

Zoroastrians in Iran



1. A cycle of life

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest but perhaps most misunderstood religions still practised today. Its spiritual doctrines on heaven, hell and resurrection heavily influenced Islam and Christianity. But emigration, conversion to Islam and centuries of oppression mean their numbers in Iran have dwindled to around 45,000.



2. Tending the flames

Zoroastrians are often incorrectly labelled as fire-worshippers and have at times suffered persecution as a result. For Zoroastrians, fire represents a pure creation and is a symbol of their religion,

much like a cross is to Christians. The fire in this temple has, according to one of the priests, been kept alight constantly for more than 70 years.



3. Women's worship

The temple and its shrine in Kerman are sacred to Muslims as well as Zoroastrians. Aged Muslim passers-by often pay homage to the shrine by kissing the door while passing. The woman with the green headscarf [centre] comes to the shrine every morning at 6am to pray, regardless of the weather.

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4. A Zoroastrian couple

This couple, in a photo dating to the early years of the 20th Century, were well known in Kerman for their generosity. They often donated large sums to the local Zoroastrian community.



5. Reviving history

This photo, thought to date from the 1920s, shows the many young children of Kerman's Zoroastrian community. Today, the community is building a new temple in which it hopes to have a museum displaying its photos and sacred books.



6. The new generation

Here local man Zende is shown cradling his newborn grandchild at the shrine. The young girl, Shakiba, comes frequently with her mother to pray and light candles for the prophet Zoroaster. Historians generally agree Zoroaster was born in north-eastern Iran, possibly around 1,000 BC, although some date his birth much earlier.



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8. Caring for the dead

In the basement of Kerman's shrine the custodian keeps this iron bed that was used to carry the bodies of the dead up to the tower. The pitchfork was used to tamp down bones from earlier bodies in the pit in order to make room for the new body.



9. Untainted earth

The metal frames used to envelop the corpse are buried with the body to keep it away from the soil. Zoroastrians believe the earth should not be tainted by human remains.



10. Final goodbye

This is the funeral of a beloved local woman called Azer, who came originally from the town of Yazd but married a rich local man in Kerman.

In the days of mourning following her death and prior to her burial, many local Muslims also came to pay their respects in ceremonies crossing Iran's often fractious religious divides.

Words and pictures by Rafi Khankhajeh.

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