Chapter 4
Indians and Iranians: The Priestly Religions

Abstract This chapter first examines the Vedic religion, whose rich archaic pantheon tended to inflate and blur the division of roles, making it unfit for the upcoming expansion in the subcontinent with its indigenous cults. The Brahmins were the paragon of a professional priestly class promoting unified rituals like an incipient monopolist. Their Iranian cousins started out with a similar pantheon and a similar priestly class but did not have to confront an alien religious substrate in their migration; rather, a conflict was brewing between the gods of law and right and the gods of raid and might, which would come to a head with Zoroaster's reform.

4.1 Vedic Religion

4.1.1 Indo-Aryan and Vedic Theology

The first firm evidence on the theology of the Indo-Aryans actually occurs outside the Indian subcontinent. In the second millennium BCE there existed a kingdom of Mitanni in northern Syria and southeast Anatolia, where an elite speaking an Indo-Aryan language ruled over a population speaking Hurrian, a non-Indo-European language. The elite's language, attested in a number of theonyms, proper names of the aristocracy and the kings, and other terminology, is very close to the earliest layer of Vedic Sanskrit. Apparently a group of warriors from the ancestral Indo-Iranian homeland, instead of migrating to the Punjab with the majority of the Indo-Aryans, had turned west and established themselves in the Middle East.

In the early fourteenth century BCE a treaty was signed between the Mitanni king and the king of the neighboring Hittites, and as usual, each king swore on his greatest gods to uphold it. Among the divinities invoked by the Mitanni king, besides a number of unknown or local deities, a group appears which is well known from the Vedas: Mitra-Varuna (as a pair), Indra, and the Nasatyas. Dumézil (1958, 36–38; 1977, 5–22) finds this list, in this order, a perfect example—possibly the earliest extant—of his tripartite structure: Mitra and Varuna (characteristically joined together in the Vedas too) representing the legal-contractual and the magical-religious sides of sovereignty respectively; Indra embodying the war function; and the Nasatyas (also

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called Ashvins, the Horsemen, in the Vedas), the youthful twins probably cognates (in mythology, not in etymology) of the Greek twins, the *Dioskouroi*, who ride around to rescue people and maintain both livestock and people in good health, standing in for the third function. As Dumézil is careful to point out, however, the Mitanni structure must reflect a very archaic substrate that was soon to change, as shown by the fact that it has no room for Agni and Soma (the gods of fire and of sacred drink, respectively), who already in the *Rig Veda* overshadow both Mitra and Varuna in importance.

The next earliest source we have is the *Rig Veda*, a collection of hymns to be recited by a particular class of priests in a fire-offering ritual described below.[1] It is the earliest of the group of four foundational compositions called the Vedas, the others being two further collections of verses and formulas (the *Sama Veda* and *Yajur Veda*) to be used by two other specialized groups of priests in the same ritual, and a collection of texts intended for a separate group of ritual specialists dealing with domestic ceremonies, magical and healing spells, and rites for rulers, which was eventually reclassified as a fourth Veda (the *Atharva Veda*). Despite being outside the ritual system of the other three Vedas, however, the *Atharva Veda* is of particular interest for the study of the earliest religion because it is the second-oldest and linguistically the closest to the *Rig Veda*. Besides the four Vedas proper, the Vedic corpus includes many other Sanskrit works classified as *Brahmanas* and (the early) *Upanishads*, containing exegesis of the rituals and meditations on their meaning, composed ca. 1000–300 BCE. The texts of this Vedic corpus were considered to be *shruti* ("what is heard"), infallible divine revelation, in contrast with the later body of literature classified as *smriti* ("what is remembered"), which is of human authorship and therefore fallible and which includes in particular the works on religious and social law called *sutras* and *shastras*. The "hearing" connotation of the Vedas points to a system of oral transmission whereby the student would sit within hearing distance of the teacher, as we will elaborate below. (The word *Upanishad* also translates as "sitting down near", referring to the student sitting within hearing distance of the teacher.)

The hymns of the *Rig Veda* were composed at different times within the second half of the second millennium BCE and given canonical form by perhaps 1000 BCE. But these dates encompass the hymns as we have them; the poetic conventions on which they were built are much older, extending back to the Indo-Iranian past—indeed, the language (an archaic form of Sanskrit), the rituals, and the theology of the *Rig Veda* are all close to those of the oldest layer of the Iranian Avesta, i.e. Zoroaster's *Gathas* (see Sect. 4.2 below). Even after this fixation of the text, transmission of it continued to be exclusively oral at least until around 1000 CE, yielding a gap of considerably over two millennia between the fixation of the text and its earliest manuscripts.

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the remainder of this subsection and the next one are generally based on Jamison and Brereton (2014, "Introduction"), Flood (1996, Chap. 2), and for a general picture of early India, including its religion, Thapar (2002). The next subsection draws extensively on Basuchoudhary, Ferrero and Lubin (2020).

The rivers mentioned in the hymns help establish the geographic area in which they were composed. Composition began in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, starting from the Kabul River in present-day Afghanistan, whence it moved east to the Greater Punjab and then further east to the Ganges Valley, following the movement of the people. This information must be gleaned solely from the hymns because of the absence of material remains associated to the Vedic people, which is what we would expect since there is no mention in the hymns of any permanent religious structures or enduring settlements. The Aryas, as they called themselves (an ethno-linguistic and religious characterization, not a racial one), formed a semi-nomadic pastoralist society where seasons of settlement (with some practice of agriculture) alternated with seasons of migration (associated with occupation of new land and cattle raiding). Cattle were the primary source of wealth, followed by sheep, goats, buffaloes, and camels, while the horse was essential for mobility and warfare. Metal of some kind was known, but not iron. There were kings or—probably a better translation at this time—chiefs, but the division of society into four hierarchically ordered classes (*varnas*), so prominent in later times, is only mentioned in one of the latest hymns, and then as a social ideal rather than a social reality.

The great majority of the *Rig Veda* hymns have a liturgical form that obviously is meant to be recited with some ritual, in most cases the *soma* rituals; they have as their major aim to praise the god(s) to whom the hymn is dedicated, in the expectation that this will entice the gods to reciprocate the praise with the requested favors. But, in the late portions of the book, there are also hymns that take the form of a dialogue between two or more figures, usually on mythological subjects or providing the mythological underpinning of some ritual, as well as some "philosophical" hymns that explain the meaning of various rituals (thus being forerunners of the *Brahmanas*). From the dedications of the hymns, as well as from their content and the mythology, we can derive a picture of the early Vedic pantheon. Judging by the number of dedications, Indra is the most prominent deity, followed (in this order) by Agni, Soma, the Ashvins, Varuna, Mitra (or Mitra-Varuna as a pair), the Maruts (alone or in conjunction with Indra), and then a long list of minor deities, usually of natural elements or of technical functions (Wikipedia 2021b).

To put this ranking in perspective, it must be borne in mind that the *Rig Veda* revolves around the *soma* ritual, and the *soma* ritual belongs to Indra. Moreover, as emphasized by Jamison and Brereton (2014, 6–7, 57), the *Rig Veda* reflects the religious practice only of the upper strata of Arya society, and only a section of that practice, to say nothing of the other social classes whose religious beliefs and practices are almost completely ignored; so the Vedic religion as portrayed in this and the other Vedas is likely to be a partial and unbalanced description of even the religion of the Aryas of that age. Among other things, this may account for the strikingly minor role of the goddesses, who in this pantheon are mostly confined to personifications of natural elements or wives or daughters of male gods. This is in stark contrast with the situation of the Greeks, the Romans, and the Scandinavians, whose pantheons and religious practice, as they first emerge to light, are not nearly so selective and biased toward the male elite. In turn, this contrast reflects the difference between a type of evidence made only of hymns and related commentaries, on the one

hand, and another made of mythology and observed cultic institutions and practices, on the other.

Be that as it may, let us briefly survey the pantheon, following the ranking by number of dedications given above. Indra, the preeminent god of the *Rig Veda*, is the warrior god, who armed with a mighty club protects the people and the gods themselves. A great *soma* drinker, he slays a dragon that had captured the waters, thus causing the rain and the rivers to flow, and performs other beneficial deeds. He often goes around with a troop of storm gods, called the Maruts, who help him and who also receive worship, alone or with him, in the hymns. The Maruts have been compared to a Männerbund, a company of unruly, unattached young men who band together to raid and fight, selected through an initiation ritual, which seems to have existed in several early Indo-European societies and religions; well-known examples are the berserks, the frenzied, frightening Scandinavian warriors dedicated to Odin that existed not only in myth but in real-life Viking societies and in earlier Germanic societies of the classical age, as well as similar groups attested among the Irish (Davidson 1964, 66–69; 1988, 78–82). A Männerbund may well have actually existed in Vedic society too, and the divine Maruts provide the charter for such an association.

Agni and Soma are preeminent as they personify the two central elements of the *Rig Veda*'s sacrificial rituals, the fire and the sacred drink. Agni represents any fire, including the sun, the domestic hearth, and the dreadful forest fire, but especially the sacrificial fire; so he is always present at the rituals and the immediate recipient of the offerings. He is the middleman between gods and men in the cult, bringing the gods down to the sacrificial meal in their honor and/or conveying the offerings up to the heavenly gods in its smoke; in this sense, he is the model of the sacrificial priest. Soma is the personification of the inebriating drink, the juice of a special plant that is subject to elaborate preparation during the ritual and then offered to the gods and shared among participants, and so he too is an interface between gods and men. The ritual and its presiding deities are clearly from an Indo-Iranian background, since the Iranians had a similar sacrifice centered on fire and the juice of a plant called *haoma*, both also divinized (see Sect. 4.2.1 below).

The Ashvins or Nasatyas, the youthful horsemen twins, are an ancient divine pair of secure Indo-European ancestry, already mentioned for the Mitanni and the Greeks and with other cognates as well. Even if originally independent, they were secondarily but strongly brought into the *soma* rite, and became big receivers of the *soma* offerings. They drive a swift chariot across earth and sky, as is necessary for them to rescue people from a variety of dangers and difficulties, which is their main job.

The Adityas are a group of gods who represent the powers that order human society, and the principal ones are Varuna, Mitra, and Aryaman. Varuna, the most prominent of these, is a distant, all-seeing sky god who presides over the cosmic and social order (*rita*), and hence the god of the kings and himself a universal king. Like earthly kings, this divine sovereign cares about the welfare of his subjects, so he brings rain and controls the waters; like earthly kings, who punish wrongdoers, he "binds" those who violate his commands. Varuna is closely connected to Mitra, with whom

he shares many hymns and invocations as Mitra-Varuna. If Varuna governs hierarchical obligations of authority, Mitra governs relations of mutual obligations such as contracts and alliances (his name comes directly from an Indo-Iranian common noun meaning something that binds, hence "covenant", "contract"—whence also the Iranian Mithra that will be discussed in Sect. 4.2.1 below). So, as already mentioned, Varuna and Mitra embody the two sides of Dumézil's sovereign function, the religious side and the juridical side respectively. The third major Aditya, Aryaman, is the god of the customs of the Aryas, including especially marriage.

Finally, it is worth noting three figures with a great future ahead but who have a very minor role in the *Rig Veda*. Vishnu appears mostly as a companion and ally of Indra; before becoming one of the great gods of classical Hinduism, he would become important in the later Vedic literature as the embodiment of the sacrifice itself. Rudra, already often called by his epithet Shiva ("the kindly one"), appears as a fearful deity whose anger must be appeased, but also as a healer. Sarasvati, who would become a great goddess patronizing learning and the arts in classical Hinduism, is here celebrated only as the physical river which she originally was.

The reverse evolution is also worth mentioning. In post-Vedic times, Agni remains a fire god with a minor position in Hindu temples and festivals, Indra is reduced to a storm god and his club becomes a thunderbolt, Varuna is reduced to a god of the oceans, and Mitra becomes the patron of friendship but practically disappears in Hinduism.

Dumézil (1958, 34–36) is satisfied that his paradigmatic tri-functional list appears repeatedly in the hymns and in several invocations during the *soma* pressing and other rituals, featuring first Mitra-Varuna, then Indra (alone or paired with Agni, Vishnu, Vayu—the Wind—or others), and finally the Ashvins.[2] However, even discounting the fact that the preeminence of Agni and Soma was due to the focus on the fire sacrifice which, as mentioned, biases the theology of the hymns, and even avoiding

[2] One of his examples is the famous hymn RV 10.125, where an all-powerful goddess Vac ("Speech") says she supports all the great gods in the first verse, and then (in verses 4, 5, 6) specifies what benefits she brings at each of the three levels (respectively, food and life itself, the protection of seers and sages, and bow and arrow in defense of the good). It reads:

1. I roam with the Rudras and the Vasus, I with the Adityas and the All Gods.
I bear both Mitra and Varuna, I Indra and Agni, I both the Ashvins.
4. Through me he eats food—whoever sees, whoever breathes, whoever hears what is spoken.
Without thinking about it, they live on me. Listen, oh you who are listened to: it's a trustworthy thing I tell you.
5. Just I myself say this, savored by gods and men:
'Whom I love, just him I make formidable, him a formulator, him a seer, him of good wisdom.'.
6. I stretch the bow for Rudra, for his arrow to smash the hater of the sacred formulation.
I make combat for the people. I have entered Heaven and Earth.

In their comment, however, Jamison and Brereton (2014, 1602–1603) ignore any tri-functional meaning and interpret the subject addressed by verses 4 and 5 as the poet, the one who is "listened to" in the world and makes his livelihood ("eats his food") by producing poems inspired by the goddess Speech, who then (verse 5) details her gifts to him. This contrast of interpretation highlights the difficulty inherent in reading theological structures into arcane ancient poetry, as opposed to cultic institutions.

asking why Indra's companion should be any one of several deities apparently unrelated to warlike concerns, the fact remains that there is a long list of "minor" deities worshiped in the hymns, some of which would become not so minor in the late Vedic period and even more so in classical Hinduism, while most of the major gods here would recede into the background or altogether disappear. That is, such a long tail attached to the head of the Rigvedic pantheon could, and in fact did, become a source of instability and change when, for a variety of reasons, the objects and forms of the rituals would have to change or new rituals would come to be absorbed into the Brahmanical tradition. Moreover, female deities are noted for their near-absence. So the tripartite structure, at least in the Vedic case, does not seem to guarantee a well-delineated, self-supporting, long-lasting division of divine labor. We will pick up the threads of theological evolution from here in Sect. 6.1.1 below.

On the other hand, the late-Vedic philosophical texts called *Upanishads* and the classical *Brahmasutras* which summarizes them began to devalue the forms of the traditional ritual and look for its deeper, hidden symbolic meaning. By so doing they proposed the idea of the formless Brahman, the ultimate reality of the universe, the absolute, which does not change yet is the cause of all change. This idea was already hinted at in the *Rig Veda* (10.121) and is explicit by the earliest *Upanishads*. By a process of abstraction, the meaning of Brahman evolved from expressing the power of the ritual and of its sacred words to signifying the essence of the universe (Flood 1996, 84–85). The Brahman is seen as the common essence that underlies all the Vedic gods, thus potentially making their differences irrelevant and pointing the way to a monistic conception that would come to fruition in classical Hinduism.

As is well known, a conception of the afterlife which delivers rewards and punishments associated with behavior or morality in life has been central to Indian religions. This was not so in the earlier Vedas, which posited an afterlife with the ancestors, and the possibility of a heavenly abode (*svarga*) for a pious life, reserved to the elite. Starting from the *Upanishads*, however, the central Hindu conception developed that the soul (*atman*) would undergo reincarnation in ways determined by the moral merit (*karman*) accumulated in the current life, and that a way out of this cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) was available by pursuing final liberation or release (*moksha*) through renunciation (*sannyasa*)—a conception first promoted by Buddhism and Jainism (see the discussion in Sect. 6.1.2 below). This conception has two consequences. First, it dictates an overarching set of prescriptions and prohibitions for worldly behavior, centered on purity rules, life cycle rituals, diet, and non-harm (*ahimsa*), and differentiated by caste stratification. This complex underwent substantial change over time; in particular, the vegetarian diet required of the "twice-born" social classes (i.e. the three highest-ranking *varnas*, which alone were allowed to study the Vedas) and especially of Brahmins took centuries to establish itself (and even then, not uniformly across the subcontinent). Secondly, unlike the Vedic gods, the new gods of classical Hinduism (to be discussed in Sect. 6.1.1 below) became intertwined with this ethical code as either helpers in the attainment of a "good" rebirth and/or *moksha*, and even saviors, or as themselves exemplars of upright moral behavior held up for imitation. We will see that these developments had far-reaching effects.

4.1.2 The Cult and the Priests

In both the *Rig Veda* and the later Vedic texts treating the classical *shrauta* system (i.e. the ritual system based on the *shruti* scriptures—the Vedas), the prevailing model of the sacrifice is the same as that which will characterize the much later *puja* of classical Hinduism: a ceremony of hospitality and a festive meal offered to the visiting gods, where the gods are entertained while they eat by recitation of the hymns of praise that make up the *Rig Veda*. To entice the gods to come to a given sacrifice, rather than choosing another simultaneous party, the host seeks to provide the best entertainment in the form of the most exquisite hymns. There is also another model, closer to the conception of the Homeric sacrifice, whereby the offerings ascend to the gods in heaven on the smoke of the offering fire. In both models, as mentioned above, Agni, the fire deified, is the essential intermediary between gods and men. In any case, the guests are expected to reciprocate with favors as requested by the host. There is also some tangential treatment of domestic (*griha*) rituals, those performed by the householder with or without the agency of a priest, which probably were already important in Rigvedic times but take second place in the hymns to the public *shrauta* rituals; they would later come to the fore as one of the foundations of classical Hinduism (see Sect. 6.1.2 below).

There is no mention of buildings or permanent spaces dedicated to the rituals; the ritual ground where the sacrifice (*yajña*) takes place is demarcated and consecrated for each performance by setting up three ritual fires. The person who commissions and pays for the sacrifice (*yajamana*), and who is the expected beneficiary of it, is otherwise passive throughout and devolves all the action to the priests, variously specified in the tradition as ranging from two to seven according to the complexity of the rituals and the liturgical specializations involved. The offerings were made into the sacred fire and might include milk, ghee, cereal cakes, the *soma* plant, and domestic animals including cattle. The *soma* sacrifice required four priests, each of them specialized in one of the ritual skills recorded in the four Vedas; the plant's stems were pressed during the ritual itself to produce a drink which was then offered into the fire to the gods and drunk by the sacrificer and the priests.[3] Animal sacrifice was prominent in the Vedic period and might be a part of the *soma* sacrifice or an independent rite. Among the latter, it is worth mentioning the great, dramatic horse sacrifice (*ashvamedha*), performed by a king to consolidate or display his power, in which a horse was let roam freely for a year, escorted by royal troops, and then slaughtered along with a great number of other animals, with the accompaniment of outlandish actions and speech, while its different portions were offered to different deities.[4]

[3] Scholars have long argued about the identity of this plant; the most likely candidate seems to be the ephedra, a stimulant which yields an exhilarating drink and which is also used in the parallel Zoroastrian ritual—under the cognate name *haoma*—to this day.

[4] This ritual seems grounded in a proto-Indo-European royal ritual of horse sacrifice, which is documented in other cultures and particularly, with striking parallels to the Indian case, in the Roman ritual of the October Horse (see Dumézil 1970, 216–227, for a detailed comparison).

Who were the priests? Jamison and Brereton (2014, 30) suggest that the Rigvedic priesthood may not have been made of professional ritual specialists, but of warriors and other elite people who acted as priests in the ritual. Even if so, however, soon the proliferation of the texts, the crushing burden of memorization of ever-lengthening materials, and the consequent rise of the priestly schools made professionalization inevitable.

In the vast majority of cases, the priests mentioned in normative and literary texts or alluded to in inscriptions were identifiable as Brahmins of some sort, subdivided by particular tradition or priestly order and/or a particular type of function. Fast-forwarding to the age of classical Hinduism (discussed in Chap. 6), among Brahmin priests, the further essential distinctions are between Vaidika (Shrauta Vedic, i.e., those practicing the archaic multi-fire sacrificial cult for which the four Vedas provide the liturgy, described above), Smarta (priests adhering to the late- and post-Vedic domestic ritual codes and Dharmashastras), Tantric priests (exponents of the rituals taught in works called *Tantra*s, whether oriented to Shiva, Vishnu, or the Goddess as supreme deity), temple priests (those responsible for performing *puja*, i.e. public worship of deities embodied in images in temples, subdivided further by deity and sectarian tradition), funeral priests, and those who provide various fee-based ritual services for visitors at temple and pilgrimage sites.

Such identification of Brahmin and priest is somewhat blurred by the distinction between married priests and celibate ascetics, who often double as priests at certain public temples as well as in monastic institutions. Some ascetic orders accept initiates of non-Brahmin and even low-status birth, which creates one sort of non-Brahmin priest. Some Tantric traditions also initiate priests of various castes, and some devotionalist (*bhakti*) traditions have non-Brahmin ritualists in specific roles. Such diversity notwithstanding, it cannot be denied that the views of male Brahmin authorities have largely dominated Hindu priestly functions, and even many of the traditions that have non-Brahmin priests have been influenced in significant ways by the model of Brahmin priesthood.

Who were the Brahmins? The criteria of Brahmin status and identity were defined in the Sanskrit works classed as Veda and Dharmashastra ("teaching on *dharma* [rule of right conduct]," post-Vedic body of normative, doctrinal works, ca. 250 BCE onward). As mentioned above, the Vedas and related texts were oral compositions transmitted mnemonically from teacher to pupil. They were called *brahman*, and the process for learning them by rote and thus embodying them was called *brahmacarya*, literally "pursuit or practice of *brahman*" (Lubin 2018). The training began with an initiation by the teacher, symbolizing a rebirth, and called for the student to adhere to a strict discipline including sexual chastity, begging for food, limits on sleep, a particular dress code, and study of the texts, and concluded with a ceremonial bath. The Veda student (*brahmacharin*) served his preceptor as an apprentice, residing in his home and tending his fire. There are indications that, at first, it was this training itself that constituted a person as a Brahmin, that is, a specialist in *brahman*. Even so, it is also clear that the profession soon came to be passed down in families as a birthright and became, in social terms, an ascriptive caste status—the highest-ranking *varna*. At the same time, Brahmins diversified into the range of specializations of

roles and traditions described above, so that in time the original *varna* branched out into many Brahmin castes (*jatis*).

4.2 Iranian Religion

Iranian polytheism was a close cousin of Indian polytheism as they both took shape in very ancient times when the Indo-Iranians were still semi-nomadic cattle herders on the Central Asian steppes; subsequently the two peoples parted ways and their religions evolved in different directions.[5] At some point after the separation, when the Iranians were on their way southward to eventually settle on the northeastern Iranian plateau, the prophet Zoroaster[6] introduced a deep change in the traditional religion that created the first monotheistic religion in history. While founders of other religions set out to overthrow the preexisting polytheism and replace it with an entirely different product, Zoroaster carried out a reform of Iranian polytheism which left many beliefs and practices standing, though restructured and reinterpreted. For this reason, Zoroaster's work can be used as an indirect, and unwitting, source for the reconstruction of ancient Iranian polytheism, and this implies that the dating of such a reconstructed system depends on the dating of Zoroaster.

The only source for the study of the earliest Iranian religion is the Avesta, the corpus of Zoroastrian holy scriptures; archeological and inscriptional data begin only in the sixth century BCE, with the Achaemenian empire, and reports by Greek writers begin in the fifth century—a time when the Zoroastrian reform had firmly taken hold in both the royal family and the general population. The Avesta was transmitted orally by rote memorization in the priesthood for millennia before it was committed to writing in the Sasanian period (probably as late as the sixth century CE). It is for the most part a liturgical work, containing hymns and invocations to be used in the rituals, as well as some discussion of moral and purity laws. Its oldest part, the *Gathas*, is a collection of 17 hymns attributed to Zoroaster himself and composed in an archaic form of the language, known as Old Avestan, which is close to that of the *Rig Veda*—the earliest text of Indian religion. Presumably because of its special holiness, this part seems to have been memorized exactly and handed down in a fixed form down the centuries. The rest, written in a later form of the language known as Younger Avestan, appears to have been handed down in a more fluid oral tradition, with each successive generation of priests updating the language, making changes, and adding new material. Nevertheless, it contains some very ancient material. Precisely because some substantial part of the pagan beliefs, rituals and observances survived into Zoroastrianism, and because the earliest extant Avestan texts seem to be remarkably faithful to the original compositions, scholars

[5] This entire section draws extensively on Ferrero (2021) and the references cited therein.

[6] Zoroaster is the form of the prophet's name given by the ancient Greeks, who first introduced knowledge of him into western culture, and still current; many modern scholars, however, use the original Avestan form Zarathustra. The religion he founded, here called Zoroastrianism, is also known in English as Mazdaism, from the name of the creator god Ahura Mazda.

can use parts of the Avesta to reconstruct ancient Iranian polytheism, with the help of comparisons with the earliest strata of the Vedic texts.

The dating of Zoroaster's life has been a difficult task for scholars. In the absence of any external evidence, the language of the *Gathas* and the world-picture they convey suggest that he flourished in what for the Iranians was the transition from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age, which may mean around the middle or in the latter half of the second millennium BCE.[7] He may thus have been a contemporary of the authors of the earliest hymns of the *Rig Veda*, and the pagan religion that can be evinced from his hymns, and from another group of Avestan hymns (*Yashts*) to individual deities that bear clear marks of pagan origin, may have been roughly contemporary of the religion pictured in the *Rig Veda*.

4.2.1 Theology

As in all the earliest forms of religion, ancient Iranians worshiped "nature" gods who personified some physical phenomena, as well as "cult" gods who personified some specialized cultic functions; some of each group will be considered below.[8] It is, however, useful to begin with "abstract" gods or personified abstractions, usually conceived of in anthropomorphic form, that were the core of the pantheon.

The ancient Iranians believed that there was a cosmic law, known as *asha* (cognate to the Vedic *rita*), that ensured order in the physical universe and also in the human world as an ethical principle of truth and righteousness; its opposite was the cosmic principle of disorder and falsehood, known as *drug*. Men's worship and sacrifices were felt to help maintain this cosmic order by strengthening both the gods themselves and the natural world. One matter that was central to this opposition of truth and lie was the sacredness of man's given word—keeping one's pledge so that *asha* was upheld. Two types of pledges were recognized: the individual oath and the contract between two parties. These were hypostatized as divinities who would support the upright man who kept his word but smite the liar who broke it, and who were called Varuna and Mithra respectively—well known from the Vedas. The judicial procedure used to test the veracity of a man accused of breaking his word was the ordeal: an ordeal by water for an oath, an ordeal by fire for a covenant. Accordingly, Varuna (known in the Avesta only by its byname Apam Napat, "Son of the Waters") and

[7] Our authority throughout this study, Mary Boyce, wavered somewhat over a narrower dating, from "between, say, 1400 and 1000 BC" (Boyce 1975, 190) to "between 1700 and 1500 BC" (Boyce 1979, 18) to "probably…. before 1200 BC" (Boyce 1982, 3).

[8] Most of the information on Iranian religion, both before and after Zoroaster, in this book is drawn from the work of Mary Boyce, which seems to have set a plumb line for modern Zoroastrian scholarship as well as providing a thorough coverage of the subject. See her seminal history of Zoroastrianism in several volumes (Boyce 1975, 1982; Boyce and Grenet 1991) and her very informative, nontechnical summary which covers all the ground from antiquity to the present day (Boyce 1979). This and the next subsection rely on Boyce 1975 (Chaps. 2, 4, 6) and Boyce 1979 (Chap. 1).

Mithra became associated with these elements and became gods of the waters and of fire (and of the greatest of all fires, the sun) respectively, and received the exalted title of *ahura* (lord). By logical extension, Mithra became further worshiped as a war god, fighting on behalf of the righteous, and as god of justice itself; and since it was believed that a just moral order brought prosperity to a realm, he was also invoked as bringer of rain and good crops and protector of rich pastures, i.e. a god of material plenty. Similarly, Apam Napat, the god of the waters, became a god of rain and the harvest.

Above these divinities there was a third and greatest lord, probably inspired by the figure of the wise ruler in ultimate control of the law: Ahura Mazda, the Lord Wisdom, who was unconnected with any physical phenomenon but personified the power of wisdom which should control men and gods alike. The three *ahuras* are all ethical beings, who uphold *asha* and rule by it. Ahura Mazda too seems to have had a Vedic counterpart in a nameless Lord (Asura, corresponding to Avestan *ahura*) who in a few Rigvedic passages is described as "our Father" and appears raised above both Mitra and Varuna as enabling them to make the sky rain, enforce their ordinances and rule the universe through truth (*rita*) (RV 5.63). Already in the *Rig Veda*, this ancient high god had become so remote from the cult as to have lost his proper name, being alluded to only by his title "Lord", and would be in the course of time forgotten. It seems likely that this god was once the highest god of the ethical triad of the Indo-Iranians, together with Mitra and Varuna, and then underwent divergent developments in the two daughter religions, yielding his prominence to Varuna with the Vedic Indians while remaining foremost with the Iranians with his proper name, Mazda, until Zoroaster moved him to the position of supreme god. This last reform also affected the relative positions of Mithra and Apam Napat (i.e. Varuna). There is evidence to suggest that the latter had an exalted place in the ancient Iranian pantheon, not unlike that held by Varuna in India, and like him fulfilled many acts of creation, while the pagan Ahura Mazda was probably more remote, like the Vedic Asura. But when Zoroaster elevated Ahura Mazda to the position of *the* creator god, Apam Napat became bereft of much of his greatness and survived in Zoroastrianism only with the limited activity of god of the waters, whereas Mithra's roles of judge and fighter for *asha* were little affected by the new doctrines and so his position remained virtually unaltered.

Around Mithra, or both Mithra and Apam Napat, were grouped a number of lesser "abstract" divinities, all of them beneficent, including among others a god of hospitality (a counterpart of the Vedic Aryaman), a god of prayer, a goddess of fortune, and a goddess of glory for kings and heroes. An interesting figure in this group is Verethraghna, the god of victory, a martial helper of the *ahuras*, a warrior who fights alongside, and grants victory only to the righteous, who enjoyed great popularity of old and continued to be greatly revered in Zoroastrianism (Boyce 1975, 53–55, 62–65). He is an ancient divinity, probably belonging with the *ahuras* to Indo-Iranian times, when he shared his warlike function with Indra, whom we have already met in Sect. 4.1.1 above as the chief god of the *Rig Veda*—a divinity who was the prototype of the Indo-Iranian warrior of the heroic age, fearless, reckless, hard-drinking, generous to his worshipers whom he would reward with material gains.

Indra is thus an essentially amoral being, the opposite of the great *ahuras*, as shown by a Rigvedic hymn (RV 4.42) which contrasts Indra's and Varuna's different claims to greatness: both are universal kings, but Varuna rules by right, Indra by might. However, no divinity corresponding to Verethraghna is known from the Vedas, where his place had been usurped by Indra, who joined his own qualities of "bad" warrior to Verethraghna's qualities of "good" warrior, smiting the demons. The evidence of the Mitanni pantheon (discussed in Sect. 4.1.1 above), in which Indra follows Mitra and Varuna in the place where one might expect Verethraghna to appear, suggests that this shift was not original with the Vedic Brahmins but had already taken place with the Indo-Aryans of the fourteenth century BCE. In an opposite development, Zoroaster instead retained the god of Victory and rejected Indra, who sank with the Nasatyas (who followed Indra in the Mitanni list) and another Vedic deity equivalent to Rudra, who were all evidently worshiped also in pagan Iran, to the rank of demons, collectively designated as *daevas* and abjured in Zoroastrianism. We will see in Sect. 6.2.1 how important this contrast was for Zoroaster's reforms.

This pantheon had a key feature in common with the Vedic and Greek pantheons: through processes of logical association, personification of abstractions, and myth-making, most gods came to be seen as wielding broad powers affecting multiple, apparently distant areas, so each god could and would be petitioned for very diverse benefits. Inevitably, then, each of these boons belonged to an area that was also the responsibility and competence of other divinities; as a consequence, the gods' jurisdictions overlapped, so that the same or similar benefits could—or indeed should—be sought of diverse divinities at the same time. For example, consider what is perhaps the chief nature deity, the goddess Aredvi Sura Anahita ("the moist, the strong, the undefiled"), originally a river-goddess and the source of all the waters of the world, the counterpart of the Vedic river-goddess Sarasvati (Boyce 1975, 71–73, 151–152). As a goddess of the waters, she was interpreted as a goddess of fertility—of humans, herds, and earth alike; not only, however, would maidens pray to her for a good husband and women giving birth for an easy delivery, but warriors would ask the goddess for swift horses and victory in battle, and priests would ask her for wisdom. As we have seen, however, war was already presided over by both Mithra and Indra, even though with different nuances, and then there was the ancient god of victory, Verethraghna; on the other hand, both Mithra and Apam Napat brought prosperity to land and cattle, as did a specialized god of material prosperity, Baga; and women' fertility was especially cared for by Ashi, the goddess of fortune and abundance. The cult god Haoma (discussed in the next section) likewise was a protector of health, cattle, crops, and warriors. So overlap abounded. Dumézil did not even try to squeeze this divine complex into the straitjacket of his tripartite ideology (although he did see the goddess Aredvi Sura Anahita as an example of tri-functional deity encompassing and synthesizing all the functions; see Dumézil 1958, 59–60).

The gods created the world and the world was regarded as unending, if men also did their part and sustained the gods' creation by means of the priests' daily sacrifices. As to the individual, there was a belief in life after death, the earliest form of which was probably that after death the human soul went to an underground kingdom of the dead; there all the souls alike lived a shadowy, joyless existence and still relied

on their living descendants to feed and clothe them. Then a belief developed that some great men—chieftains, warriors, and priests—if worthy enough, might ascend to a heaven of delight in the company of the gods, while commoners and women were still doomed to the underworld—a dual conception of the afterlife shared by the Vedic Indians; probably on account of uncertainty about each individual's fate, however, the descendants' offerings remained for all the departed. With the hope of paradise a belief arose in the resurrection of the body for the individual to be able to experience the full joys of heaven, and this seemed incompatible with burial in the ground. Hence the Indians began to shift from burial to cremation, while the Iranians, out of utmost respect for fire, moved to the rite of exposure that would take center stage with Zoroastrianism.

4.2.2 The Cult and the Priests

The ancient Iranians devoted much time and resources to pleasing the gods with offerings and praises, with the double purpose of securing material and spiritual benefits for the supplicant and of strengthening the gods themselves, on whose work the maintenance of the "world of *asha*" depended. Among the various offerings, the blood sacrifice (Boyce 1975, 149–151, 152–153) was always the rarest and most highly regarded, partly because it was the most costly to the supplicant, and partly because the taking of life—itself a dangerous act of destruction—had to be hedged about with strict rituals, so that the consecrated animal's soul could safely depart for the other world. Even though a sacrifice could be offered by any laymen, a priest's presence was always necessary as he alone was sufficiently pure to perform this high ritual act. The most prized of sacrificial animals was the cow or bull—a reminiscence of the remote pastoral period of the people—followed by the horse—clearly an aristocratic offering—and then more commonly goats, sheep, and fowl. Each sacrifice was dedicated to a particular deity, called down by name with proper ritual words.

In addition to sacrificing to the gods on high, the ancient Iranians had a particular cult around the two elements that played a vital part in the life of the steppe-dwelling pastoralists, and which have remained central to the Zoroastrian cult to this day: water and fire (Boyce 1975, 153–156). Offerings to the waters were threefold: milk and the sap or leaves of two plants, representing the animal and vegetable kingdoms. The waters were deified as Apas, whose "son" was Apam Napat, i.e. Varuna. As lighting a fire then was a laborious process, it was convenient to keep a hearth fire always burning, so a cult of ever-burning fire developed among the Indo-Europeans. As the Vedic Indians deified fire as Agni, so the Iranians deified it as Atar, although he never developed anything like the rich personality and mythology that surrounded Agni. Among the Iranians, the offerings to fire were again threefold: clean dry wood, incense, and a small amount of animal fat—again two from the vegetable kingdom and one from the animal one. The offerings to both water and fire were thought to strengthen that element by returning to it the vital force it had given out.

As the food offerings to the gods could be performed by the laity, so the offerings to both water and fire were made regularly by each household; but these three things (food offerings to a particular god, offering to fire, and offering to water) also formed the basis of the rite known in later times as the *yasna* (cf. the Vedic *yajña*), the major daily act of worship officiated by priests; although known directly only in its Zoroastrian form, substantial pre-Zoroastrian features can be detected in it (Boyce 1975, 156–165). While the basic ritual was always the same, each *yasna* service was dedicated to an individual god through particular mantras, although it always included the offerings to fire and water. While the domestic offering of fat to fire was presumably made whenever the family had meat to cook, at the priestly rite the fat was obtained from animal sacrifice—which implies that such sacrifice was a regular part of the service. Like the ancient Greeks and the Vedic Indians, the Iranians believed that the gods were content with a symbolic portion of the meat, offered into the fire, and otherwise enjoyed the odor rising from the sacrifice, so the consecrated meat (like all the other food and drink offerings) was shared between priests and worshipers. Unlike the Vedic three-fire rites, the Iranians, including the Zoroastrians to this day, have always used only a single fire.

One of the plant offerings to the waters was the juice obtained from pounding the stems of a plant called *haoma* (the Indian *soma*), which was believed to confer untold powers when drunk by warriors, poets, and priests. While in ancient times the preparation, consecration and drinking of *haoma* must have begun life as a separate rite, it then was absorbed and became the center of the *yasna*, to the point that the juice was personified as a god Haoma (parallel to the Indian god Soma), the divine priest who presided over the entire ritual and who too received a stipulated portion of the sacrificial meat. Like many other gods, Haoma became endowed with vast and diverse powers, all ultimately related to the plant which he represented: he was invoked as a healer, and one who could protect cattle, give strength to warriors, and ensure good harvests. While the *haoma* cult has close parallels in the Vedas (see Sect. 4.1.1 above), in stark contrast with the Indians (to whom the dog, being omnivorous, is a symbol of uncleanness) the Iranians to this day give a fraction of the consecrated meat to a dog, which is always present at the service and receives the food on behalf of the gods—a striking legacy of the pastoral days, as is its regular attendance at funeral rites.

In keeping with the needs of nomadic peoples, these major rituals were performed in a sacred precinct that consisted simply of a piece of level ground marked off by a furrow and consecrated by prayers, with no fixed structure. Purity was thought essential in the presence of the gods, so the ground and the vessels used in the rituals were carefully washed with water, and the priests and all participants had to be in a state of ritual purity, which was achieved by preliminary bodily washing with water or cow or bull urine. (As in India, cattle urine was used also for purification in cases of serious pollution such as contact with a corpse.) However, the pagan gods were selective in granting access to worshipers and accepting offerings from them: various gods forbade participation in the rituals devoted to themselves to various groups of people including prostitutes, liars, lepers, the physically impaired or deformed, the insane, or the sterile—old men and women, young girls and boys (Boyce 1975,166).

On the other hand, as in Brahmanism, propitiatory offerings were also made to the powers of evil and darkness—Zoroaster's wicked *daevas* (ibid., 170–171).

Regarding the priests, what we can know of their profession and organization comes from the commonalities between Zoroastrianism and Brahmanism, which must go back to their common Indo-Iranian past (Boyce 1975, 8–11, 168–169). There was a common basic training in which young boys, probably from the age of 7 to 15, were apprenticed to a master, and there learned the mastering of rituals, the sacred words to accompany them, and the hymns to the gods. While these were learned by heart, thus preserving a sacred literature down the generations, the priests also learned the techniques for composing new additions to the literature, such as mantras and the "wisdom" poetry with instructive content (exemplified by Zoroaster's own *Gathas*). As in the early times there were no established cult centers to be served by priests, the latter, like their Indian colleagues of old, were attached to individual families, at whose behest they performed the rituals for a fee. Thus, payment for service by families to "their" priests was the latter's source of livelihood—a livelihood which would of course be humble or handsome depending on whether their employer was lowly or highborn. In contrast, Greek sources from the fifth century BCE mention a priestly "tribe", the Magi, among the Medes of western Iran—the first hint at an exclusive hereditary priesthood, whereas among the Avestan people of eastern Iran the priestly class seems to have had less rigid barriers (Zoroaster himself, a priest, married into a warrior family).

4.3 Main Takeaways

The earliest attestation of the religion of the Indo-Aryans—a semi-nomadic, pastoralist people that eventually settled in northern India—is found in the hymns of the *Rig Veda*. Indra is the war god and the king of the gods, followed by Agni and Soma who personify the two central elements of the cult—the multi-fire sacrificial ritual and the preparation and drinking of an inebriating drink. Next come the Ashvins, youthful twins and horsemen, Varuna, the sovereign and priestly god, and Mitra, the protector of contracts and alliances. This group may reflect an early tri-functional structure, but it is followed by a long list of minor deities that blur the picture and which threaten to become, in time, a source of instability of the pantheon. Female deities play a very minor role.

The original conception of the afterlife posited the possibility of heaven reserved to a pious, aristocratic elite. Then the late-Vedic texts developed the central Hindu conception that the soul would undergo reincarnation in ways determined by the moral merit accumulated in the current life, and that a way out of this cycle of rebirth was available by pursuing final liberation through renunciation. This entailed a complex of prescriptions and prohibitions for worldly behavior, differentiated by caste, which would evolve over time, and implied that the gods would have to become intertwined with this ethical code as "moral" gods—which would happen with the new gods of Hinduism. At the same time, the late-Vedic literature advanced the idea

of the formless Brahman, the ultimate reality of the universe, seen as the common essence that underlies all the Vedic gods.

The public sacrifice for which the Vedas provide the ritual was commissioned and paid for by a private person but conducted by a number of priests, and included vegetable and dairy offerings as well as cattle and other domestic animals. There was also a separate royal ceremony of horse sacrifice. These rituals took place on a shifting piece of ground demarcated and consecrated for the purpose by the fires. The priests could be identified as Brahmins, who underwent many years of training that involved ascetic discipline, sitting within auditory distance from their teacher, and memorizing the Vedas and related texts by rote. The profession soon became hereditary and came to regard itself as the highest-ranking social class (*varna*), even as the Brahmins diversified into a range of specialized roles and traditions that in time crystallized into many castes.

Iranian polytheism was a close cousin of Indian polytheism. The pantheon included Varuna and Mithra, "moral" gods who upheld the keeping of individual pledges and the keeping of contracts respectively, well-known from the Vedas. Around them were grouped a number of lesser beneficent divinities, and above them was a greater lord, Ahura Mazda (Lord Wisdom), guardian of the cosmic order. On the other hand there was Indra, the chief god of the *Rig Veda*, who was seen in Iran as an essentially amoral being, the prototype of the Indo-Iranian warrior of the heroic age, fearless, reckless, hard-drinking, generous to his worshipers; a few other gods clustered with Indra. Goddesses were marginal. Most gods came to be seen as wielding broad powers affecting multiple, apparently distant areas, hence they could and would be petitioned for very diverse benefits; inevitably, then, each of these areas was also the responsibility of several other divinities, so the gods' jurisdictions overlapped.

Upon death, some great men—chieftains, warriors, and priests—if worthy enough, might ascend to heaven in the company of the gods, whereas commoners and women were doomed to a shadowy underground kingdom of the dead—a dual conception of the afterlife shared by the Vedic Indians. Animal sacrifice was the highest form of offerings to the gods, above all cattle, then horses, and then other domestic animals; and a priest's presence was required as he alone was sufficiently pure. The cult of water and fire was particularly developed. The three types of offerings (to the gods, water, and fire) formed the basis of the *yasna*, the major daily rite officiated by priests, at the end of which the sacrificial meat and other foods were shared between priests and worshipers. This rite was centered on the pressing and drinking of the juice of a sacred plant, which was considered inebriating. The major rituals were performed on a piece of ground consecrated by prayers, with no fixed structures.

The similarities with the Vedic cult are obvious, as are the similarities between the priesthoods. Young boys were apprenticed to a teacher for many years to learn by heart prayers, hymns, and ritual practices. The Iranian priests, like their Vedic colleagues, were attached to individual families for which they performed the rituals for a fee, which was their source of livelihood.