasing religious activity. In 1964 Lazerwitz and Rowitz used national survey data to argue that the Lenski hypothesis worked for Protestants, that Catholic men experienced a second-generation drop, and that Catholic women displayed no generational effects in church attendance. In 1973 Abramson used more survey data on Catholics to refute Herberg's specific claim and muddy the waters still further. In 1979 Herbert Gans introduced the term "symbolic ethnicity" to suggest that whatever was retained or renewed was symbolic and did not deeply affect the behavior of the assimilated ethnic group. On the other hand, a recent volume commemorating the fifty-year anniversary of Hansen's thesis provided a number of supporting arguments for specific communities, while also providing a general critique (Kivisto and Blanck 1990).

The new Parsi religious impulse follows the pattern Hansen first noticed, of a move to assimilate which is so successful that it is followed by a move to affirm the roots of difference. The specifics of the pattern in the Parsis differ from those Hansen described for American immigrants. American immigrants were expected by their American compatriots to assimilate into the melting pot; the first generation's failure in that respect caused embarrassment in the second. It is unlikely that there were such expectations of the Parsis who arrived in Gujarat in the tenth century, although the stricture against intermarriage may well date from that point. Instead, the Parsi push to assimilate came from the colonial period and the economic advantages that would accrue to those the British saw as more like themselves than others. The Parsis became Europeanized in a manner not unlike other groups in the subcontinent, although more successfully (see Bayly 1989). Parsis tended not to convert, but they abandoned the features of the religion that seemed distastefully backward to the English, and they made efforts to westernize in their dress, language, education, and custom. During the colonial era, Parsis "Protestantized" their faith, and although some Parsis eventually turned to a more mystical interpretation of their ancient texts, they retained the framework of Protestantized Zoroastrianism in their explicit theological formation of the faith. Parsis were assimilating to the dominant elite culture, and the ritualistic, non-westernized Parsi behavior of earlier generations caused embarrassment to the westernized elite.

Even though the strict generational framework Hansen described may not apply to Parsis (or indeed to most assimilating groups), the structure of the two impulses he detailed—the move to assimilate followed by the move to affirm one's difference—helps us to interpret the structure of centrifugal and centripetal impulses among the Parsis, and helps us to understand the role of the new orthodoxy Khojeste Mistree created. That orthodox revival presented itself as the way to regain an original Zoroastrianism unbesmirched by western influence and, even more explicitly, as a way to maintain a distinct community at risk of assimilating into the wider Indian whole. The orthodox revival emerges out of the same fear of overly successful assimilation that Hansen argued motivated his "third generation." Admittedly, Hansen's third generation is smug and self-congratulatory. They return to the past out of a sense of pride. Parsis are more vulnerable than before. After Independence, they were not as successful as they were in the nineteenth century. That is, they remained financially successful (for the most part), but they no longer held the social and political position that was theirs during the Raj. They had assimilated—or tried to assimilate—into a group which was now not only out of power but had been thrown out of the country, although the style the Raj had cultivated left perduring marks on elite South Asian culture. Parsis live now in a world whose politics have changed dramatically from the days of their greatest power. Still, like Hansen's Americans, the Parsi new orthodoxy emerges out of pride—a stubborn pride in the face of panic, and a response to the perceived need to keep the community alive, but pride nonetheless.

In this context, religion is not what defines the community as unique, as it did in the nineteenth century when Parsis took violin and English lessons but insistently refused to convert to Christianity. Religion becomes the means to retain any sense of community at all. When Hansen wrote his famous essay, he had in mind local societies for Swedes and Poles and Norwegians, where descendants could learn ethnic dances and sample ethnic food. The new Parsi orthodoxy is more like the new Jewish orthodoxy, with its explicit aim of using religious practice to maintain a society decimated by the Holocaust and by the temptations—as practitioners see it—of modern secular indulgence. And it may be the case that dualism's externalization of

evil, with a sense of a threatening, diffuse badness, is appealing to Parsis in this more fragile public space.

The result of these very modern aims, and their very modern circumstances, is that the Parsi religious “return” is far from a recreation of the past. God remains a player in late-twentieth-century modernity, despite once solemn predictions of His imminent demise. But the game is not what it was. The environment for faith within the new orthodoxy is quite different than it would have been for individuals growing up within a society that took its religious traditions for granted. Just as among American immigrants, the legacy of assimilation is not replaced by the rediscovery of roots, but jostles by its side. In contemporary Bombay, one now finds Parsis who follow a Protestantized Zoroastrianism, those who follow kshnoom, those who have been influenced by Zoroastrian Studies, and a near infinite variety of more idiosyncratic syncretisms. The environment of faith, particularly for the new orthodoxy, is colored by the recognition that deep Zoroastrian commitment is a choice. The Parsis who rediscover their past in the new orthodoxy know of their Parsiness in a manner which allows them (middle-class and mobile as they are) to conceive of not being Parsis, because they treat their return to Zoroastrian orthodoxy as intentional and willed. Their religiosity and ethnicity become visible choices among alternatives for selfhood, rather than the invisible constitutives of identity. They have selves which consist of the commitments they have made, not of the obligations to which they were born.

Thus the burden of religious “return” rests upon religious leaders who must persuade Parsis of its value. They must sell their take on the religion; Parsis must buy it. Of necessity, the tools of religiosity—the books, the prayers, the ritual—become hooks to draw in those who have not yet chosen the greater commitment they demand. The teachers teach the texts explicitly; theology becomes important because students and teachers argue about theology together as they read the famous passages. The teachers teach the texts also by helping their students to make them personally and individually meaningful, and that personal revelation comes to matter more than scholarly accuracy, because in the movement a Parsi’s commitment to his Zoroastrianism and to his Zoroastrian community is more important than the nature of his interpretations.

Anthropologists have turned their attention to the way identity, belonging, and a sense of place alter as people split apart, relocate, and recombine (Malkki 1995; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Ong and Nonini 1997; Borneman 1992). Broadly speaking, they find that these modes of self-representation grow more abstract, as David Harvey (1989) perceptively observed. Displaced Palestinians, as George Bisharat (1997, 204) describes them, have become “bound by the specific experience of life in exile and committed to a ‘return’ to a Palestine conceived abstractly.” Exiled Hutus in isolated refugee camps passionately reconstruct their history as “a people,” with rightful claims to the “homeland” (Malkki 1997, 66). Chinese businessmen, at home anywhere close to a major metropolitan airport, build triumphal narratives that articulate the native Chineseness of people who spend little time in China (Ong and Nonini 1997). Liisa Malkki quotes Simone Weil: “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul” (1997, 52). When people experience themselves as uprooted, or with roots at risk of rot, they reach upwards to representations that can contain their anxiety at the threat of dissolution. Religious faith is one of those representations. It is not the faith practiced by previous generations: it may be more self-conscious, more textual, more personal, more entrepreneurial. It remains nevertheless a place in which the troubled can seek comfort.

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