

European Zoroastrian Attitudes to Their Purity Laws

Gillian Towler Mehta

DISSERTATION.COM



Boca Raton

European Zoroastrian Attitudes to Their Purity Laws

Copyright © 2010 Gillian Towler Mehta
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage
and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher.

Dissertation.com
Boca Raton, Florida
USA • 2011

ISBN-10: 1-59942-385-5
ISBN-13: 978-1-59942-385-2

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS	6
1.1 Introduction	
1.2 The theoretical concepts of purity and pollution in Zoroastrianism	
1.3 The shape of my argument in the thesis	
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	14
2.1 Introduction	
2.2 The Zoroastrian purity laws	
2.3 Research into the purity laws in Europe	
2.4 Research into the purity laws outside Europe	
2.5 The benefits of quantitative data	
CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS: DIASPORA, HYBRIDITY AND FEMALE BODIES	35
3.1 Introduction	
3.2 Diaspora and hybridity	
3.3 Women, diaspora and religion	
3.4 The impact of religion on women in the diaspora	
3.5 Women and patriarchal religion	
3.7 Women, bodies and religion	
3.8 Women, purity and pollution in religion	
3.9 Summation of conceptual frameworks: diaspora, hybridity and female bodies	
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY: A QUANTITATIVE APPROACH	59
4.1 The focus of the research	
4.2 Methodology	
4.3 The research into Zoroastrian purity laws	
4.4 Social surveys	
4.5 Results generated by SPSS	
4.6 Reporting the data analyses	
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSES OF THE QUANTITATIVE DATA	74
5.1 Introduction	
5.2 Responses to the three surveys	
5.3 Symbolic boundaries	
5.4 Setting the scene	
5.5 The six purity laws to be considered for analyses	
5.6 The responses to the questions about the purity laws in the 2003 survey	
5.7 A black and white snapshot of the Zoroastrian attitudes to the six purity laws	
5.8 Analyses of purity laws by demographic characteristics of Zoroastrians	
5.9 Ranking the purity laws	
5.10 The purity laws and religious beliefs, practices and values	
5.11 The purity laws and other aspects of Zoroastrianism in Europe	

5.12 Conclusion

CHAPTER 6: REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION	122
6.1 Introduction	
6.2 The central role of religion for people of South Asian origin	
6.3 The composition of the Zoroastrian community in Europe in 2003	
6.4 The Zoroastrian religion today in Europe	
6.5 Purity and pollution in the Zoroastrian religion	
6.6 Women and men and the six purity laws	
6.7 Zoroastrian women and their religion	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	145
GLOSSARY	166
APPENDIX A: CHAPTER 1	171
APPENDIX B: CHAPTER 4	186
APPENDIX C: CHAPTER 5a	190
APPENDIX D: CHAPTER 5b	244
APPENDIX E: CHAPTER 5c	295

ABSTRACT

EUROPEAN ZOROASTRIAN ATTITUDES TO THEIR PURITY LAWS

The thesis has one main focus, the purity laws of a religious group in Europe, an original piece of research never done before in the UK. The thesis uses diasporic theories of identity; theories of women and the body; theories of women, their bodies and patriarchal religion and theories of women, purity and pollution in religion, to explain why European Zoroastrian women continue to support six of the purity laws of Zoroastrianism in the year 2003. Purity and pollution are at the heart of the Zoroastrian religion and the research demonstrated that Zoroastrians belief in and knowledge of the six purity laws was strong in 2003.

Zoroastrians are a diasporic religious group whose modern origins are in Iran and the sub-continent of India. They have been visiting and settling, from the sub-continent, in Europe, and especially in London, in small numbers since the middle of the nineteenth century.

There have been three quantitative surveys of the Zoroastrian community in Europe, in 1976, 1985 and 2003, with each survey building on the last one. Thus, the analytical, quantitative research leading up to the thesis covers a period of nearly 30 years. In the 2003 survey, new questions, never posed before in academic research, were asked about six of the Zoroastrian purity laws, which yielded data for the main focus of the thesis. The women support the six purity laws more than the men and the majority of both women and men affirmed four of the purity laws and rejected two of them.

The conclusion of the thesis is that the six Zoroastrian purity laws examined in this research are used in the creation of a hybrid, immanent and liminal religious identity and in some cases ethnic identity, by the women of the European Zoroastrian community; purity laws are known about and matter to these women in Europe in 2003.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the unstinting support from my Doctor of Philosophy supervisor Professor John R Hinnells;

The help of my second supervisor The Reverend Professor Kenneth G.C. Newport in steering me through the Doctor of Philosophy requirements of the University of Liverpool and through their extension procedures too;

The unstinting support of Professor Mary Mills, my supervisor for the re-write of the thesis;

The support of Professor Jamsheed K.Choksy of the University of Indiana, USA, both at the SOAS conference in 2006 and during the writing of the thesis;

The support and help from Ervad Bhedwar and Ervad Sethna;

The support from the sixteen members of the Zoroastrian community in Europe, who helped with critiquing the pre-survey 2003 questionnaire:

All the members of the Zoroastrian community in Europe who, by responding to the 2003 survey, made this thesis possible;

Last, but not least, the author would like to acknowledge the World Zoroastrian Organisation and the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe for their generous funding of the 2003 survey, without which this research could not have been conducted, analysed and reported.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis is concerned with Zoroastrians, a minority diasporic religious group in Europe which has its modern origins in the sub-continent of India and Iran. European Zoroastrians are part of the Zoroastrian Diaspora that has spread to all parts of the world from their original homelands. The focus of the thesis is an analysis of the attitudes of the European Zoroastrians to the six purity laws of Zoroastrianism, which apply specifically to women. This thesis is a study of a living religious group¹ in Europe in 2003, rather than a textual study or a sociological study² of a community, though sociological tools will be used for the analyses of data gathered through a postal survey. The 2003 survey is the third in a series, allowing a longitudinal study, informed by results of surveys conducted by J.R. Hinnells in 1976 and J.R. Hinnells and myself in 1985.

In drawing up the questionnaire for the 2003 survey of Zoroastrians in Europe, based on the 1976 and 1985 surveys, the problem of missing questions was addressed.³ The survey results from the added questions developed into the focus of this thesis: an analysis of six of the purity laws of Zoroastrianism. I statistically analysed the 1976 survey of Zoroastrians in the UK and was intrigued by the responses to certain questions which highlighted what I called at the time, the ‘controversial’ aspects of Zoroastrianism. I had anticipated that race would be an issue for Zoroastrians in Europe but found it not to be the case; it was the ‘controversial’ aspects of Zoroastrianism that were the unexplained issue.⁴ Only on analysis of data collected

¹ I am studying specifically how European Zoroastrians answer the questions asked in the survey questionnaire; who affirmed, who rejected and who did not respond to each question. I measure the respondents' answers by simple raw figures and percentages.

² It is not a sociological study in the sense of using triangulation methods where the religious group is studied by two or more different methods, such as participant observation, face to face interviews and postal questionnaires, (See Chapter 4). Nor am I testing sociological theories using sophisticated statistical techniques to interpret the data as I did for the data gathered during the 1985 survey, but I am looking at the explanatory nature of the theories used here and broadening the reach of them in the light of the conclusions of the analyses as well as adding to knowledge about women. Sociological tools will be used: a postal questionnaire; translating the data from the questionnaire on to a computer statistical programme; asking questions of the data; interpreting the results of these questions.

³ See copy of questionnaire in Appendix A: Chapter 1.

⁴ Towler Mehta G.M., *'The Survival of a Racial and Religious Minority'*, MA thesis, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, USA, May 1981.

in the 1985 world Zoroastrian Diaspora survey, did I recognise that the ‘controversial’ aspects of Zoroastrianism were the symbolic boundaries⁵ of the Zoroastrian community. I concluded that basic questions, concerning the purity laws central to the study of Zoroastrianism in Europe, were missing from the survey questionnaires of 1976 and 1985.

Boyce was the first western academic to stress the importance of the purity laws and above all she demonstrated how the purity laws are consistent with Zoroastrian doctrines. The purity laws are not mentioned in books or in interfaith dialogue by Zoroastrians, but they are at the theological centre of the Zoroastrian religion. I wanted to see if they are still part of the living faith in Europe. Boyce in her book, *A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism*, suggests that in Iran in the 1960s the practice of the purity laws was beginning to fade even amongst the rural Zoroastrians.⁶ It could be anticipated that this decline might accelerate in diasporic communities, but this thesis contradicts any such prediction.

1.2 THE THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS OF PURITY AND POLLUTION IN ZOROASTRIANISM

For Zoroastrians, evil is the source of misery, suffering, disease, death, decay, dirt, chaos, and all that destroys the ‘good’. The feature of Zoroastrianism is that it has a clearly articulated theology of ‘why’: even if outsiders do not accept the explanation for ‘good’ and ‘evil’, there is one for Zoroastrians. All dead matter is potentially polluting: blood when in the body is ‘good’ but when outside the body, polluting. It is not only menstruating women and women at child birth who are polluting, but also a priest or anyone, with an open wound. Ritual purity laws are central to Zoroastrianism because of the association of the pollution with evil and it is the duty of Zoroastrians to protect God’s good creation from pollution and evil. Purity laws are widespread among numerous cultures - Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism as well as Zoroastrianism. In the UK, women used to undergo a

⁵ Symbolic boundaries are the group boundaries of Zoroastrianism and they are formidable excluding any person who was not born to Zoroastrian parents or to a Zoroastrian father and who is not initiated into the religion. They can be thought of as the external purity laws of Zoroastrianism and will come up many times in the text.

⁶ Boyce M., *A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism*, Lanham, University Press of America, 1989, pp. 92-139.

‘churching’ ceremony at the Anglican Church after child birth, certainly up until the middle of the twentieth century.

The Zoroastrian myth of creation is based upon a pre-Zoroastrian concept of the universe but in the Zoroastrian myth the sky acts ‘as a shell enclosing the world’.⁷ Evil exists outside the shell of the earth and bursts into the pure ideal world, and it is foreign to the nature of good creation. Evil is the source of all change, impurity and suffering and ultimately of death. Thus, wherever there is dead matter there is evil, hence dead matter is impure. The knowledge of the Zoroastrian myth of creation comes from the Avesta, the sacred text of the Zoroastrians. Parts of the text are very old and certainly pre-Zoroastrian. Only one part of the Avesta has survived and it is that part, probably a quarter of the original, which deals with the ritual. Although not many people, including the priests, understand the language of Avestan, the words are thought to be powerful in themselves, whether the speaker understands the words or not.⁸ The *Bundahishn* from about the 9th century C.E. is an important text for the Zoroastrian myth of the creation. It is written in Middle Persian, or Pahlavi, and is largely a translation, maybe from more than one source, with some commentary, of ancient Avestan ideas about the creation. The texts are about the act, nature and goal of creation.⁹ The *Vendīdāh*, an ancient Zoroastrian text, describes the laws of purification after pollution and for the sins of omission and commission.¹⁰ Its latest parts may date from the early Parthian period and contains ancient lore. The *Vendīdāh* is the most authoritative Avestan text on purity and it makes the point that ‘Not only real death makes one unclean, but partial death too. Everything that comes out of the body of man is dead, and becomes the property of the demon’. Anything that alters the nature of the body makes the person unclean.¹¹ The *Vendīdāh* concentrates on the greatest pollutant of all, death, and the problems of purification after contact with death or a dead body, and that of menstruating women and their un-cleanliness at this time, especially if they go beyond the allotted time for

⁷ Hinnells J.R., *Persian Mythology*, second edition, Feltham, Newnes, 1985, p. 60.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 17-20.

⁹ West E.W., *The Bundahishn or Knowledge from the Zand*, translated from *Sacred Books of the East*, volume 5, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1887, reprint, Kessinger Publishing, 2004.

¹⁰ Ichaporia P., ‘Sacred Texts’, in *The Legacy of Zarathushtra: An Introduction to The Religion, History and Culture of Zarathushtis*, editor, Rivetna R., Illinois, Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America USA, 2002, p. 34.

¹¹ Darmesteter J., translator, *Zend-Avesta Part I, The Vendīdāh Sacred Books of The East*, volume 4, Delhi, Motilal BanarsiDass, reprint 1988, p. xcii.

menstruation.¹² The menstruating woman is considered to be unclean and possessed by the demon.¹³ Also, the *Vendīdād* deals twice with the problems of the woman who has had a still born child and how she can recover and be delivered from her polluting state.¹⁴

For Zoroastrians, Ahura Mazda created all that was good in the world which was completely separate from all that was evil in the world. All that was evil was fashioned by Ahriman as a reaction to all that was good. The world / universe became a battleground between the forces of good and evil which, in the end, God will win and the world / universe will be wholly good for ever. It is the duty of all humans to fight against evil and the purity laws are one of the important ways of doing so. For Zoroastrians, Ahura Mazda is eternal and dwells in perpetual light on high, whereas Ahriman is in the deepest of darkness and will one day be destroyed. Ahura Mazda always knew about the existence of Ahriman but Ahriman is ignorant and did not understand about the existence of Ahura Mazda until he saw him in his eternal light. Ahriman's reaction was to destroy Ahura Mazda and the light, but Ahura Mazda offered peace between them if only 'Ahriman would praise the Good Creation'.¹⁵ Ahriman refused because he thought that Ahura Mazda was negotiating from a position of weakness and when Ahura Mazda offered that the ensuing battle would be for a fixed period Ahriman agreed. Hinnells suggests that this myth represents the idea that if evil is left to go on quietly and is not openly opposed then it will cause chaos and destroy all that is good. Evil has to be opposed openly and deliberately.¹⁶ This can be done by following all the Zoroastrian purity laws which are at the centre of the Zoroastrian religion: ritual religious purity wards off evil.

The analysis of the 2003 research data found that women support the six purity laws at a much higher level than the men: women because of their 'nature' as understood in Zoroastrian theology, have more difficulty than men in leading a pure and unpolluted life. In the Zoroastrian religious symbolic world, Jahi is the personification of all female impurity, and Ahriman, in his gratitude for her arousal

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 48-131.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp. 181-184.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 60, 86.

¹⁵ Hinnells, *op cit*, p. 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

of him to attack the universe, grants her wish that all men should desire her. Hinnells also suggest that this maybe a sectarian or Zurvanite detail, but it is included in this text because the six purity laws to be investigated in the thesis are concerned with women and there is an underlying idea in Zoroastrianism of woman finding it nearly impossible to live the life of purity and thus to fight evil.¹⁷

The purity laws are all important in the battle against evil and it is through them that evil will be defeated, therefore it is beholden upon women to help in the battle by obeying the purity laws even if it is nearly impossible for them to do so in Europe. Zoroastrian women know that although Ahriman may kill individuals, mankind continues to increase and wages the battle with Ahriman. There will be a final battle between good and evil when the good will triumph, Ahriman will be defeated and the world will be made fresh, or *frashogird*, and will be renovated and restored to an ideal state, as it was before Ahriman unleashed evil upon it.

There is still the ‘shadow’ of the idea in Zoroastrianism that women can go to Zoroastrian heaven, even though it may be difficult for them to do so.¹⁸ This is reflected today in women’s ideas of their need to perform their religious duties. In Zoroastrian theology man was created for life and not for death and there will be two judgments for man / woman; one at the time of death and one after the resurrection when good has finally triumphed over evil, and the whole man / woman, body and soul, is united and can be in total harmony in spirit and matter, in praise of the creator.

It is important for Zoroastrian women to have fulfilled their religious duties so that they can be in the balance on the side of the just. On the third day after death, the soul of the individual has its good thoughts, words and deeds put in balance against its evil thoughts, words, and deeds: if the good outweighs the evil then the soul passes to heaven; if the evil outweighs the good then the soul passes to hell; and if they are evenly balanced then the soul proceeds to an in-determinate place,

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 60. Zoroastrian religious symbolism deals with the start of the conflict between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, with the former creating everything good and the latter everything evil and it deals with the development of the conflict and how evil is to be overcome.

¹⁸ Choksy J.K., *Evil, Good and Gender: Facets of the Feminine in Zoroastrian Religious History*, New York, Peter Lang, 2002, pp. 51-74. In fact the whole book deals with the ambivalent Zoroastrian theological attitudes to women and the feminine. Hinnells J. R., *op cit*, 1973, p. 73.

Hamestagan. For Zoroastrians, hell is a temporary place of punishment and in the final victory over evil the just souls will go to heaven and be united with Ahura Mazda.

The Zoroastrian purity rituals surrounding death are concerned with non-pollution of the living Zoroastrians by the dead person. The death of a virtuous person is more contaminating than that of an evil person because the victory of Ahriman is much greater when the dead person is virtuous. Complex rituals are put in place to protect the living with non-Zoroastrians being employed to handle the dead bodies. What is essential for a Zoroastrian is that the correct rituals are performed for the dead, for they are a comfort to the soul of the deceased and take place over three days. In Mumbai today there are problems with exposing the dead in the Dokhma¹⁹ because of the absence of vultures. Rotting bodies have been left in these towers in the hope that the sun plus large reflecting mirrors will deal with the problem, but that is not working. Some Zoroastrians are opting for cremation, but it is very difficult to get a priest to perform the correct religious rituals for persons who are cremated causing grief to the dead person's relations.²⁰

At the final judgement, when all the people who have ever died are judged, each person's good and evil deeds will be shown to them and those who are judged to be good will proceed to heaven while those who are judged to be evil will proceed to hell. After the final defeat of evil, Ahriman will flee back to hell and the world will be renovated to the ideal state; there will be no rotting, no putrefying, no disease and none of the evils that beset the world.²¹ It is not clear from the texts what is the fate of Ahriman, but it seems that not only will he be sealed in hell for ever but also Ahura Mazda will be all powerful, all knowing and all good for ever. In Karde III from the ancient *Zamyād Yašt*, the ideal state will be of people who are ageless and 'without decay, not rotting, not putrefying, living forever, thriving forever, ruling as it wishes'.²²

¹⁹ Also known as The Towers of Silence.

²⁰ Personal experience in Mumbai in 2007, at the funeral of a person who insisted on a cremation ceremony and of the problems involved in trying to get the correct rituals performed. Not only had the person died, a serious polluting exercise, but also they were increasing the potential for pollution by the manner of the disposal of their body.

²¹ Hinnells, *op cit*, 1985, pp. 60-70.

²² Hintze A., *Zamyād Yašt*, Introduction, Avestan Text, Translation Glossary, Weisbaden, 1994, p.18.

1.3 THE SHAPE OF MY ARGUMENT IN THE THESIS

One important part of this research was to discover precisely how much knowledge and acceptance there is in the living community, of the purity laws which the priests say are important but which have generally been neglected in the books. However, Choksy has written an academic book concerned solely with purity and pollution in Zoroastrianism.²³ He looks in detail at the purity laws in the daily life of Zoroastrians and states that

....there are rituals for the cutting of hair and the paring of nails; precautions that must be taken to prevent pollution by breath and saliva; ablutions designed to ensure ritual purity after sexual intercourse, nocturnal pollution, and urination; rules for the seclusion of women during menses and the rites for purification after menstruation; numerous dietary rules; and methods for purifying articles and homes through contact with impurities or the demise of the occupant.²⁴

Choksy's book will be discussed in Chapter 2 which reviews scholarly literature about Zoroastrians in Europe with particular reference to purity and pollution.

Chapter 3 creates the theoretical framework within which my research findings will be explained. The group of Zoroastrian women to be studied will be contextualised, in the sense of describing what it is like to be a diasporic hybrid person in Europe: the majority of the research group origins are in the sub-continent of India. In a postcolonial situation they are settling in Europe in a diasporic community and dealing with the cultural hybridity that this entails. The research focuses on Zoroastrian women and their attitudes to the six purity laws concerning women alone, and thus women, religion and the body will be at the centre of the theoretical framework.

Chapter 4 sets out the quantitative methodology used in my ethnographical study, explaining its rationale in the opportunity for conducting a longitudinal investigation. Chapter 5 presents my analyses of data collected through the survey, showing how my statistical analysis produces a measure for exploring survey results. I begin to draw out conclusions from that analysis here.

²³ Choksy J.K., *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism*, Austin, University of Texas, 1989.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 79.

Chapter 6 draws the thesis together by using the theoretical framework established in Chapter 3 to interpret the data analyses enumerated in Chapter 5. Here I reflect and conclude regarding the analyses of the data on the purity laws and how these relate to the theories elaborated in the literature review.

There is no existing study of purity laws in the living religion of Zoroastrianism in Europe, so this thesis is the first to research and report on this subject. My work is a continuation and addition to the extensive work already done, by J.R. Hinnells, on Zoroastrians in Europe. In the conclusion of the thesis, future research possibilities based on findings of this thesis are discussed.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I will look at the theoretical background to the Zoroastrian purity laws and then I will explore already existing relevant quantitative/ qualitative research. There is a small body of research into the Zoroastrian purity laws, as they are known and practiced in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries in India, Iran, and the USA. Clearly the work of Professor Hinnells on Zoroastrianism is central to this analysis. However, Hinnells has not touched the subject of the purity laws to any depth in his work although they are at the absolute centre of Zoroastrianism. This is a very interesting and even surprising gap: which could be explained by the fact that the purity laws could not have been approached before the 2003 survey because of the sensitive nature of the subject to Zoroastrians. Professor Hinnells has worked very hard to win the trust of the community which is richly deserved, and without all this hard work and the ensuing trust, the present thesis could not have been attempted or written. The work of Hinnells will be considered and reviewed, the research that has been conducted by others into Zoroastrian purity laws will be discussed and then the contribution of this thesis will be situated within that field.

2.2 THE ZOROASTRIAN PURITY LAWS

The purity laws are an aspect of Zoroastrianism, which is not publicised to outsiders, who are not given insight into the importance of purity laws. Very few books about Zoroastrianism discuss the purity laws²⁵, the exceptions being books written for Zoroastrians who are interested in the occult. Hinnells in his book *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies* has written a chapter about ‘Contemporary Zoroastrian Philosophy’ which deals at length with the ideas of the occult in Zoroastrianism and the Zoroastrian authors who have written on this matter for fellow Zoroastrians.²⁶ Many reformists, and even some Dasturs, from the early 20th century onwards, have been

²⁵ Choksy’s book, *op cit*, 1989, as already noted, is one of the exceptions together with K.P. Mistree’s book *Zoroastrianism, An Ethnic Perspective*, Zoroastrian Studies, Mumbai, Cama Oriental Institute, 1998, discussed in section 2.2 of this chapter.

²⁶ Hinnells J.R., *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, pp. 241-275.

calling for them to be dropped. Within the community and behind closed doors, the purity laws generate controversy.²⁷

J.J. Modi begins his book, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees*, in the preface, by discussing the importance of purity for Zoroastrians where he rationalises the purity laws for his non-Zoroastrian readership. He discusses the purity laws and rituals in detail but on the basis that in the ancient world the purity laws were developed as a form of hygiene and that in some periods the practice of these laws was taken to extremes.²⁸ F.K. Dadachanji published a book in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1995, on the speeches and writings about the Zoroastrian religion, culture and civilisation, and the only mention of the purity laws in this comprehensive book is a paragraph about physical purity in terms of hygiene and mental purity in terms of ‘Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds’.²⁹

The latter concepts, ‘Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds’, are always presented to non-Zoroastrians as the core of the Zoroastrian religion. This thesis demonstrates that in private the beliefs by Zoroastrians about the purity laws are still strong, even though in public they may not be discussed. The concept of physical purity is rarely presented to non-Zoroastrians, except as hygiene and is quickly passed over. The book *The Legacy of Zarathushtra*, edited by R. Rivetna, does not mention the purity laws at all, not even in the chapters on doctrine or on rituals.³⁰ This book was written for people who are not Zoroastrians, in this case North

²⁷ In conversations between G.M. Mehta and Professor Hinnells about the lack of certain data from the 1985 survey, and also, G.M. Towler Mehta discussions with Parsis in Pakistan and India in 1996 and 1997. In the five years from 1997-2003, before the 2003 questionnaire was drawn up, *Parsiana*, the Zoroastrian journal based in Mumbai, India, mentions the purity laws concerning menstruation once in two lines, in an article ‘Together, to the Twenty First Century’, in July-August, 1997 edition, page 106, written by A.S. Mama, referencing a question at the Zoroastrian Youth Conference in London ‘Why can’t menstruating women attend Agiaries?’ with the total response from the High Priests of ‘because of biology’. A.D. Moddie refers to this statement in the December edition of *Parsiana*, pp. 36-39, ‘We read no reasonable responses by the priests to the reasonable questions of the youth’. Also, in the Feb-March edition 1999, pp. 144-146, an article ‘Fire-Temple Etiquette’, written by C.M. Patel, no mention is made regarding women menses and attending the Fire Temple.

²⁸ Modi J.J., *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees*, second edition, Bombay, Society for the Promotion of Zoroastrian Religious Knowledge and Education, 1922. Preface, pp. vi-ix, pp.1-168 .

²⁹ Dadachanji F.K., *Speeches and Writings on Zoroastrian Religion, Culture and Civilisation*, Karachi, published privately, 1995, p. 12-13.

³⁰ Rivetna R., editor, *The Legacy of Zarathushtra: An Introduction to The Religion, History and Culture of Zarathushtis*, Illinois, Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America USA, 2002, pp. 11- 57.

Americans, who want to know about the Zoroastrian religion. As with all interfaith activities, Zoroastrians are highly selective in what they choose to present to the outside world.

However, there is one Zoroastrian, K. P. Mistree who has written about the purity laws from a theological perspective. He puts Zoroastrian purity laws regarding menstruating women into context, noting that menstruating Islamic women are not permitted to touch their holy book the Koran or attend religious functions. Orthodox Jewish women have to take a ritual purification bath after the end of their menstrual period. He notes that in other orthodox religions where purity and ritual are maintained, there are similar injunctions against menstruating women.³¹ The fact that ‘a woman menstruates regularly does not mitigate her from being considered doctrinally to be in a temporary state of impurity’.³² This injunction does not just impact on women, because any individual who has emissions from the body including blood is considered to be doctrinally in a state of impurity.³³

Purity is more than just washing clean. It is a theological concept which defines the worldview of actual Zoroastrians, as was noted in the attitudes of Zoroastrian women towards the purity laws and their contribution to fighting evil. R.C. Zaehner mentions the word purity once in his book *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* in connection with the self mortification of Iranian Mithra.³⁴ He does not discuss or mention the words menstruation, women, the role of women in Zoroastrianism,³⁵ the concept of pollution or the word pollution in this book. Even though Zaehner expounds the myth of creation which is to do with purity, the eternal ‘good’ against evil, he never mentions it. Perhaps he found the subject distasteful or was uncomfortable with it. Zaehner says that for ‘Zoroastrians body and soul were so closely linked that it seemed that bodily sickness must denote sickness of soul’.³⁶ Man is innately ‘good’ and all sickness, disease and sin must come from the outside. A really ‘good’ person must be happy, healthy, peaceful and content with the world.

³¹ Mistree K.P., *op cit*, 1998, p. 103.

³² *Ibid*, p. 103.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 102.

³⁴ Zaehner R.C., *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975, p. 117.

³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 248-284.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 277.

It is the duty of each person to develop, both in both body and soul, and to prosper and work for a happy, healthy peaceful life.³⁷ Ahriman recognises man as his most important enemy, and woman too, because she had allowed herself to ‘be defiled by’ Ahriman. She alone could bring male progeny into the world to fight against Ahriman until the world is restored to its original ideal state. Ahriman, the destructive spirit, does not understand that man can never be destroyed.

Never from the time of creation until the Rehabilitation in purity has this earth been devoid of men, nor will it ever be; and the Destructive Spirit, not being good, cannot understand this will to succeed.³⁸

Boyce writes that for Zoroastrians, the world was created by Ohrmazd in a perfect static state, whereas the process of change, which includes imperfection and decay, is the work of Ahriman. The work of Ohrmazd and his creations is to restore the world to a state of static perfection and the purity laws are ‘essentially a series of battle orders, whereby the individual receives his instructions for combating the Adversary’, Ahriman.³⁹ There are seven creations of Ahura Mazda: the sky, metals, water, the earth, plants, man and fire, and the main creations to be protected from pollution, and therefore from evil, are those of fire and water. It is the veneration and the observance of regulations surrounding the contact of mankind with fire and water that distinguishes Zoroastrianism from other religions.⁴⁰

There are extensive purity laws for each individual Zoroastrian to continue the fight against evil and to promote the good, and they cover every aspect of a Zoroastrian’s life. Boyce has written extensively and in detail about Zoroastrian concepts of purity and pollution. In her book, *Zoroastrians their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, she discusses the Zoroastrian purity laws and the origins of some of the individual purity laws in Indo-Iranian times, and that Brahmins in India observe some of these same individual purity laws today.⁴¹ She writes that

.....the purity laws derive their strength from their firm doctrinal basis, that is, Zoroaster’s dualistic concept of the world as a place of unremitting conflict between goodness, of which purity is a part,

³⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 275-277.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 261.

³⁹ Boyce, *op cit*, 1989, p. 94.

⁴⁰ Boyce M., *A History of Zoroastrianism, volume 1*, Leiden/ Koln, E. J. Brill, 1975, p. 296.

⁴¹ Boyce, *op cit*, 1979, p. 43.

and evil, by which that goodness and purity are constantly threatened.⁴²

Even the humblest of Zoroastrians can contribute to the fight against evil in their daily lives through their ordinary tasks, by obeying the purity laws which Boyce recognises as one of the strengths of Zoroastrianism. It has been observed by Zoroastrian priests that it is impossible to live in this world without sin.⁴³ Boyce suggests that the code of conduct was so rigid that it was thought that only people born into the faith could cope with the rigours of the purity laws and that is why the religion did not gain converts outside Iran, and that ‘this code of observance was fused with morality, the belief being that ‘all actions and ways of behaving are either meritorious or sinful’, no neutral areas being recognised’.⁴⁴ As a consequence today, the belief that Zoroastrianism has never permitted conversion of people outside Iran has become one of the main constituents of the symbolic boundaries.

The worst pollutants are anything emanating from the body, such as excrement or blood and the worst pollutant of all is a newly dead body, especially that of a good person because the power of victory of Ahriman is greater.⁴⁵ Not least of the list of pollutants leaving the human body, is breath, which is holy within the body but dead when expelled and that is why the priests wear a mask, a padan, when praying before the fire. Menstruation is one of the most common pollutants. In a sense, the womb is seen as the locus where the battle of creation is repeatedly enacted, and, as at the beginning where there is life, there is evil which will seek to attack and destroy.

Pollutants can be ranked, some being worse than others,⁴⁶ whereas ‘good’ and purity cannot be ranked; they are all equally ‘good’.⁴⁷ The difference becomes important when the data generated by the 2003 survey is analysed and the results presented in Chapter 5, where the six purity laws under investigation in the thesis, are ranked by the respondents in terms of which purity laws should be followed. The ranking is not

⁴² Boyce, *op cit*, 1975, pp. 295-296.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 296.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 294-295.

⁴⁵ Boyce, *op cit*, 1979, pp. 43-45.

⁴⁶ Hinnells J.R., *The Zoroastrian Diaspora, Religion and Migration*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 731, ‘The corpse of a good person is more polluting than that of someone who is wicked, because the former represents a greater victory for the evil powers’.

⁴⁷ Hinnells J.R., e-mail 19/06/07 and letter dated 21/06/07.

about differences in the ‘good’ of the purity laws, but in the potential for pollution by Zoroastrians not following the laws. Boyce also comments on the harsh rules on menstruating women in Zoroastrianism and the stoical acceptance of Zoroastrian women in ‘their inescapable part in the cosmic struggle against evil’.⁴⁸ She writes that ‘it is impossible for a woman, and difficult for a man, to avoid all ritual uncleanness; purity being part of morality for Zoroastrians, various rites existed for restoring it’.⁴⁹ Cleanliness is holy because that is the way Ahura Mazda created the world, but cleanliness is not the same as pure because the person can be pure and dirty, such as when working. A sanctuary can be ‘dirty’ from the smoke of the fire, but still pure, and a priest standing in front of the fire in the immediate presence of God must be in a state of absolute ritual purity so as not to defile the fire.

The main focus of this thesis with regard to the purity laws will be those which relate particularly to women and their menstrual cycle and child birth. During the days of menstruation, women have to withdraw from their families as strictly as possible and sit in a dark corner so that their polluting gaze will not fall on any of Ahura Mazda’s good creations: earth, running water, fire, the sky, plants, animals, or righteous men.⁵⁰ ‘In sum, a woman during this time, however virtuous, and however strict in her general observance of rules of purity, is regarded as impure as a harlot and as blighting to the good creation’.⁵¹ Child birth is regarded as a serious pollutant and the greater pollution is a still birth because it represents a great triumph for Ahriman and therefore the presence of evil. Strict purification rituals have to be undergone by the woman who has had a child and rigorous and lengthy purification rituals for the woman who has had a still birth.⁵²

Boyce comments that compared with the purity rituals surrounding women, menstruation and child birth, the precautions to be taken when dealing with nail clippings and cut hair, are minor.⁵³ But I learned, in conversation with Ervad Bhedwar, that he seemed to be as concerned about nail clippings and cut hair as

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁰ Boyce, *op cit*, 1975, p. 307.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 308-309.

about the purity rituals surrounding women: purity rituals surrounding the disposal of nails and hair were as important as menstruation and child birth.⁵⁴

It should be noted that for Zoroastrians, cleanliness is an absolute good, and a believer must be clean in body as well as the soul. The priests keep the strictest ritual purity and they have to stay away from people or situations which would involve them in loss of purity. Hence the injunction that menstruating women cannot visit a priest or the prayer room during menstruation.⁵⁵ Choksy notes that the purity laws surrounding menses and child birth were similar in terms of seclusion and ritual purifying after the event. After child birth, the woman was supposed to undergo 40 days seclusion and this 40 day confinement was observed by Parsis in Bombay at the beginning of the 20th century. Today this is not usually observed by Parsi women or even conservative Iranian Zoroastrian women. Choksy also notes that today in Iran, India and the Diaspora, most Zoroastrians keep a light burning for three days after the birth to dispel evil forces waiting in the dark to harm the baby.⁵⁶

Hinnells discusses the central concept of purity and pollution in Zoroastrianism and notes that many religions place restrictions on menstruating women, but in Zoroastrianism the restrictions are based on the Zoroastrian concept of evil.⁵⁷ The woman is not considered by Zoroastrianism as immoral, but that she is the unwilling victim of the destructive forces of Ahriman.⁵⁸ Hinnells also discusses the fact that these restrictions place a burden on Zoroastrian women which they have born with ‘fortitude as their duty against evil in all its forms’.⁵⁹ Boyce comments on importance of purity for other religions such as Islam and Hinduism, and that in Iran in the 1960s in the villages where she conducted her research, the Zoroastrian community regarded the Islamic community as ritually impure and the Islamic community regarded the Zoroastrian community as ritually impure.⁶⁰ Any contact

⁵⁴ I spoke with Ervad Bhedwar about the purity laws, 14/06/07. Ervad Bhedwar, who lives in London, was consulted because he is the most active of the European priests and widely recognised as the most senior, because he does virtually all the teaching and presided at most ceremonies. Also, he is the only priest on the governing body of ZTFE, which gives his views more authority.

⁵⁵ Boyce, *op cit*, 1975, pp. 311-312.

⁵⁶ Choksy, *op cit*, 1989, pp. 78-103.

⁵⁷ Hinnells, *op cit*, p. 56.

⁵⁸ -----, *Ibid*, p. 59.

⁵⁹ -----, *Ibid*, p. 59.

⁶⁰ Boyce, *op cit*, 1989, p. 95.

between the two groups of people had to be carefully negotiated. Zoroastrianism is not the only religion to take ritual purity seriously.

Boyce notes that for orthodox Zoroastrians in Iran there were three ways to God, through worship, the purity laws and ethical behaviour.⁶¹ She comments that some of the purity laws are straight forward and can be understood by non-believers in terms ‘of hygiene and conservation’ but other purity laws are strictly Zoroastrian.⁶² Menstruation is the worst of all pollutions and strict purity laws have been devised by the priests to alleviate the effects of this evil recurrent illness.⁶³ The menstruating woman afflicts all the creations of Ohrmazd and consequently cannot pray to God, meet with the priests, enter the Fire Temple, take part in any religious ceremonies or even have any interaction with other Zoroastrians. These restrictions of seclusion of Zoroastrian women during menstruation were in force in Iran up until the beginning of the twentieth century but they were fading out of the cultural memory by the 1960s in Iran, especially in Tehran although they were still around in Yazd.⁶⁴

2.3 RESEARCH INTO THE PURITY LAWS IN EUROPE

Hinnells has written and researched extensively, Zoroastrians in Europe, in the larger diaspora and in India, and he is the foremost authority on Zoroastrians in Europe in the UK today. He is the major player in my field of research and has laid the foundations for the study of the living Zoroastrian religion in Europe. He has conducted two surveys of Zoroastrians in the UK one in 1976 and one in 1985 which not only looked at Europe but also the world wide Zoroastrian Diaspora. I collaborated with Professor Hinnells in drawing up the 1985 world wide survey and was responsible for statistical analysis of both 1976 and the 1985 surveys: I not only analysed the data relevant to my own research questions but also answered all the statistical questions that Professor Hinnells asked of the data.

In 1996 Hinnells published the book, *Zoroastrians in Britain*, part of which was based upon the 1985 survey of the world wide Zoroastrian Diaspora, where he discusses the purity laws including menstruation and the position of women as

⁶¹ Boyce, *op cit*, 1979, p. 45.

⁶² -----, *op cit*, 1989, p. 94.

⁶³ -----, *ibid*, pp. 100-108.

⁶⁴ -----, *ibid*, p. 109.

potential pollutants.⁶⁵ Although he raises the question ‘How can one measure a person’s Zoroastrianess?’ Hinnells then lists the attributes that can be used to do so which include ‘attitudes to the purity laws’,⁶⁶ though in fact laws were not mentioned in the 1985 questionnaire except tangentially through the measurement of attitudes to the symbolic boundaries.

Again Hinnells mentions that a measure of Zoroastrianess in his survey is through attitudes to the purity laws which are left undefined.⁶⁷ Hinnells discusses the attitudes of young Zoroastrians to their religion in the 1985 survey and he concludes that ‘... fewer stress the importance of festivals, and purity laws’.⁶⁸ The analyses of the 2003 survey demonstrate that this is not the case in 2003 and that there is a gap in the research on Zoroastrians in Europe with regard to their personal, individual attitudes to purity laws. Also, Hinnells’ statement from the 1985 survey that ‘there does not appear to be any significant difference between Zoroastrian men and women in terms of religious activities or beliefs’ is not supported by the analyses of the 2003 survey with regard to the six purity laws. However, Hinnells does note that ‘more women than men affirm that they wish to preserve the link between religion and race and the purity laws’.⁶⁹ I would argue that ‘the link between religion and race’ is important for the symbolic boundaries of Zoroastrianism: in some responses to the 2003 questionnaire race was given by the respondents as a reason for not opening the symbolic boundaries. It is important to note that ‘In Zoroastrianism a sacred space is that within which purity is preserved and such areas are delineated by literal and metaphorical walls’.⁷⁰ Zoroastrian people, religious places, religious rituals and religious ideas have to be preserved as ritually pure. Any deviation from these laws could expose the sacred space to pollution and for some Zoroastrians that includes race. This concept of race is of Zoroastrians themselves as a ‘race’ apart from the rest of humankind. Some of the responses on the 2003 questionnaire demonstrated that the concept can throw up typical overt racist comments.

⁶⁵ Hinnells J.R. *Zoroastrians in Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 13-23.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 229.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 241.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 248.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 250.

⁷⁰ Hinnells J.R., *op cit*, 1996, p. 269.

Hinnells does not set relevant foundations⁷¹ for the present study when he states in his analyses of the 1985 survey of Zoroastrians in Europe, that the pattern that emerges is of women being more active and more conventional in religious practice and belief than men, and that ‘markers of ethnicity’ are prevalent among the women rather than the men. He also says that both ‘Zoroastrian men and women are equal in Zoroastrian belief and practice’⁷² although in practice women cannot become priests and have more stringent purity laws applied to them than do the Zoroastrian men. However, he suggests that the purity laws affect the position of women and that since women have the key role in adding members, by birth, to the Zoroastrian faith, the purity laws to be observed by women ‘are a consequence of this special status’.⁷³ Although he notes an area of interest, his work does not pursue this matter and there is no mention of the effect of these laws on the women’s lives and that because of them women cannot have equality with men in Zoroastrianism. Also, Hinnells does not pursue the matter of those women who marry out of Zoroastrianism, who can no longer consider themselves or their children as Zoroastrians: this does not apply to the men who marry out.

Hinnells mentions the purity laws in passing in his work *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies*, from 2000, but none of the chapters are devoted to this central theme of Zoroastrianism. However, in his position as an editor of the book *The South Asian Diaspora in Britain, Canada and the United States*, he does mention the suffering caused by Zoroastrians not being able to practise the purity laws associated with childbirth.⁷⁴ He states that because non-Zoroastrians do not practise the purity laws then they must be excluded from anything that Zoroastrians consider religious.⁷⁵ In his chapter in the book *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ‘Changing perception of authority among Parsis in British India’, he does not mention the purity laws

⁷¹ Hinnells does not look at Zoroastrian women independently from men especially with regard to their attitudes to symbolic boundaries of Zoroastrianism, which are the nearest to examining the Zoroastrian purity laws in the 1985 survey.

⁷² _____, *op cit*, 2005, p. 720.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 720.

⁷⁴ Hinnells J.R., Coward H., Williams, R.B., editors, *The South Asian Diaspora in Britain, Canada and The United States*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, Introduction, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, ‘The Zoroastrian Diaspora in Britain, Canada and the United States’, pp 42-43.