Chapter 6
Death and Rebirth: Polytheism Reformed

Abstract This chapter examines the religions that underwent a reform and managed to survive and thrive. Brahmanism reacted to the challenge of ascetic sects and to the withering of its old base of royal support by replacing the Vedic pantheon and rituals with the new theology of sectarian Hinduism, centered on new supreme deities (Vishnu, Shiva, the Goddess) who had a universal jurisdiction and eliminated divine jealousy. The Brahmins diversified their services and confirmed their monopoly. Zoroastrianism established a divine hierarchy subordinating all deities to Ahura Mazda, promoting a universal struggle between good and evil, and inaugurating monotheism, while the priests expanded their role as guardians of purity and ethics. Both religions were thus able to expand their territorial spread.

6.1 Hinduism

6.1.1 The New Theology

We address here the formative period of Hinduism, from about 600 BCE to 700 CE.[1] In this period, the primacy of Vedic Brahmanism was challenged by deep social and political changes as well as by the concurrent rise of ascetic (*shramana*) movements, Jains and Buddhists prominent among them. In a long process, the Brahmins reacted by changing their theology and practices and finally succeeded in claiming the leadership of the new sects centered on the devotion to particular deities. The new theology and rituals are enshrined in the great epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana (both composed over many centuries and finalized in their present form perhaps in the third century CE), and in a group of works called *Puranas* (mostly composed in the period of the Gupta Empire, ca. 300–500 CE), each of which is devoted to a particular deity.

[1] The entire Hinduism section draws extensively on Basuchoudhari, Ferrero and Lubin (2020); see also the references cited therein. For general background see Thapar (2002).

M. Ferrero, *The Political Economy of Indo-European Polytheism*,
Contributions to Economics, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97943-0_6

As mentioned in Sect. 4.1.1, Vishnu and Rudra-Shiva were only marginal figures in the Vedas, representing only a small aspect of their later divine personae, but later—in the first millennium CE—they replaced the great Vedic gods or displaced them to secondary status. Interestingly, and similarly to the oldest indigenous Roman gods, most Vedic gods were not removed for the pantheon but left there as minor figures (Sect. 4.1.1). The new centrality of Shiva and Vishnu was signaled by depicting them as complementary in their primary functions in the conception of the Trimurti, the "three forms" of god: Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the sustainer), and Shiva (the destroyer at the end of each eon), with Brahma personifying the old Vedic notion of divinity and hardly receiving any worship in the developing Hinduism. This ecumenical conception, however, did not reflect the emerging reality of the new religions. From the beginning of the Common Era, there arose a group of new traditions—Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Shakta—enshrined in the *Puranas*, each named after its eponymous deity (Shiva, Vishnu, and Shakti, i.e., the Devi, respectively), which constituted the core theology of classical Hinduism and in time crystallized into sects. Below this top layer of pan-Indian deities, there were hundreds of gods and goddesses and a plethora of specializations of a given deity to particular roles or concerns, usually captured by an epithet. These often represented local varieties or earlier local deities subsumed into the main theological framework of Hinduism through affiliation.

Beginning with the first two traditions, despite the appearance of cosmological complementarity in the Trimurti, and although the characters depicted by the mythology were different, both Shiva and Vishnu were claimed by their devotees (the members of the various sects comprising the Shaiva and the Vaishnava traditions, respectively) as supreme gods, referred to by titles such as Bhagavan ("holy one") or Ishvara ("lord"). The sects promised to their members, whether ascetics or householders, the achievement of liberation (*moksha*) through the grace of the Lord, and in contrast to Vedic practice, they introduced the worship of anthropomorphic images of the gods, which were later to receive their permanent home in the temples.[2]

Vishnu is the Lord residing in the highest heaven, who creates the universe, then preserves it, and then destroys it at the end of each eon, thus taking on in turn the three successive forms of god and their names; and he manifests himself to the world by means of his avatars or incarnations. These avatars constituted one mechanism for affiliating other figures to a central divine person. The figure of Vishnu himself appears to have taken over those of several previously independent tribal deities, among them Krishna, who was elevated to the status of avatar but then was identified with Vishnu himself in the Bhagavad Gita (the "Song of the Lord", itself a section of the Mahabharata), which is claimed as scripture by the Vaishnavas.

Shiva too is considered by his devotees as the supreme Lord who creates, sustains, and destroys the universe. He is an ambiguous god, described as a wild ascetic and at the same time as the ideal householder, although the ascetic component looms larger in the Shaiva than in the Vaishnava tradition. He is the Lord of *yoga* (roughly, "discipline of the mind") who meditates on Mount Kailash in the Himalayas; he has

[2] The following three paragraphs on the Hindu deities are based on Flood (1996, Chaps. 5, 7, 8).

a wife, Parvati, and two children; he is the Lord of dance, through which he brings forward an infinite energy; and he is embodied in the *linga*, the phallic image that became a fixture of Shiva's temples, symbolizing the cosmic power of generation. A foundational myth, told in different versions, tells how all the gods once celebrated a great Vedic horse sacrifice but Shiva, who was meditating on the mountain, was not invited; overtaken by fearsome wrath, he then descended on the ritual and destroyed everything, whereupon he was begged by the gods to desist and was offered a share in the sacrificial offerings forever after. This suggests that Shiva, originally an outsider to the Vedic divine club, was excluded from the sacrifice until he forced himself in, and analogously, the Shaiva tradition, originally not part of Brahmanism, was later assimilated into it.

Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva were each juxtaposed with a goddess—Sarasvati, Lakshmi, and Parvati respectively—personified as a divine consort and representing the god's creative energy (*shakti*). This was a sharp turn from the Vedic pantheon, where the goddesses played a minor role and were generally pale personifications of natural phenomena or of abstractions. The *Puranas* then established a separate Shakta tradition centered on the cult of the Shakti, i.e., the goddess (*devi*), alongside the Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions, with a theology and a mythology of its own, where the different goddesses were seen as embodiments of a single feminine principle, the Great Goddess (Maha-Devi). Somewhat like Shiva, the Devi is an ambiguous figure, the generous mother and source of all life and at the same time a force of destruction that must be appeased, or, the ideal wife and at the same time the woman free from social control. Her cult seems to have resulted from the accretion of local goddesses, some of which of non-Arya origin or worshiped by low-caste and tribal groups, originally alien to the Brahmanical framework and then assimilated into it. In her theology, the Devi is the ultimate reality and origin of the universe; she is more powerful than Vishnu and the other gods, who are nevertheless acknowledged, and can grant believers liberation from rebirth. Her most prominent manifestation is Durga, the beautiful warrior goddess who would countenance no husband and who kills the buffalo-demon that all the gods could not conquer—though not before drinking her cup of wine. Other manifestations are Kali, the fierce goddess personifying Durga's wrath, who smites the demons and dances over the body of his consort, Shiva; then the various canonical consorts of the chief gods, mentioned above, who are benevolent powers presiding over poetry and music (Sarasvati) or wealth and royal power (Lakshmi); and finally scores of local goddesses, variations on the same themes. The Devi requests blood sacrifice, which is practiced to this day in many local cults associated with the lower castes.

This evolution from the Vedic to the Hindu pantheon was thus no mere change of names and attributes. The Vedic pantheon, as we have seen in Sect. 4.1.1, exhibited substantial overlap of jurisdictions, not unlike the Greek and Roman pantheons. Apart from Agni and Soma, who had specialized ritual roles, divine functions were not tightly defined, and multiple deities were honored for presiding over the same phenomena and were appealed to for similar motives. By contrast, each eponymous deity of the three Puranic traditions, together with his or her earthly embodiments, takes care of all the material and spiritual needs of the worshiper, making recourse to

alternative deities unnecessary (even though many Hindus do cross over and honor all of them). In a given sect, the presiding deity was perceived as having an all-encompassing jurisdiction; other deities, great and small, received worship as ancillary powers or partial manifestations of the supreme deity. Thus, even as there was competition among *sects* for *members and patronage*, there was no competition for *allegiance or offerings* among *gods* within a given sect. That is, within each of these sects, the overlap of functions and attributes between the gods (each being described as "the god/goddess of this and that") was effectively neutralized. Across the sects, on the other hand, divine jealousy was tamed through a kind of junior partnership: the "other" major god (e.g., Shiva) was honored as a secondary figure with his own limited jurisdiction—inferior and thus not really a rival to the presiding deity (e.g., Vishnu), with the inferiority reflecting the inter-sect rivalry and the jurisdiction reflecting the major gods' reciprocal accommodation in the new sectarian theology. In the service of such non-jealous conception of divinity, the narratives contained in the epics and the *Puranas* that depict the high gods in interaction and competition were tailored to affirm the theological or sectarian commitments of the compilers. Underlying this accommodation was the fact that Brahmins filled most of the priestly roles in all the sects. As a result, either within or between sects, the gods were no longer "jealous" of one another. This noncompetitive conception of the deity was in turn founded on the classical Hindu theology of the Bhagavan (or Bhagavati, if conceived as female), already mentioned—the one supreme godhead of which all the multiple divine persons are mere reflexes or partial manifestations or local and temporal incarnations. At the end of the eon, all of the latter "perish" like all other embodied beings, which means that they are reabsorbed into the primal divine essence, which is timeless and immortal. This is really a polytheism embedded in a monotheistic framework.

Alongside the three major theistic traditions, there arose a fourth denomination, Smarta, which explicitly affirms the equivalence of five major deities—Vishnu, Shiva, the Devi, Ganesha, and Surya—and leaves the worshiper free to choose a preferred one while honoring all five of them; the deities are considered equivalent interim steps toward realizing the formless Brahman—the ultimate reality of the universe, proposed in the *Upanishads* and discussed in Sect. 4.1.1. This provides a means of overcoming even theistic sectarianism by rendering any jurisdictional overlap between gods illusory or irrelevant.

The Vedic sacrificial rituals never disappeared but gradually lost ground to the new, sectarian worship ritual (*puja*), which focuses on devotion (*bhakti*) to a single personal deity, usually represented by an image, and basically consists in an exchange of offerings for blessings. The *puja* can be private or public; in the latter case it is conducted in a temple or through a festival and is typically presided over by priests to ensure that the rituals and offerings be properly performed, so that the deity is enticed to grant the requested or expected benefits. While the temples, the festivals, and the presiding priests naturally tend to be differentiated along sectarian lines, the *puja* generally follows the same pattern everywhere. Animal sacrifice, which was prominent in the Vedic cult, continued for a long time afterward but then, in the first millennium CE, based on the ascetic ideal of non-harm (*ahimsa*), opposition to it

grew and culminated in its systematic replacement by vegetable offerings (together with the increasing practice of vegetarianism in personal diet) in cults conforming to Brahmanical norms. Animal offerings, however, have persisted in less Brahmanized Hindu settings, especially in offerings to Shiva or to a goddess; sacrificial offerings of goats and chickens are still common in many parts of South Asia.

6.1.2 The Priests and Their Competition

We have seen that a key factor in the theological shift away from the Vedic pantheon was the need for the Brahmins to assimilate or subsume a variety of local, indigenous, often non-Aryan deities that the Vedic Aryans encountered in the long centuries of their expansion eastward and southward.[3] Apparently these deities and their cult did not sit easily with the Vedic gods and their rituals, so through a process that spanned many centuries the latter were eventually replaced by the gods and rituals of the Puranic sects. Another key factor, however, was that from the fifth century BCE the Brahmins encountered a stiff competition in the form of self-consciously non-Brahmanical *shramana* (ascetic) religions, founded by renunciate teachers such as the Jina Mahavira and the Buddha and spread by their Jain and Buddhist monastic disciples (as well as by a long since extinct group, the Ajivikas).

These groups originated in the territory of the later kingdom of Magadha, in the lower Ganges plains, whereas the established Brahmins' territory was to the west of it, in the upper Ganges valley. Magadha was the site of the urbanization process that took place before and after the middle of the first millennium BCE, a process which displaced the Brahmins who were a mainly rural institution servicing the small kingdoms or chiefdoms of the previous age. The new cities were cradles of social diversification and places of circulation and exchange of ideas and goods, and the Brahmins were ill-suited to this environment and tried to ignore it. In contrast, the ascetic groups found their audience and source of recruitment there. They were the carriers of the belief in karmic retribution, reincarnation, and release, which had originated outside Brahmanism, probably in Magadha, and they spread through the promotion of a route of escape from this cycle of rebirth: renunciation, which included nonviolence, vegetarianism, and general rejection of bodily pleasures in the pursuit of ascetical discipline and/or meditation and spiritual elevation. These ascetic orders were at first wandering mendicants; over time, they established monastic communities. As we have seen, with the late-Vedic *Upanishads* the Brahmins began to answer these concerns with their own theology of renunciation, but the question remained of how renunciation and married life in the world could coexist. The *shramanas* had clear, antagonistic answers: they targeted caste exclusions, scorned the Vedic gods, abhorred animal sacrifice, rejected the Vedas and Brahmanical authority, focused on the quest for liberation from *samsara*, and embraced monastic celibacy. If they wanted to survive as a priestly class, the Brahmins needed a response to that.

[3] This section is based on Bronkhorst (2011, 2016) and Lubin (2005, 2013, 2015, 2018).

Yet another source of disadvantage for the Brahmins was the rise of the first pan-Indian state, the Maurya Empire (ca. 320–180 BCE), which wiped out and absorbed the petty kingdoms that used to be the customers of the *shrauta* rituals. The Mauryas were generally supporters of the *shramana* orders, and in particular the third ruler of the dynasty, the emperor Ashoka, was a devout Buddhist, even though he and his predecessors and successors paid respect to the Brahmins too. At about the same time, the invasion of Alexander the Macedon and the succeeding Indo-Greek kingdoms in the northwest of the subcontinent—the ancient region called Gandhara—undermined an ancestral homeland of Brahmanism, which became a center of Buddhism for many centuries afterwards. So the Brahmins found themselves largely unemployed and had to reinvent themselves.

They responded to the *shramana* challenge by devising a Brahmanical path of asceticism and renunciation, and responded to the shrinking demand for Vedic ritual services by broadening and diversifying the range of services they offered. Underlying this range of responses, as well as underlying their (partial) endorsement and promotion of the theistic sects, was the ubiquitous emphasis on the Brahmins' claim to the highest position in society, justified by birth and enshrined in the elaborate ideology of the hierarchically ordered four social classes (*varnas*), i.e. the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas (warriors and kings), the Vaishyas (farmers and traders), and finally the Shudras (laborers). This vision of society was already proposed in late-Vedic works and finally codified in a classical Dharmashastra text, the *Law Code of Manu* (ca. second century CE). Brahmanism thus survived the period with little or no political support by turning inward and establishing a core vision whose central concern was to separate Brahmins from everyone else, contained in the manuals for proper social and domestic behavior. Ironically, in due time this inward-looking emphasis allowed Brahmins to start exerting influence on others.

The ascetic challenge was taken on through the figure of the *grihastha* (householder). A term first attested in some inscriptions of the Maurya emperor Ashoka (mid-third century BCE), it was later to become a central concept of the Dharmashastra, defining the pious married life as a form of home-based quasi-ascetic piety that became the hallmark of Brahmin identity. In these works, the *grihastha* designates the ritually observant married householder as a sort of religious professional on a par with other recognized kinds of "holy men" who were celibate mendicants; unlike the latter, he follows a system of specialized mildly ascetic regimens, consecrations, and purity rules as, in effect, an ascetic-in-the-world. The fact that a period of celibacy and mendicancy as a Veda student (*brahmacharin*) was made part of the training for all Brahmins (and, in theory, also for other classes who wished to be granted Arya status in the eyes of the Brahmins, and hence were called twice-born) helped to show how Brahmins partook of the same sorts of virtues as the mendicant orders. Moreover, the feeding of worthy Brahmins in the guest ceremonies and at the conclusion of ritual sacrifices, which goes back at least to Ashoka and was promoted in the Brahmanical texts, also gave credit to the idea that *grihastha* Brahmins were as deserving of patronage as the *shramanas*.

The *grihastha* status was constituted as an *ashrama* (vocation) in the earliest Dharmashastra (the *Dharmasutras*, composed in the last few centuries BCE), alongside some permanent modes of virtuosic asceticism accepted as a viable alternative: the vocations of Brahmanical lifelong celibate, forest hermit, and wandering mendicant ascetic (*sannyasin*). Later, the Book of Manu was the first to arrange the four *ashramas* sequentially as successive stages of life: the chaste Veda student, the householder, the forest hermit, and the wandering mendicant, thus to better validate the last two options, at least in theory, since the ascetic had already fulfilled his householder's duties. Later on, the ascetic path, whether of the old-age or the lifelong type, came to accommodate both solitary life and monastic communities (*mathas*). In this way, Brahmins competed with the *shramana* orders and the *dharma*s (rules of right conduct) that they taught by developing one of their own. Brahmanical *dharma* differed from these *dharma*s by prescribing norms for the disciplined, consecrated householder as a religious professional comparable to an ascetic. Although the householder-ascetic vocation (*grihastha-ashrama*) remained at the core of Brahmanical *dharma*, the *ashrama* system also accommodated models of celibate asceticism as life stages. "The rule of the *ashramas* (*ashrama-dharma*) became, along with the rule of caste-classes (*varna*), almost as good as a definition of Hinduism: *varṇashrama-dharma*" (Bronkhorst 2016, 246).

Turning to the diversification of services, we have seen in the previous section that the Brahmins were able take the scholarly leadership of the new sectarian theology and near-monopolize the priestly roles in the new sects. Concurrent with this transformation, however, even after its dark period royal courts appear to have played a central role in the spread of Brahmanism. There were good reasons for kings to welcome and honor Brahmins: whatever useful services could be had from them, it did not require "conversion", as one does not "convert" to Brahmanism, so the king could also keep patronizing *shramana* ascetics if he wanted to; and Brahmins were safe since, at least in theory, they did not aspire to kingship but, by the *varna* system, they were superior to kings and kept aloof from them. Many kings continued to patronize Vedic sacrifices for their well-being; others might not care about Vedic rites but adopt the vision of society that Brahmins offered; and since Brahmins were adept at dealing with the supernatural, they could provide services such as interpreting signs and predicting the future, or performing blessings and curses upon request. Furthermore, as ascetics-in-the-world, Brahmins could claim that their expertise extended to social, political, and legal matters, in a way that their rivals, the celibate monastic orders, could not match; hence they became royal advisors, drafters of documents, jurists, and teachers at court. So they produced a vast literature targeted to these functions, as exemplified by the sections of the Dharmashastras prescribing the "*dharma* of kings" as well as by the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, an early-CE free-standing treatise on statecraft. These assorted qualities of the Brahmin class allowed its expansion into new territories.

The theorists of Dharmashastra had identified its primary jurisdiction as the "land of the Aryas", essentially the Ganges plain and its fringes. Within those bounds were to be found the Brahmins who observe the "best practices" of holy people; beyond lay what were deemed "uncivilized" lands. From at least the first centuries of the

Common Era, however, Brahmins were settled by distant rulers on endowed lands, where they constituted spatially and administratively distinct, tax-free estates called *agrahara* ("prime share"). Such Brahmin settlements, whose spread can be tracked in the vast inscriptional record, were presented as disciplinary spaces analogous to monastic communities and were patronized by kings and other elites in analogous ways.

These religious endowments stipulated an expanding set of exemptions from tax payments and other obligations to the king, and created hereditary Brahmin enclaves administered by councils that were granted authority over villagers and farm laborers attached to the granted lands. This helped to cement Brahmin authority in the countryside despite the paucity, before the medieval period, of large-scale institutions such as royal temples and monasteries to which Brahmins would subsequently be attached. In this way, Brahmanical ritual norms and intellectual tradition were transmitted into the peripheries beyond its heartland (including Nepal, Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Indonesia) by ambitious local rulers keen to emulate the famous emperors of India. And with the Brahmins' norms and traditions, also their liturgical language, Sanskrit, spread to become the preferred medium of high discourse (for a time) in royal inscriptions, courtly literature, and learned discourse, even for Jains and Buddhists, and even in Southeast Asia. At the same time, the spread of endowed Brahmin settlements produced a supply of literate, well-networked professionals claiming expertise in secular, kingly matters, even in kingdoms that otherwise favored Buddhists or Jains in religious matters.

Summing up, despite the specialization and diversification of the religious and non-religious services provided over the centuries, the Brahmin class was successful in consolidating and retaining a near-monopoly of priestly prerogatives in the market for major Hindu deities – at least those possessing or aspiring to elite patronage. In addition to the characteristics that defined them as a class—birth, training, ascetical discipline, learning—the Brahmins were aided in their endeavor by some of the factors previously discussed, all of which can be read as barriers to competition. First, they produced book upon book in an endless, cumulative chain of commentary; this by itself endowed them with a cloak of expert knowledge ever more difficult to challenge. Second, they had a priestly language —Sanskrit—different from the Prakrits spoken (and then read) by the common people, which protected this knowledge. Third, and importantly, they were theoretically in charge of the myriad behavioral prescriptions, purity rules, and ethical norms for all social classes; provided their authority was acknowledged in the first place, this gave them a pervasive grip on individual lives. And fourth, unlike in other ancient societies such as Greece and Rome, in India states and elites were willing to outsource religious functions to priestly or monastic organizations, which managed all aspects of their cultic enterprises (as well as often serving as advisers, teachers, and high-level bureaucrats at court) in exchange for material support and substantial internal autonomy. Political patronage was thus essential—it was, however, itself the object of competition from the *shramana* sects, which, as we have seen, were often favored by the ruling elites.

Thus the long-term success of the Brahmins happened despite the competition from Buddhism and Jainism—or rather, thanks to it. This competition drove Vedic

Brahmanism to develop its own mode of household-asceticism, to diversify the services it offered to its royal and other elite patrons, and to endorse and lead the rise and establishment of Puranic Hinduism, which accommodated many of the Shramanic challenges with the turn to Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and the other Hindu sects. It is under the pressure of this competition that among the Hindus the practice of animal sacrifice gradually shrank, a vegetarian diet for the upper castes (first the prohibition of eating beef, and then of eating meat in general) slowly gained ground, and the path of renunciation and pursuit of *moksha* was exalted alongside the traditional path of the virtuous householder. This transformation was in time able to meet the Shramanic religions on their ground and to undercut and finally wither their base of popular and elite support. By the beginning of the second millennium CE, Hinduism had been able to contain the Jains and to drive the Buddhists to near-extinction in the subcontinent, and was thus well tested and set to meet the onslaught of Islam and finally emerge in the colonial era as the modern, "inclusivistic" Hinduism. The competition offered by sects from outside the orthodox establishment was fundamental to the evolution and long-term success of Hinduism.

6.2 Zoroastrianism

6.2.1 Zoroaster's Reforms

As we have seen in Sect. 4.2, even though a precise dating of Zoroaster's life is a moot question, the religion he founded was already between a millennium and half a millennium old when it entered recorded history in the sixth century BCE.[4] We now review its birth and development with a focus on highlighting both the similarities and the differences with traditional Iranian polytheism.

Zoroaster refers to himself as a fully qualified priest (*zaotar*), hence probably the scion of a priestly family. As such he must have begun training at the age of seven and been made a priest at fifteen. Like with the Vedic Indians, the training was carried out orally within hearing distance of a teacher, and consisted of learning rituals and doctrines and memorizing invocations and prayers. Thereafter he must have spent years wandering in a quest for higher knowledge from various teachers. He was thirty, according to the tradition, when revelation came to him, in the form of a series of visions in which he saw and talked to Ahura Mazda and six other shining divine figures. From that moment he felt empowered and called to a mission of spreading the newly gained truth for the rest of his life.

Zoroaster introduced three radical innovations into the framework of the old religion: he established a hierarchy in the pantheon, thus producing a supreme god; he created an antagonist to the supreme god and enjoined his people to shrink from worship of some of the previous "gods"; and he greatly expanded the purity ordinances and the ethical requirements for everyone, and therefore both the role of the

[4] The entire Zorastrianism section draws extensively on Ferrero (2021) and the references cited therein.

priests and the demands made of them. In contrast to our treatment of all the other religions in this book, we will have to address Zoroaster's doctrine of creation and cosmogony because it is intertwined with both his conception of the divine and his vision of the end of the world.

Beginning with the pantheon, Zoroaster proclaimed Ahura Mazda—who previously was already worshiped as the greatest of the three *ahuras*, the guardians of *asha*—to be the one and only eternal, uncreated God and Creator of everything that is good, including all other beneficent divinities. According to the new doctrine, the first act Ahura Mazda performed was the evocation of six lesser divinities of Zoroaster's own devising, the Amesha Spentas (Holy Immortals)—the six divine beings of Zoroaster's visions, forming a heptad with the Lord Wisdom himself; tellingly, a deified Asha was one of them. This evocation is described in Zoroastrian works in ways that suggest the essential unity of beneficent deity; in one text Ahura Mazda's creation of them is likened to the lighting of torches from a torch (Boyce 1979, 21). In turn, these six proceeded to evoke other divinities that are nothing but the beneficent gods of the old pantheon, including in particular the other two *ahuras*, Mithra and Apam Napat. All the divinities subordinate to Ahura Mazda, old and new, are collectively known as *yazatas* (beings worthy of worship). Then the six Amesha Spentas proceeded with their creator to shape the seven creations that make up the world, with each of them appointed as the maker and guardian of one creation—man belonging to Ahura Mazda himself. Thus the new theology was cast in the mold of the old cosmogony, which had envisioned the world as created by the gods in seven stages.

Zoroaster's theological reform did not stop at the reordering of the old pantheon. Opposite to, and coexisting with, Ahura Mazda he conceived a Hostile Spirit, Angra Mainyu, who was also uncreated and wholly malign. At their original encounter, these "two primal spirits, twins, renowned to be in conflict…. the good and the bad" (in the words of an ancient hymn; Boyce 1979, 20) made a deliberate choice, one choosing righteousness (*asha*) and the other falsehood (*drug*). This is the doctrine of dualism, which has often been thought to sit awkwardly with monotheism (as further discussed in Sect. 6.2.3 below). This primordial choice between good and evil prefigures the choice that all human beings are to make for themselves in this life, and it unfolded in the cosmological drama, for when Ahura Mazda and the other Immortals created the world, the Hostile Spirit set out to blight it precisely because it was good. So, according to the myth, he defiled the water, turning much of it salty, and the earth, creating deserts; next he withered the first plant, slew the first animal and the first man, and finally sullied the fire with smoke. The Amesha Spentas, however, reacted and turned his malicious acts to benefit: the plant was pounded and its juice scattered over the world to raise more plants; the seeds of the animal and the man were purified and more animals and men sprang from them.

Furthermore, a section of the old pantheon was disowned. Zoroaster singled out Indra and his associates, whom he called *daevas*, as amoral beings, destructive and warlike, and enjoined his followers not to worship but to shun them. These he saw as allies of Angra Mainyu in his evil works—wicked beings who, following him, chose *drug* instead of *asha*, or, in another rendering, who were begotten by him just as the Amesha Spentas were begotten by Ahura Mazda. So he put a part of the

traditional priestly functions beyond the pale. One might wonder how the mighty, fearsome, but also helpful, beneficent warrior-god Indra of the *Rig Veda* came to be perceived in Iran as the chief of the *daeva* band, the personification of *drug*, second only to Angra Mainyu himself (Boyce 1975, 201, 211, 251–252; Cohn 2001, 92–95). One answer may be that it reflected a developing cleavage in Zoroaster's own society between traditional, righteous cattle-rearing tribes and newly emerging cattle-raiding tribes headed by warrior chiefs (the "non-herders among the herders", in the words of an Avestan hymn); he identified with the former and abominated the latter, thus choosing right instead of might. But, beyond these historical specifics, the founding of a new religion cannot rely only on fine theological rethinking, which matters only to a priestly elite, but must be able to show some conspicuous, dramatic sign of discontinuity in the pantheon that makes a difference in the ordinary believers' life. Indra and the *daevas* naturally lent themselves to the role of bad characters, so they were henceforth branded as supreme embodiments of the forces of chaos, and therefore as archenemies of the restoration of the world to its original perfection that the prophet preached—the eschatology to which we now turn.

In the new doctrine, cosmic history was divided into three times, Creation, which was wholly good, being the first. Angra Mainyu's attack inaugurated the second time, that of Mixture, during which the world is a battleground between good and evil where the forces of darkness continue to inflict material ills and spiritual sufferings on mankind. To counter this, men must worship all beneficent divinities, seek their help, and in turn provide them with their help in the struggle to protect the good creation from evil. Thus it is incumbent upon every human being to make and uphold the same fundamental choice between *asha* and *drug* that started the cosmic drama, and to ally with the forces of good to overcome evil. Eventually the victory of righteousness will indeed happen in a great final event called Frasho-kereti (Making Wonderful), where Angra Mainyu and his minions will be utterly destroyed in a cataclysmic battle and the world restored to its original perfection. In this final battle, mankind will be led by the Saoshyant (Savior), a man born of the prophet's own seed miraculously preserved in a lake—in effect, a messiah. This conflagration will bring the end of history and usher in the third time, that of Separation, when goodness will again be utterly separated from evil, the latter will disappear, and men and women and all the *yazatas* will live together forever on earth in perfect goodness and peace. This was a radical departure from earlier ideas: the old idea that cooperation between men and gods was necessary to maintain *asha* was retained, but it was no longer directed to preserving the world as it is but to achieving its ultimate perfection. Thus by imputing men's sorrows not to the will of the creator but to the actions of the Hostile Spirit, Zoroaster gave humankind an explanation for the evils they have to endure in this life, as well as a moral purpose to strive for by submitting to the demands of the new doctrine.

The dualistic doctrine had far-reaching consequences for the conception of the hereafter. For Zoroaster, paradise was no more a preserve of high social rank as in the traditional religion but was attainable by everyone, women and men, master and servant, noble and commoner, on the basis of moral merit. At death, all souls undergo a judgment presided over by Mithra, who holds the scales of justice. Here the soul's

thoughts, words, and deeds are weighted, the good ones on one side, the bad ones on the other. If the good side weighs more heavily, the soul ascends to paradise; if the bad side is heavier, the soul sinks to hell, a place of torment presided over by Angra Mainyu —Zoroaster's own, wholly new concept. In case the two sides just balance out, the soul goes to an intermediate place of shadowy existence without suffering or joy, like the old underworld kingdom of the dead. Divine justice is unwavering and inflexible, and no capricious or merciful divine intervention, nor any intercession by the living, can change the balance of an individual's moral account. But this is not the end of it, as bliss is not perfect in paradise because the soul is disembodied. Complete happiness will have to wait until the end of time, at Frasho-kereti, when the soul will be reunited with its body in a general resurrection of the dead. Thereafter a Last Judgment will occur and divide for the last time the righteous from the wicked, both alive and dead. Then the wicked will be utterly destroyed body and soul, while the righteous' bodies will become immortal and unaging and lead an everlasting life of joy in the kingdom of God on earth.

Thus Zoroaster introduced to the world, in one stroke, the doctrines of individual judgment at death, heaven and hell, the future resurrection of the body, the final battle of good and evil, the messiah, the Last Judgment, and life everlasting on a perfected earth—that is, the apocalypse and the millennium. These doctrines were to have a long life in subsequent historical religions.

To entrench his theological and ethical doctrines, Zoroaster maintained but at the same time reformed the traditional observances. First, the great daily ritual, the *yasna*, was confirmed as fundamental but, while still centered on the offerings to water and fire, it was now dedicated to Ahura Mazda and the six Amesha Spentas. In later times the priests evolved a set liturgy for this ritual, incorporating in it Zoroaster's own *Gathas* and other ancient liturgical texts, which thus acquired a fixed, immutable form, and finally enclosing them within more recent texts. Second, the individual obligation of daily prayer, which used to be three times a day in pagan times, was now expanded to five times a day, and involved the believer first washing face, hands and feet and then praying while standing upright to face his Creator, his eyes fixed on the home fire, the symbol of righteousness. The final obligation was to celebrate seven annual high feasts, dedicated to Ahura Mazda and the six Amesha Spentas and to their seven creations – thus again fixing the essential doctrines in the minds of everyone. Each feast was celebrated communally, sharing the consecrated food with rich and poor alike. These high feasts were originally seasonal and pastoral festivals in pagan days, which Zoroaster re-dedicated to the divinities of his doctrine – thus making the transition easier for the people.

6.2.2 Spread and Development of Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism outlived its prophet and slowly developed for many centuries before entering recorded history, so knowledge of its infancy has to be gleaned from meager

indications in the Avesta and the tradition.[5] After his enlightening vision, Zoroaster preached his new doctrine to his fellow tribesmen for many years but met only rejection, after which he traveled to a new tribe where he managed to convert the prince and his court. The prince apparently went to war with neighboring chieftains in defense of the new religion and won, thus giving the prophet and his teaching an established home and shelter for the rest of his life. Thereafter, it seems, the faith slowly spread by mission and grassroots conversion among the eastern Iranian peoples, before it finally reached the Medes and Persians of western Iran centuries later. This missionary expansion was no doubt led by the priests.

Several aspects of the new religion required a break with the pagan community on the part of the convert. First, Zoroaster preached to women as well as men, to the poor and uneducated as well as to the wealthy and learned, offering to all who would follow his teaching and seek righteousness the hope of salvation in heaven while threatening with hell and ultimate annihilation all, however mighty, who would choose evil. This involved a sharp break with the old aristocratic and priestly tradition which, as we have seen, promised heaven to the elite and consigned the common people and the women to the shadows of an underground kingdom of the dead. Second, most difficult and divisive for all the people must have been the utter rejection of *daeva* worship, a rejection which was feared to bring down the wrath of those beings on the whole community. Traditionally, Iranians used to propitiate both the evil powers, to turn aside their malice, and the good powers, to secure their protection – a "kind of double insurance" which was "an entirely normal religious instinct", also found with the Vedic Indians (Zaehner 1961, 123). As a consequence, this rejection was likely the most conspicuous mark of one's break with the old beliefs and adherence to the new ones; it is significant that abjuration of the *daevas* figures prominently in the ancient confession of faith, which is still routinely recited today but seems to incorporate the original avowal made by converts in the early days. Relatedly, Zoroastrian believers, men and women alike, are required to this day to wear an outward badge of membership in the faith, the sacred girdle (*kusti*), which is first put on when reaching maturity and then untied and retied every day of their life. Third, and crucial, there was the code of purity laws, which became so characteristic of Zoroastrianism as to set it in a class apart from most other religions.

The purity laws are rooted both in Zoroastrianism's dualistic doctrine and in its linking of spiritual and material. The seven creations had been brought into being by Ahura Mazda in a state of perfection and were then marred by Angra Mainyu; hence, preventing or reducing any of these blemishes—dirt, disease, stench, decay, etc.—contributes to the defense of the good creation and the fight against evil, and so ultimately to the achievement of Frasho-kereti. Every member of the community is thus permanently enlisted to fight evil through the ordinary tasks of daily life. Some of the rules probably go back to Indo-Iranian times, since Brahmanism has similar prescriptions regarding cultic purity; but Zoroastrian rules regarding daily living proliferated down the centuries, even though it is impossible exactly to determine

[5] This section is based on the detailed treatment in Boyce (1975, Chaps. 10, 12) and the summary in Boyce (1979, Chap. 4).

which observances were original with Zoroaster and which were later extensions at the hands of generations of priests. Moreover, to this day high-caste Hindus are bound by similar rules against defilement when practicing a domestic ritual or visiting a temple, but these rules are differentiated by caste and come to the point of excluding from rituals certain groups which, owing to their occupations, are thought to be too inherently impure to be cleansed (Flood 1996, 298–300). By contrast, Zoroastrian rules know of no caste distinctions and are incumbent upon every member of the community, reaching into the normal run of daily life, even though, like in India, they naturally weigh more heavily on priests, as we will see. Furthermore, the divide between good and evil was all-encompassing and knew no middle ground: as an ancient text says, "all actions and ways of behaving are either meritorious or sinful", no neutral areas are recognized (cited in Boyce 1975, 294), unlike in Islam.

The purity code must have been an important reason for the failure of Zoroastrianism to spread beyond Iranian peoples: the demands are too irksome and the self-discipline needed too strict for anyone who was not accustomed to it from birth, while since Iranian paganism knew some of the same rules, the difficulty would have been less severe for Iranian converts. Moreover, the stringency of the rules explains why, even though historically the religion was fully open to conversion, no unbeliever is allowed to be present at a religious service, since no unbeliever will ever keep all the Zoroastrian purity laws. This self-segregation is in contrast with the liberality with which sympathetic Gentiles ("God-fearers") were admitted to the synagogues in the Diaspora of late-Second Temple Judaism, which apparently was a key engine of soft proselytizing (Ferrero 2014b). While this contrast must stem from the different workings of the respective purity codes, it too functioned as a disincentive to conversion.

Turning to the content of the purity rules, first of all people should keep themselves scrupulously clean in person, clothing, and abode, and keep the other six creations likewise healthy and unsullied. But it is the rules concerning water and fire—the central elements of the Zoroastrian cult—that set its believers apart from all other peoples. In most cultures, water and fire are regarded as the chief cleansing agents, used to restore an unclean or defiled object, person or place to purity. In stark contrast, in Zoroastrianism it is water and fire which, being among the seven good creations, must be kept clean. Nothing impure should be allowed in direct contact with a natural source of water; if anything ritually unclean is to be washed, water should be drawn off for this purpose, and the impure object should first be cleansed with cattle urine (because cattle was the paragon of the "good" creation – and of course because of its high ammonia content, hence a disinfectant), then dried with sand or in sunlight, and only then washed in water. Similarly with fire, only clean, dry wood and pure offerings may be laid upon the flames, special care must be taken lest cooking pots spill over and sully the hearth fire, and burning rubbish is unthinkable. Dry and clean waste might be buried, but the rest was thrown into a small windowless building and then periodically destroyed with acid.

As regards plants and animals, in striking contrast with other religions loaded with purity rules such as Judaism and Islam, Zoroastrianism in general has no food prohibitions. However, for plant and animal, as for man, perfection is seen in healthy

maturity; hence it is sinful to cut down a sapling tree and kill a lamb or a calf. Furthermore, all creatures harmful or repulsive to man, from insects to reptiles to beasts of prey—collectively called *khrafstra*—are regarded as the work of Angra Mainyu, so killing them is highly meritorious. Down to modern times communities have engaged in ritual killing expeditions around the village—not the champions of biodiversity!

Death is regarded as the chief single cause of pollution, and the greatest pollution is from a human corpse. This explains the practice of exposure of the body, as it secures the swift destruction of the polluting flesh. Since medieval times the place of exposure has been a funerary tower (*dakhma*); in ancient times it was simply a bare mountain side or stretch of stony ground, so that the body would not come into contact with the good earth or water or plants, after which the dried bones were buried to await Judgment Day. In the same vein, dead bodies were handled only by professional corpse-bearers, who submitted to an ordeal of ritual precautions and cleansing procedures.

Apart from putrefying flesh, the other chief source of pollution is anything that issues from the living body, whether in sickness or in health: not only excrement, but also blood, saliva, semen, dead skin, cut nails and hair. As a consequence, daily life becomes hedged about with regulations of all sorts. Thus detailed prescriptions surround the disposal of nail and hair trimmings; you should not spit, sneeze, drink from a common vessel or eat from a common dish. Above all, the doctrine of the impurity of blood has pressed hard on women. Every woman during her monthly menses was ritually unclean and had to withdraw from her family, keeping away even from her tiny children, and not even saying her private prayers—since one must be pure to approach the divine. Childbirth was likewise regarded as a heavy pollution, requiring similar isolation of the new mother for 40 days.

Since it was impossible for a woman, and very difficult for a man, to avoid all ritual uncleanness, purification rites were necessary, as in all societies that have purity laws. The simplest ones, involving washing from head to foot, were performed by people at home, but the rituals prescribed for more serious contaminations were administered by priests with recitation of mantras. The most elaborate of these, prescribed for the heaviest contaminations—such as touching a dead body or mingling with impure strangers while traveling—was called *barashnom* and was a nine-day affair, in which the person retired to a secluded precinct and there underwent successive triple cleansings with consecrated cattle urine, sand, and water.

The purity laws weighed particularly heavily on the priests, who had to be "the cleanest of the clean" for their intermediation with divinity to be effective. In addition to the restrictions incumbent on the laity, a priest would not eat food prepared by a lay person, not to mention an unbeliever, nor make a physical link with anyone else such as a common cloth while eating. As just mentioned, the priests attended to the purification rituals for the laity, and themselves underwent *barashnom* many times in their lives in preparation for the highest ceremonies.

At some point, a practice established itself of undergoing *barashnom* vicariously, either for the living or the dead. A devout person might go through it for a relative who committed suicide, or who was drowned or burnt to death (both of which acts are

sinful as they contaminate the water or the fire with death). Among the living, people who have both means and a high opportunity cost of time, such as wealthy merchants or farmers, may hire someone to take the purification in their stead when they incur pollution; and since the purer and better trained the performer, the more effective the ritual will be, it is priests who are naturally chosen as substitutes and paid for it. One can see the doctrinal logic of this development—some harrowing deaths are involuntary, so it seems only fair to afford these people a chance of salvation; and then if the dead can be cleansed by proxy, why not the living too? Regardless, the whole idea of interceding for the dead seems alien to Zoroaster's teaching of everyone's personal responsibility for their own fate (Boyce 1975, 319). It is, however, an element of continuity with the ancient Indo-Iranian tradition of caring for the souls of the departed, and it could therefore be seen as a tempering of the stern original doctrine to accommodate the new converts as the religion expanded.

As we have seen in Sect. 4.2.2, priests were important in the traditional Iranian religion, as were their cousins among the Vedic Indians, and formed a specialized profession, entry to which was passed down along the male line. But no doubt Zoroaster's reforms and their subsequent elaboration greatly increased the demands on them, and hence their social role, even in the long centuries before Zoroastrianism surfaced to history in the sixth century BCE. This was in part a self-reinforcing process as it was the priestly scholastics themselves who, in the course of time, extended and codified the liturgy, the purity rules, and the purification rituals, which in turn gave them an ever more prominent and ubiquitous role. To summarize, Zoroastrian priests performed the daily *yasna* ceremony, which in its developed form takes about two hours; performed services for the laity at initiation, marriage, and death, as well as on special family occasions; performed the ritual services for the community at the seven annual high feasts; administered the *barashnom* and other purification rites to the laity upon request; frequently underwent the *barashnom* themselves to ensure their fitness to their tasks; and underwent it as proxies for lay people when hired to do so.

Thus, since the prehistoric period, the laity depended on the priests for their religious life, and the priests depended on the laity for their livelihood as they lived off the fees for their services. A close, usually hereditary bond formed between lay and priestly families to support and stabilize this exchange. This close relationship has continued into modern times, during and after the age of state religion.

From the sixth century BCE, Zoroastrianism became for some twelve centuries an imperial religion, endowed with court chaplains, fixed ceremonial places, and the newly invented, signature Zoroastrian shrines—the fire temples (Boyce 1982, 221–225, 228–230; 1979, 63–66). The priests also became teachers in elite schools and at court, as in any state religion. All of this further enhanced the social role of the priesthood and multiplied its numbers, bringing in its wake high incomes and political influence. As a consequence, at least in the Sasanian period, if not before, the profession acquired a hierarchical structure headed by a chief priest who oversaw orthodox doctrine and practice, which makes it possible for historians to speak of a Zoroastrian "church".

The imperial era waned with the fall of the Sasanian Empire to the Muslim conquest in the seventh century CE. Thereafter, in the long age of repression and decline to this day, the priesthood basically returned to what it was in its earlier pre-state days, with the addition of the specialized service of fire temples which became a fixture of Zoroastrian communities—as well as an added demand on their resources.

6.2.3 Discussion: Zoroastrianism's Endurance

As we have seen, Zoroaster did not overthrow but reformed the theology and practices of Iranian polytheism, which made his doctrines easier for both the people and the priests to accept. This selective continuity was facilitated by the fact that, alone among the known historical founders of great religions, Zoroaster was a trained, working priest of the traditional religion. Such a start helps explain the new religion's early success, but it is its capacity to survive the ebb and flow of fortune through the millennia basically unreformed in its essentials that poses a challenge to rational analysis. For, despite the unrelenting pressure from Islam since the Muslim conquest of Iran, Zoroastrianism still survives today in tiny communities in Iran and India (there called the Parsis), who have remained unswervingly loyal to the traditional beliefs and practices of the faith, remote as they are. This extraordinary endurance calls for explanation. Furthermore, unlike Jesus of Nazareth and many early Christians, Zoroaster was not martyred and martyrdom has no place in the religion's tradition; and unlike Moses, other Jewish prophets, Jesus, many Christian saints and martyrs, and the prophet Muhammad, neither he nor his followers are reported as performing miracles. Thus, two of the most powerful engines of historical conversion to monotheism and loyalty to it (as modeled in Ferrero 2016) are missing in Zoroastrianism, which makes its success and persistence all the more remarkable. We will argue that a key to the explanation can be found in the peculiar Zoroastrian wedding of eschatology and purity laws, but for this it is necessary to first assess its monotheistic claims.

Two issues have long made it problematic to identify Zoroastrianism as true monotheism: the presence of lesser deities and dualism. Before hastening to conclude that the Amesha Spentas and the other *yazatas* compromise the purity of monotheism (as did many modern European Christian scholars—see Boyce 1975, IX–XI), it is well to consider that the other historical monotheisms too made room for other figures endowed with supernatural powers to bridge the gulf between the exalted, remote Creator God and the human world: the angels in all of them (whose conception in post-exilic Judaism was apparently developed after the pattern of the Amesha Spentas; Boyce and Grenet 1991, 404–405), the saints and the Virgin Mary in several Christian churches, the other persons of the Trinity in all of Christianity. Despite the vast differences with Zoroastrian theology, the common thread is that all these beings are subordinate to the Godhead as helpers or (in the case of the persons of the Trinity) co-equals, hence they do not pursue different interests and are worshiped jointly with the Godhead, not separately; therefore, to introduce a key concept of our comparative

analysis (Chap. 7), the supplicant's dilemma does not arise here. Also, while the three divine persons, Mary, and the angels are not seen as specialized entities appointed to different realms of creation or fields of human life, the Roman Catholic saints to some extent are worshiped as special patrons of things, people, or activities, somewhat like the *yazatas*. Rather, the lesser Zoroastrian divinities are distinctive in two ways: most of them have their origin in the pagan pantheon, and still they are worthy of worship in their own right as specialized protectors of the various realms and functions of creation under the lordship of their creator, Ahura Mazda. This makes them more than angels—but on the other hand it is significant that they are usually not called "gods" in the Avesta. So they represent a concept unique to Zoroastrianism and their Avestan appellation, *yazatas*, is best left untranslated (Boyce 1975, 195–196). The pagan origin of the *yazatas* is important because it must have made conversion relatively easy for the Iranian peoples, as it did not involve a complete turnaround of beliefs.

Dualism is one way for a religion to address the problem of evil which is inherent in monotheism—how can a God who is thought to be all-powerful, all-knowing, and wholly good tolerate evil? Zoroaster's answer is a radical, unbridgeable separation between the two principles: God did not create evil, nor does he tolerate it; rather, evil has always existed from before time, uncreated and personified as the Hostile Spirit, but will meet its end at Frasho-kereti someday; and it is God's purpose and unceasing work to fight it to its extinction with the help of all his divine and worldly creatures. So one could say that while God is not quite the One and Only so long as the present time of Mixture lasts, he will indeed "become" such at the End, as the final victory of the good over evil is not to be doubted; and with the disappearance of Angra Mainyu and his cohorts, dualism will leave the field to unqualified monotheism. Other monotheistic religions which, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, posit that God is the creator of everything, including evil, were driven to explain evil by resort to fallen angels (like Satan) or inferior supernatural beings who vie with God for man's soul, thus replacing a philosophical conundrum with another (Boyce 1982, 195; Cohn 2001, 182 ff.; Pagels 1996).[6]

The strength of the Zoroastrian solution to the riddle of evil is that it lays the foundation of a militant faith[7]: it involves the faithful in a struggle that will continue

[6] That the dualistic belief was problematic even within the religion is indicated by the fact that it sparked a monistic heresy, known as Zurvanism (Boyce 1979, 67–70; 1982, 231–242). It seems to have originated in late Achaemenian times from speculation in some priestly circles, who imagined that a personification of Time, Zurvan, pre-existed to, and was the "father" of, both Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. He remained a remote First Cause, was never the object of worship, and changed nothing in the traditional observances. Nevertheless, it was indeed a heresy as it betrayed Zoroaster's fundamental doctrine of the utter separation of good and evil. Zurvanism became the official state religion of the Sasanians but, when state support waned after the Muslim conquest, the orthodox doctrine came back into its own and Zurvanism disappeared without a trace.

[7] Hint of a militant faith immediately brings Islam to mind, but the contrast between the two religions is sharp. Islam makes it incumbent upon every competent Muslim to join the struggle to bring the whole world into submission to Islam—that is, *jihad*; in contrast, for a Zoroastrian the struggle to perfect the world and defeat evil is primarily a struggle within one's daily life and immediate surroundings. Conversion of infidels to Zoroastrianism is indeed desirable but must occur through

unabated till the end of days, and which, in the meantime, thoroughly pervades their daily life through the prescribed rituals and the observance of the purity laws, allowing no temporary leave or excuse. Such a stern system of moral and behavioral demands makes acceptance difficult to begin with, but exit or lapsing just as difficult for the same reasons. The difficulty of entry, as discussed in the last section, largely accounts for the fact that Zoroastrianism—in principle a universal religion for the whole world—in fact historically became a national religion of the Iranian peoples.[8] The difficulty of exit, on the other hand, goes a long way toward explaining the extraordinary permanence of the religion against all odds—something that deserves some more discussion.

Zoroastrian doctrines had a profound influence on Second-Temple Judaism (conventionally 515 BCE—70 CE) and, through it, on early Christianity.[9] It began with the prophet called Second Isaiah during the Jews' Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE and continued through the following centuries via the sustained contact between Iranian and Jewish neighbors in the Near East. Among these doctrines, the most important were the notion of a Creator God, which helped turn the religion of Yahweh from a tribal religion to true monotheism; a purity code centered on individuals' daily lives rather than just regulation of cultic matters, which in time enabled Judaism to survive the destruction of the Temple; and, most important for our purposes, the expectation of an end of time that was to bring the utter defeat of evil, a Last Judgment, and a kingdom of God on earth, which became the centerpiece of Jewish, and then Christian, apocalyptic. As is well known, infant Christianity, dismayed at the non-event of the Second Coming of Christ, waged a long-drawn-out struggle to shelve its millenarian eschatology and turn into an established church, thus coming to terms with the need to survive for an indefinite time in the Roman Empire of this world. In stark contrast, Zoroastrianism down the centuries never bracketed out its apocalyptic expectation, and yet its belief in this respect must have been as hardly tested as Christianity's (Cohn 2001, 99–101). The *Gathas* do convey a sense of urgency, suggesting that the "Making Wonderful" was expected to happen in the very near future, so the first generations of Zoroastrians must have been as bitterly disappointed as the early Christians were to be, more than a thousand years later. They must have rested their further hopes on the coming of the future world savior, the Saoshyant, in whom Zoroaster would be, as it were, reincarnated, and who would fulfill his prophecy; Zoroaster himself seems to have foreshadowed it. Still, in what seems a striking rehearsal for the future Christian drama, even the Saoshyant failed to arrive. How could the Zoroastrian millenarian belief survive such a disconfirmation?

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their recognition of the believers' moral superiority—witness the remarkable tolerance of other religions which (with some exceptions in late Sasanian times) was a distinctive mark of all three Iranian empires.

[8] However, after coming under Parthian rule in the first century BCE, Armenia became a predominantly Zoroastrian land until it converted to Christianity (Boyce 1979, 84–85).

[9] For a detailed comparison of texts and analysis of historical developments see Boyce (1982, 43–47, 188–195), Boyce and Grenet (1991, 401–436, 440–446), Smith (1971), Cohn (2001, Chaps. 4, 5, 8–13).

Part of the answer must be sought in the fact that, unlike Christianity, Zoroastrianism for more than two thousand years did not have to live under heathen rule: in prehistoric times it grew and spread through a network of petty chieftainships, and then it became the official religion of a great empire. More fundamentally, however, a key factor to account for the difference was the purity laws. Early Christianity shed the Jewish purity code and rested its alienation from the surrounding pagan society entirely on the prohibition of idolatry and its moral implications, not on behavioral rules; hence, any sustained apocalyptic expectation would have had to rely purely on faith. By contrast, Zoroastrianism translated the apocalyptic belief into a struggle between good and evil in which everyone was involved at all times and to which he or she was to contribute in every smallest way, and embedded this struggle in a strenuous system of observances shot through with purity regulations. This essentially turned eschatology into daily behavior for all believers, and correspondingly gave priests an enormous, indispensable role as overseers of daily life. This personal, all-embracing twist to apocalypticism was made even more compelling by the fact that Zoroastrianism, unlike Christianity, had no room for asceticism, monasticism, or self-chosen heightened piety: all men and women, led by their priests, were equally enlisted full-time.

This rooting of eschatology into daily behavior for normal times, without any set deadline, seems unique to Zoroastrianism, as other millenarian movements either fizzled out or normalized when the millennium failed to materialize (Ferrero 2014a).[10] Indeed, this religion seems to have maintained not just orthodoxy but orthopraxis more or less unabridged and unreformed through its periods of rise and decline, down to modern times. This highlights a problem that underlies the now standard approach of the new economics of religion (Iyer 2016), and at the same time suggests a solution to it. Building on Iannaccone's (1992) seminal paper, this approach models a religious sect as a club whose members collectively produce a local, excludable public good, or club good. As all collective groups, religious clubs are plagued by free riding. To reduce free riding, sects impose costly sacrifices on members in the form of restrictions or prohibitions on behavior (diet, drink, dress, sex, social intercourse, deviant beliefs). The economic rationale for this is that of an efficient tax on externalities: instead of subsidizing participation, which is not easily observable, sects resort to taxation of secular consumption, reducing the value of outside activities. As a result, fewer people join but those who do supply more intense participation to everyone's benefit; hence the sacrifice is efficient, not irrational. This explains why today strict churches in a competitive religious market are strong and grow.

The effectiveness of these prohibitions, however, crucially depends on interaction with outsiders and so cannot be independent of the existence and strength of the

[10] Manichaeism—perhaps the most important dualistic religion of later times, and itself an offshoot of Zoroastrianism mixed with Gnosticism—never normalized and became a very successful competitor of Christianity for a few centuries after its foundation in the third century CE, but eventually died out under heavy persecution. Opposite to Zoroastrianism, however, it sought man's salvation in the rejection and ultimate destruction of the material world, not in its redemption, which must go some way toward explaining its demise.

competition. When the religion has expanded so much that it includes most of the relevant population and the competition is in disarray, alternative activities have little value and hence their sacrifice has little effect; that is, behavioral prohibitions are subject to diminishing returns to size. For example, drinking alcohol is typically a social activity, so a prohibition on drinking reduces the attractiveness of social intercourse with outsiders and enhances the value of activities inside the group. This makes sense in the USA, where for example the Mormons—who are forbidden from drinking—are a minority and secular activities compete for the members' time and effort; but in a society where nearly everybody is a Mormon the usefulness of prohibiting drinking sinks. This is a problem that the club model of the sect, as it stands, is not equipped to address. Zoroastrianism's unique wedding of apocalyptic belief and individual everyday behavior provides one way out of this problem: by tying one's prospect of salvation to one's own contribution to the daily battle of good and evil and not to everyone else's choice of behavior, it breaks out of the diminishing returns trap and enables this strenuous religion to survive enormous changes in its numbers unscathed.

6.3 Main Takeaways

Starting in the fifth century BCE, the primacy of Vedic Brahmanism was challenged by the rise of ascetic movements, including Jainism and Buddhism, by the need to come to terms with the local, non-Aryan gods worshiped by the indigenous peoples among whom the Vedic people settled, and by the withering of its traditional base of support and patronage—the petty chiefdoms which were being replaced by new, urbanized states and empires. To survive, the Brahmins switched to a new theology, taking the lead of the new Hindu sects, defined their own form of asceticism, and diversified the range of services they could offer to royal and other elite patrons.

The new theology replaced the great Vedic gods with figures that were only marginal in the Vedas but were now moved to center stage: Vishnu and Shiva, and with them the Devi (the Goddess). These three became the eponymous deities of the great sectarian traditions of Hinduism. Around each of them clustered a plethora of minor gods and goddesses and of incarnations and specializations of the chief deity to particular roles or concerns, which often allowed the affiliation of local varieties or indigenous deities into the main Hindu framework. Each of these eponymous deities was claimed as supreme god, all-powerful ruler of the universe, taking care of all the material and spiritual needs of their worshipers and promising them liberation from the cycle of rebirth; each major deity, however, recognized the "other" major deities as junior partners, honored as secondary figures with their own limited jurisdiction. In this way, jurisdictional overlap was made harmless and divine jealousy was effectively tamed. Underlying this noncompetitive conception of the deity was the burgeoning Hindu theology that views all the multiple divine persons as mere reflexes or partial manifestations of the ultimate divine essence, the formless Brahman; all of them are equivalent routes to liberation.

The Vedic sacrifice gradually lost ground to the sectarian ritual, focused on devotion to a single personal deity. This was increasingly conducted in a temple or through a festival and typically presided over by priests, who were still the Brahmins. Animal sacrifice was gradually replaced by vegetable offerings due to the ascetic ideal of non-harm, although it has persisted to this day in certain offerings to Shiva or to a goddess.

The Brahmins responded to the ascetic movements by inventing their own form of asceticism: the householder-ascetic, a ritually observant married householder who follows a system of mildly ascetic regimens and purity rules as, in effect, an ascetic-in-the-world. This vocation was then arranged in a sequence of successive stages of life: the chaste Veda student, the householder, the forest hermit, and the wandering mendicant, thus accommodating other models of celibate asceticism. As ascetics-in-the-world, Brahmins could then claim that their expertise extended to social, political, and legal matters, in a way that their rivals, the celibate monastic orders, could not match; hence they became royal advisors, drafters of documents, jurists, and teachers at court. These assorted qualities of the Brahmin class allowed its expansion into new territories, in the form of Brahmin settlements established by distant rulers on endowed lands; so Brahmanism was able to expand its norms, traditions, and secular expertise into much of South Asia. These transformations were in time able to meet the ascetic religions on their ground and to undercut their base of support. By the beginning of the second millennium CE, Hinduism had been able to contain the Jains and to drive the Buddhists to near-extinction in the subcontinent. The competition offered by sects from outside the orthodox establishment was thus fundamental to the evolution and long-term success of Hinduism.

The prophet Zoroaster, a priest of the old Iranian religion, introduced three radical theological innovations. First, he established a hierarchy in the pantheon, proclaiming Ahura Mazda to be the one and only eternal, uncreated God and Creator of everything that is good, including all other beneficent divinities subordinated to him. The latter included the beneficent gods of the old pantheon (like Varuna and Mithra) and six new entities, each appointed as maker and guardian of one of the realms of creation. Second, opposite to Ahura Mazda and co-eternal with him there was a Hostile Spirit, forever fighting for evil against good, and a section of the old pantheon – Indra and his associates—was cast off as demons and allied to the spirit of evil. The struggle between good and evil was to involve all humans in a daily commitment until the end of days. This was expected to be a great final battle in which the forces of evil will be utterly destroyed, whereupon men and beneficent divinities will live together forever on a perfected earth.

As a consequence of this dualistic doctrine, the conception of the afterlife changed radically. Paradise became attainable by everyone on the basis of moral merit; at death, souls undergo a judgment and then either ascend to heaven or sink to hell. At the end of days there will be a Last Judgment when the body of the righteous will be resurrected and made immortal. These innovations —heaven and hell, the apocalypse and the millennium—were bequeathed to subsequent monotheistic religions. The rituals (the great daily ritual, the prayers, and the seasonal festivals) were maintained but rededicated to the new divine beings.

Thus many elements of continuity made the transition to the new religion easier for the Iranians, but the rejection of some of the old gods tested their willingness to convert. Then, in the course of time, the purity laws for ordinary people—the third innovation—were extended in a way that is probably without comparison in other religions, thus enlisting every member of the community in the fight against evil through the ordinary tasks of daily life. This goes a long way toward explaining the endurance of Zoroastrianism despite the unrelenting pressure from Islam.

The purity laws weighed particularly heavily on the priests, who had to be "the cleanest of the clean". The priests' role was greatly enhanced, as they were in charge not only of all the ritual services but also of the purification rites made necessary by the stringency of the purity rules. They led the missionary expansion of Zoroastrianism to all the Iranian peoples. With the rise of the Persian empires, the priests were further elevated and given a new charge, the fire temples.