

## **Religious Portraits: British Women and their Encounters with Persian Islam and Zoroastrianism (excerpt)**

### **Introduction**

The word “travel” is surrounded by a wide semantic field, which is studded with culturally determined meanings and subjective values. As its etymology suggests, it was originally connected to the hardships of a journey, since it comes from the Old French word “travail”, whose former meaning was “labour” or “suffering”. Travelling has gradually abandoned this medieval nuance as transport innovations and mass tourism transformed it into a universal activity. Today, travel is alternatively associated with leisure, business, package tours, freedom, spiritual quests or migrations and it has definitely become a global and globalised phenomenon. In any case, travelling involves the notions of movement and change, which are both the principles and the effects of a traveller’s encounter with a new and more or less different context. On a journey, the traveller’s culture, understood as a complex system of signs, “a mechanism for organizing and preserving information in the consciousness of the community,”<sup>1</sup> confronts and interacts with other semiotic systems. They experience new spatial contexts by the use of perceptions and symbolizing thought, thus creating a phenomenological version of the reality around them and developing their own cultural identities.

The aim of my investigation is to examine the way nineteenth-century British women, who travelled to and resided in Persia, negotiated with a completely different cultural space, with particular reference to sacred space, which consists of meaningful places and objects, myths, rites and symbols. In 1917 Rudolf Otto proposed the study of the sacred as the numinous experience of a “mysterium tremendum”, the revelation of something “wholly other” where awe and fascination intermingle.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenological approach was adopted by Mircea Eliade, who aimed to illustrate the sacred and how it differs from the profane. In *The Sacred and the Profane* he claims that the sacred reveals itself by means of hierophanies, through which men acquire a fixed point in space and time.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the discovery of sacred space has existential values and implies what

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<sup>1</sup> Yury M. Lotman and Boris A. Uspensky, “The Semiotic Mechanism of Culture,” *New Literary History* 9, no.2 (Winter 1978): 214, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468571>.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, [1917] 1936), *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, [1957] 1959), 12.

Eliade calls a cosmogonic moment.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, he highlights that profane existence, in its homogenous experience of space and time, still presents inevitable “values that to some extent recall the non-homogeneity peculiar to the religious experience of space,”<sup>5</sup> since men tend to fix points of unique quality, but sacred time is a sort of eternal mythical present, which is re-actualized by rites and the experience of sacredness.

Edward Relph draws on Eliade’s conception of sacred space and considers it as a type of existential space, which is “the inner structure of space as it appears to us in our concrete experiences of the world as members of a cultural group.”<sup>6</sup> He points out the fact that existential space is sacred and symbolic in those cultures which still have not attained widespread technological advance, while it is of a more geographical and utilitarian kind in highly industrialised societies.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, nineteenth-century British citizens travelling to Persia were undoubtedly amazed at the encounter with a society where religious and spiritual symbols were so pervasive as well as different from the traditions of their own native culture. As far as religion was concerned, Persia was a source of interest for travellers because of its variety of creeds. Travelogues abound with historical and practical information about Islam, Bábism, Bahá’í Faith, Sufism and Zoroastrianism. I will focus on the representation of Islam and Zoroastrianism in Gertrude Bell’s 1894 *Persian Pictures* and Ella Sykes’s 1898 *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle* and 1910 *Persia and its People*, in order to highlight how experiential, cultural and political influences intermingle in these descriptions. Moreover, I will emphasize how travellers experienced and negotiated with these creeds through the different signs which they encountered during their journey, particularly rites and meaningful places.

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<http://archive.org/stream/throughpersiaons00sykerich#page/n5/mode/2up>, accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, [1976] 2008), 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

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Zoroastrianism is the ancient, pre-Islamic religion of Persia (modern-day Iran). It survives there in isolated areas but primarily exists in India, where the descendants of Zoroastrian Persian immigrants are known as Parsis, or Parsees. In India the religion is called Parsiism. Founded by the Iranian prophet and reformer Zoroaster in the 6th century BCE, Zoroastrianism contains both monotheistic and dualistic features. Although a fairly small religion today, numbering about 200,000 adherents, it shares many central concepts with the major world religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The religion states that active participation in life through good deeds is necessary to ensure happiness and to keep chaos at bay. This active participation is a central element in Zoroaster's concept of free will, and Zoroastrianism rejects all forms of monasticism. Ahura Mazda will ultimately prevail over the evil Angra Mainyu or Ahriman, at which point the universe will undergo a cosmic renovation and time will end. In the final renovation, all of creation—even the souls of the dead that were initially banished to "darkness"—will be reunited in Ahura Mazda, returning to life. Like Islam, Zoroastrianism does not discriminate between men and women, both sexes are treated equally in the religious texts. There is no preferential treatment of male children and children are advised to honour both father and mother equally. What exactly does Quran have to say about these monotheistic religions that pre date the Islam we know today? Zoroastrians do not preach their religion; in fact, many modern Zoroastrians claim that conversion to their religion is impossible. While there are priests there is no hierarchy and no intermediaries between the people and God. The basic doctrine of Zoroastrianism revolves around good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.[4].

Footnotes: [1] <http://www.dlshq.org/saints/zoroaster.htm>. The Direct Encounter of Islam with Zoroastrianism: The Causes of the Tragic Consequences There are two opposing versions of the events surrounding the first encounter. One says that the Zoroastrians were converted by the Arabs at the point of the sword: All that was Iran, whether spiritual or material, was swept away by the Arabs a sacrifice of their fanaticism. In the event that hostility and fighting become inevitable, the Koran calls upon Muslims to follow a set of rules of warfare concerning prisoners, women and children, the elderly people, and so forth. It is said in a number of ayats: Fight to the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loves not transgressors (2: 190).