

It has influenced Star Wars and Game of Thrones – and characters as diverse as Voltaire, Nietzsche and Freddie Mercury have cited it as an inspiration. So what is Zoroastrianism? Joobin Bekhrad finds out. By Joobin Bekhrad 6 April 2017

Talk of ‘us’ and ‘them’ has long dominated Iran-related politics in the West. At the same time, Christianity has frequently been used to define the identity and values of the US and Europe, as well as to contrast those values with those of a Middle Eastern ‘other’. Yet, a brief glance at an ancient religion – still being practised today – suggests that what many take for granted as wholesome Western ideals, beliefs and culture may in fact have Iranian roots.

Even the idea of Satan is a fundamentally Zoroastrian one

It is generally believed by scholars that the ancient Iranian prophet Zarathustra (known in Persian as Zartosht and Greek as Zoroaster) lived sometime between 1500 and 1000 BC. Prior to Zarathustra, the ancient Persians worshipped the deities of the old Irano-Aryan religion, a counterpart to the Indo-Aryan religion that would come to be known as Hinduism. Zarathustra, however, condemned this practice, and preached that God alone – Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom – should be worshipped. In doing so, he not only contributed to the great divide between the Iranian and Indian Aryans, but arguably introduced to mankind its first monotheistic faith.



Zoroaster likely lived between 1500 and 1000 BC, but some scholarship suggests he may have been a contemporary of Persian emperors Cyrus the Great and Darius I

The idea of a single god was not the only essentially Zoroastrian tenet to find its way into other major faiths, most notably the ‘big three’: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The concepts of Heaven and Hell, Judgment Day and the final revelation of the world, and angels and demons all originated in the teachings of Zarathustra, as well as the later canon of Zoroastrian literature they inspired. Even the idea of Satan is a fundamentally Zoroastrian one; in fact, the entire faith of Zoroastrianism is predicated on the struggle between God and the forces of goodness and light (represented by the Holy Spirit, Spenta Manyu) and Ahriman, who presides over the forces of darkness and evil. While man has to choose to which side he belongs, the religion teaches that ultimately, God will prevail, and even those condemned to hellfire will enjoy the blessings of Paradise (an Old Persian word).



Zoroastrianism may have been the first monotheistic religion, and its emphasis on dualities, such as heaven and hell, appear in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

How did Zoroastrian ideas find their way into the Abrahamic faiths and elsewhere? According to scholars, many of these concepts were introduced to the Jews of Babylon upon being liberated by the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great. They trickled into mainstream Jewish thought, and figures like Beelzebub emerged. And after Persia’s conquests of Greek lands during the heyday of the Achaemenid Empire, Greek philosophy took a different course. The Greeks had previously believed humans had little agency, and that their fates were at the mercy of their many gods, who often acted according to whim and fancy. After their acquaintance with Iranian religion and philosophy, however, they began to feel more as if they were the masters of their destinies, and that their decisions were in their own hands.

Could Dante have been influenced by Zoroastrianism?

Though it was once the state religion of Iran and widely practised in other regions inhabited by Persian peoples (eg Afghanistan, Tajikistan and much of Central Asia), Zoroastrianism is today a minority religion in Iran, and boasts few adherents worldwide. The religion’s cultural legacy, however, is another matter. Many Zoroastrian traditions continue to underpin and distinguish Iranian culture, and outside the country, it has also had a noted impact, particularly in Western Europe.

Zoroastrian rhapsody

Centuries before Dante’s Divine Comedy, the Book of Arda Viraf described in vivid detail a journey to Heaven and Hell. Could Dante have possibly heard about the cosmic Zoroastrian traveller’s report, which assumed its final form around the 10th Century AD? The similarity of the two works is uncanny, but one can only offer hypotheses.



Zoroastrians worship in fire temples, such as this one in Yazd, Iran – they believe fire and water are the twin agents of purity and necessary for ritual cleansing

Elsewhere, however, the Zoroastrian ‘connection’ is less murky. The Iranian prophet appears holding a sparkling globe in Raphael’s 16th Century School of Athens. Likewise, the Clavis Artis, a late 17th/early 18th-Century German work on alchemy was dedicated to Zarathustra, and featured numerous Christian-themed depictions of him. Zoroaster “came to be regarded [in Christian Europe] as a master of magic, a philosopher and an astrologer, especially after the Renaissance,” says Ursula Sims-Williams of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.



Towers of Silence, such as this one in Chilpyk, Uzbekistan, are where Zoroastrians would leave the bodies of the dead to be consumed by birds

Today, mention of the name Zadig immediately brings to mind the French fashion label Zadig & Voltaire. While the clothes may not be Zoroastrian, the story behind the name certainly is. Written in the mid-18th Century by none other than Voltaire, Zadigtells the tale of its eponymous Persian Zoroastrian hero, who, after a series of trials and tribulations, ultimately weds a Babylonian princess. Although flippant at times and not rooted in history, Voltaire’s philosophical tale sprouted from a genuine interest in Iran also shared by other leaders of the Enlightenment. So enamoured with Iranian culture was Voltaire that he was known in his circles as ‘Sa’di’. In the same spirit, Goethe’s West-East Divan, dedicated to the Persian poet Hafez, featured a Zoroastrian-themed chapter, while Thomas Moore lamented the fate of Iran’s Zoroastrians in Lalla Rookh.

Freddie Mercury was intensely proud of his Persian Zoroastrian heritage

It wasn’t only in Western art and literature that Zoroastrianism made its mark; indeed, the ancient faith also made a number of musical appearances on the European stage.

In addition to the priestly character Sarastro, the libretto of Mozart’s The Magic Flute is laden with Zoroastrian themes, such as light versus darkness, trials by fire and water, and the pursuit of wisdom and goodness above all else. And the late Farrokh Bulsara – aka Freddie Mercury – was intensely proud of his Persian Zoroastrian heritage. “I’ll always walk around like a Persian popinjay,” he once remarked in an interview, “and no one’s gonna stop me, honey!” Likewise, his sister Kashmira Cooke in a 2014 interview reflected on the role of Zoroastrianism in the family. “We as a family were very proud of being Zoroastrian,” she said. “I think what [Freddie’s] Zoroastrian faith gave him was to work hard, to persevere, and to follow your dreams.”

Ice and fire

When it comes to music, though, perhaps no single example best reflects the influence of Zoroastrianism’s legacy than Richard Strauss’ Thus Spoke Zarathustra, which famously provided the booming backbone to much of Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey. The score owes its inspiration to Nietzsche’s magnum opus of the same name, which follows a prophet named Zarathustra, although many of the ideas Nietzsche proposes are, in fact, anti-Zoroastrian. The German philosopher rejects the dichotomy of good and evil so characteristic of Zoroastrianism – and, as an avowed atheist, he had no use for monotheism at all.



Raphael’s The School of Athens, finished in 1511, includes a figure, seen in this detail from the larger work, many historians think is Zoroaster, holding a globe

Freddie Mercury and Zadig & Voltaire aside, there are other overt examples of Zoroastrianism’s impact on contemporary popular culture in the West. Ahura Mazda served as the namesake for the Mazda car company, as well as the inspiration for the legend of Azor Ahai – a demigod who triumphs over darkness – in George RR Martin’s Game of Thrones, as many of its fans discovered last year. As well, one could well argue that the cosmic battle between the Light and Dark sides of the Force in Star Wars has, quite ostensibly, Zoroastrianism written all over it.



Freddie Mercury, the legendary lead singer of Queen, drew inspiration from the Zoroastrian faith of his Persian family

For all its contributions to Western thought, religion and culture, relatively little is known about the world’s first monotheistic faith and its Iranian founder. In the mainstream, and to many US and European politicians, Iran is assumed to be the polar opposite of everything the free world stands for and champions. Iran’s many other legacies and influences aside, the all but forgotten religion of Zoroastrianism just might provide the key to understanding how similar ‘we’ are to ‘them’.