

On the State and Prospects of the Study of Zoroastrianism

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Abstract

The academic study of Zoroastrianism goes back to the seventeenth century. It was a classic topic in the History of Religions as an academic discipline throughout its formative period. Zoroastrianism has become less visible on the field of the History of Religions since the 1970s. This, however, does not mean that there was no progress in Zoroastrian Studies since that time. Quite to the contrary, despite the customary tendency to paint a gloomy picture of the progress of Zoroastrian Studies, scholarship in this field has advanced considerably in recent decades. The present article sketches eighteen major subjects of innovative recent research activities. Topics include textual studies, law, astrology, secondary sources, religion and politics, regional diversity, marginalization, impact on and interaction with other religious traditions, the modern communities in India, Iran, and various “diasporic” settings as well as gender, rituals, and outside reception. The article concludes by sketching some prospects for the study of Zoroastrianism.

Keywords

Zoroastrianism, Parsis, Iran, Iranian Studies, philology, history of scholarship

... ‘finality’ is as dangerous a thing in scholarship as in politics.
(Max Müller [1867:137])

Introduction: The Study of Zoroastrianism and the History of Religions¹

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest living religions in the world. It has a very rich history and was the dominant religious tradition of pre-Islamic Iran. Zoroastrians lived in close neighbourhood to adherents of various other religions such as Jews, Christians, Manicheans, Buddhists, and others. It is generally held that Zoroastrianism made an impact on several of these religions — as well as on Islam in its formative period. The (presumed) widespread influence of Zoroastrianism on neighbouring religions is probably one of the main reasons why several generations of scholars have shown an interest in this religion.²

The spread of Islam led to the marginalization of Zoroastrianism in Iran and promoted its relocation to the Indian subcontinent. Nowadays, the majority of Zoroastrians (probably some 130,000 worldwide) are living in Western India. Sizeable groups of Zoroastrians are to be found in Iran (where the religion is an officially recognised religious minority) as well as in England, Canada, the United States, the Gulf States, and Australia. There are smaller groups in various other countries.

The study of Zoroastrianism as an academic enterprise harks back to the beginnings of Orientalism in the late 17th century. The first book on ancient Iranian religion was published by Thomas Hyde, an Oxford scholar of Arabic, Semitic, and Persian, in 1700 (Stroumsa 2002). The book also contained the first translation of a late, but important Persian Zoroastrian text in a European language. These early studies were still firmly grounded in biblical and apologetic presuppositions (Stausberg 1998a, 2001). The study of the oldest Zoroastrian scripture began as a result of the Orientalist expedition of the French scholar Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil Duperron (Stausberg 1998b) and his *Le Zend-Avesta* from

¹ For a comprehensive review of the study of Zoroastrianism (including reflections on its disintegrated state, short profiles of main protagonists, a discussion of some attempts to map main approaches and the contribution of Zoroastrians and Iranians as well as the impact of the study of Zoroastrianism on modern Zoroastrianism), see my chapter in the forthcoming *Routledge Companion to Scholarship in Religious Studies* (edited by Gregory Alles).

² See Sundermann (2008:163): “The fact that Zoroastrianism inspired and enriched other religions in many ways allows us to call the religion of Zoroaster a world religion.”

1771. Its philological bases solidified with the establishment of comparative Indo-European linguistics in the first half of the 19th century.

As is well-known, Friedrich Max Müller tried to adapt the scholarly program of the science of language to establish a new science of religion (Müller 1873). Müller was of course familiar with the linguistic studies of the ancient Zoroastrian texts that had been carried out by Burnouf, Haug, Spiegel, and others. Several essays reviewing these studies, assembled in the first volume of his *Chips from a German Workshop*, bear witness to the great interest Müller took in the contemporaneous development of Zoroastrian Studies (Müller 1867:81–103, 118–180). This is hardly surprising, since “next to Sanskrit, there is no more ancient language than Zend — and that, next to the Veda, there is, among the Aryan nations, no more primitive religious code than the Zend-Avesta” (Müller 1867:119–120).

Alongside the continued specialist philological and linguistic study of the Zoroastrian texts (for a partial history see Kellens [2006]), several of the leading protagonists of the nascent field, or “science,” of the History of Religions partly built their careers around writing on Zoroastrianism. Consider the following cases.³ In 1864, long before his doctorate and eventual appointment to the chair in Leiden (1877), Cornelis Petrus Tiele published a book with the title *De godsdienst van Zarathustra: van haar ontstaan in Baktrië tot den val van het Oud-Perzische Rijk* (*The Religion of Zarathustra: From its Origin in Bactria to the Fall of the Ancient Persian Empire*) (Tiele 1864). When still at Oslo, in the autumn term 1898 William Brede Kristensen (who would eventually succeed Tiele on the Leiden chair) lectured on Zoroastrianism (Ruud 1998:284), but he never published a book on the subject. Nathan Söderblom, the first Swedish scholar of the History of Religions, was trained in Iranian studies in Paris and wrote his early scholarly works on Zoroastrianism (Söderblom 1899, 1901) before obtaining the first chair in the field in Sweden (in Uppsala). In 1912 Söderblom was called to the new chair in the History of Religions in Leipzig, while the Berlin chair had already been occupied by the Danish scholar Edvard Lehmann in 1910. Lehmann, who would shortly thereafter move to Lund (Sweden), had

³ See Stausberg (2007a) for the early history of the study of religion(s) in Western Europe.

likewise largely gained his scholarly reputation with a work on Zoroaster and ancient Iranian religion (Lehmann 1899–1902). Söderblom and Lehmann were not only friends, but also shared a firm Protestant belief and to some extent an apologetic agenda. This was not the case with the Italian historian of religions Raffaele Pettazzoni. Although mostly known for his comparative studies and his work on Mediterranean religions, a couple of years before the establishment of his chair at the University of Rome in 1923 Pettazzoni also published a book on the history of ancient Zoroastrianism (Pettazzoni 1920). None of these works, however, have had a lasting impact on the specialist study of Iranian religions. The one historian of religions who was as much as a specialist as a generalist was Pettazzoni's successor as president of the International Association for the History of Religions, the Swede Geo Widengren, whose work situated Iranian religions firmly within Near Eastern religious history.

Zoroastrianism in *Numen*

It is a telling sign of the status earlier held by the study of Zoroastrianism in the History of Religions that the content of the first two numbers of this journal (*Numen* 1954 and 1955) was, at least page-wise, dominated by two lengthy articles by Widengren entitled “Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionsgeschichte” (“The Present State and Future Tasks of the Study of Iranian Religious History”). The collated text of the two articles of 68 and 88 pages respectively was published as a separate book by Brill in 1955. Contrary to what its title might suggest, the text is less a survey of the state of the art of the study of Iranian religions; it rather unfolds Widengren's own view, which he later revised into a survey work (Widengren 1965). The first article starts with a (still valid) plea for combining philological and historical approaches to the study of pre-Islamic religion and proceeds to presenting an extensive “phenomenological” survey of such issues as cosmology, the belief in supreme deities (“Hochgottglaube,” one of Widengren's favourite ideas), the concepts of soul, eschatology and apocalypticism (two of his main fields of interest), primordial figures and saviours, myths and legends, cult and ritual including annual festivals (a hobbyhorse of the so-called Uppsala school) and other rites (e.g. sacrifice), cultic and secret societies (another Uppsala idea),

priests, cultic places and temples, oral and written transmission and sacred kingship (again promoting interpretations peculiar to the Uppsala school). At the end of his first article, Widengren points to the lack of comprehensive studies on ethics in Iranian religiosity and on forms of prayer among Iranian peoples (Widengren 1954:83).⁴ The second article changes from the phenomenological to the historical mode. The bulk of the article is a reconstruction of what Widengren considered as the main epochs of pre-Islamic religious history and their features, including an extensive discussion of the religious “type” and message of Zoroaster and various digressions about the influence Iranian religion (rather than Zoroastrianism in a stricter sense) exerted on its neighbours. This last point is the topic of the much shorter third part of the article (Widengren 1955:128–132).⁵ Widengren concludes by inviting his fellow scholars to pay particular attention to the rich treasures of the Middle Persian (Pahlavi) literature.⁶

Shortly after Widengren’s book-length articles, *Numen* featured an article about the date and teaching of Zarathustra by the Reverend C.F. Whitley (1957). A little later, the journal published an exchange between the Slovenian/Polish Iranologist Marijan Molé and his Belgian adversary Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (Duchesne-Guillemin 1961; Molé 1961) prompted by the former’s structural-eschatological interpretation of ancient Iranian religion (e.g. Molé 1960). At the same time, the American Iranologist Richard Frye discussed Dumézil’s theory and

⁴ There still is no comprehensive scholarly study of Zoroastrian ethics and morality, but see Kreyenbroek (1997); Gignoux (2000/2001).

⁵ As Ab de Jong reminded me, Widengren was the main protagonist of an “Iranian/Zoroastrian” interpretation of the origins of Manichaeism (see Widengren 1961a). The pendulum has since swung to an interpretation favouring Christian backgrounds. More recent scholarship has pointed to (among other things) Iranian/Zoroastrian elements in Manichaean terminology (Colditz 2000), ritual (BeDuhn 2002), or propheology (Sundermann 2004) as well as the polemical interactions between both religions (Sundermann 2001b, 2001c) and their use of identical deities and demons (e.g. Sundermann 2003) or mythological adaptations on the side of Manichaeism (Sundermann 2008:160–161). For reviews of the discussion on the Iranian/Zoroastrian elements in Zoroastrianism see Rudolph (1992:66–79); Skjærvø (1995); Sundermann (2001a:39–58).

⁶ The re-evaluation of the importance of the Pahlavi sources resonates with the work of scholars like Molé, Zaehner, and Boyce.

its application to Avestan studies (followed up by Kuiper 1961), and Kurt Rudolph presented an insightful review of the discussion about the religious “type” of Zarathustra (Rudolph 1961). Further articles published during the 1960s were by Jacob Neusner (1965), Marina Vesci (1968), and John Hinnells (1969).

From the year 1970 onwards, however, Zoroastrianism disappeared as an object of study in its own right from the pages of the journal. While it is mentioned in some general articles or in articles on neighbouring religions such as Manichaeism, with one partial exception (Hasenfratz [1983] on different forms of dualism in Iran),⁷ no more articles on Zoroastrianism were published in *Numen* after 1969!⁸ This is an impressive testimony to the marginalization of Zoroastrian Studies in our scholarly field.⁹ The readers of this journal may therefore benefit from an account of the more recent development of the study of Zoroastrianism. General sources of information are the obvious point to start with.

Surveys and Introductions

Before my own trilogy (Stausberg 2002a, 2002b, 2004)¹⁰ no general extensive survey work had been published since the 1960s (Zaehner

⁷ The essay by Hasenfratz has largely remained unnoticed in more specialized studies. For recent discussions of the classical question of Zoroastrian “theology” in terms of dualism/monotheism/polytheism see Stausberg (2003); Hultgård (2004); Panaino (2004a); Kellens (2005: a discussion of previous interpretations); Kreyenbroek (2006).

⁸ Since the mid 1990s Manfred Hutter and the present author at least contributed a series of reviews of some relevant books from this field.

⁹ Taking a look at other journals in the study of religion(s) does not change the picture much. Just like *Numen*, *History of Religions* published several articles on Iran/Zoroastrianism in the 1960s, but then it disappears, with two exceptions in the 1980s (Darrow 1987; Lincoln 1988). In addition Zoroastrianism was featured in Lincoln’s Indo-European studies published in that journal from the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the early years of the present millennium, Lincoln returned to Zoroastrian issues in relation to his critique of the validity of the Indo-European hypothesis (Lincoln 2001) and in relation to his new interest in the Empire of the Achaemenians (for a synthesis see now Lincoln [2007]). A further article that appeared in *HR* is Moazami (2005). *Religion* published merely one article on Zoroastrianism in its entire history (Williams 1989).

¹⁰ The first volume reviews Zoroastrian history from the origins to the pre-colonial periods in India and Iran. The second volume presents a survey of the modern

1961; Duchesne-Guillemin 1962; Widengren 1965).¹¹ The monumental *History of Zoroastrianism* by Mary Boyce, the towering figure of Zoroastrian studies in the last decades of the 20th century, is still incomplete.¹² Three volumes are hitherto published (Boyce 1975 [3rd ed. 1996], 1982; Boyce and Grenet 1991). The work is currently being continued by the Dutch historian of ancient religions Albert de Jong (Leiden), but the remaining three to four volumes will certainly take another decade, if not much more, to be completed.

Mary Boyce has also written a masterly survey of Zoroastrian history (1979 with several reprints) which is often used as a textbook. Other introductory textbooks are thematically arranged (Clark 1998; Stausberg 2005 [English edition in preparation]). Readers seeking introductory information will naturally consult the entries in encyclopedias such as the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (all entries on Zoroastrianism revised in the second edition) or the *Brill Dictionary of Religion* and handbooks of the History of Religions, world religions, or ancient religion (far too many to even list here).

There exists neither a scholarly handbook of Zoroastrianism nor a specialist journal or an encyclopedia. However, the monumental *Encyclopædia Iranica* (1982 ff.) provides a plethora of relevant entries for the specialists. In recent years, the continued publication of fascicles is supplemented by online-publication of articles scheduled for later volumes with open access (www.iranica.com).

Collections of source materials are obviously highly useful for teaching purposes (and for research for the non-specialist). Specimens of that

developments in India and Iran as well as the emergence of world-wide Zoroastrian communities; it also sketches Mazdasnan and discusses issues of gender. The third volume presents the total spectrum of Zoroastrian rituals (rites, liturgies, festivals) as they are practiced in India and Iran. It is supplemented by two CDs containing pictures and short videos of Zoroastrian rituals.

¹¹ The most up to date and complete survey on Zoroastrian history available in English was edited by two upper class Parsi ladies from Mumbai (Godrej and Mistree 2002). The book contains 41 chapters (by 36 authors including scholars, priests, community activists and lay-scholars) addressing a vast variety of topics. The sheer number and superb quality of the more than 1,000 illustrations (some conveniently assembled from previous publications, but many original) will grant this volume a lasting place in the libraries of Zoroastrian scholars.

¹² A collection of her essays is in preparation for a reprint series.

genre are available in English (Zaehner 1956 [several later editions]; Malandra 1983; Boyce 1984 [latest reprint 2006]), German (Widengren 1961b), Danish (Barr and Asmussen 1997), and Norwegian (Skjærvø 2003a). The selection of texts naturally mirrors the research interests of the translators. The volume by Boyce is unique since it also includes modern source materials as well as modern Western secondary sources. The website www.avesta.org (administered by an American “convert” to the religion) has over the years developed into a veritable archive of Zoroastrian scriptures, but its scholarly value is limited since it mainly uses dated translations and transcriptions.

Personality Clashes and Gloomy Pictures

It is part of the self-awareness of most scholars of Zoroastrianism that the past scholarly debates in our field were exceptionally violent (see e.g. Hinnells 2000:23; Kellens 2003:213). Moreover, it is customary to paint a gloomy picture of the state of affairs in the study of Zoroastrianism. I think both views need qualification.

The first concern, it seems to me, mainly bears witness to the isolation of Zoroastrian studies. For I doubt whether the debates in our field have been any more tumultuous than those in the study of, say, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam. However, as Albert de Jong has reminded me (personal communication), it may well be that several leading scholars of Zoroastrianism were prone to attacks *ad hominem*. Moreover, as de Jong also points out, the very limited size of the active scholarly community often implies that criticizing an idea to some extent may be taken as criticizing a specific person. For these reasons even relatively minor scholarly disagreements may result in personality clashes (and vice versa).

Turning to the second point, institutional prospects by and large tend to be grim for the kind of studies we are engaged in (at least in Europe), and contemporary scholars all have their limitations just as much as their predecessors did (only that those of the latter tend to be forgotten, while one is by nature constantly reminded of one’s own shortcomings). At least to my eyes, a dispassionate review of scholarly work during the past two decades reveals several bright spots. I would even go so far as to say that the field has been as vibrant during this period as never before in its history.

A Catalogue of Areas of Innovative Research

At the danger of a fairly subjective selection and taking the risk of offending some colleagues who might feel that their work should have been featured more prominently, let me point out some major achievements. The following is my (sic!) selection of eighteen major areas of innovative research activities during the past two decades.¹³ “Major” here refers not only to the relative importance of the areas, but also to the degree of scholarly commitment to these subjects. The following list does as a rule not include topics that may well require further study, but on which relatively little has been published so far. This includes work on topics such as conceptions of the body (Williams 1989), food regulations (Gignoux 1994), medicine and anthropology in general (Gignoux 2001), animals (Moozami 2005), as well as ethics and morality in Zoroastrianism (see above note 3).

The following catalogue is not arranged according to priority, but roughly follows a chronological order with regard to the history of Zoroastrianism. All scholarly work (including my own) is subject to criticism and necessarily of uneven quality, but as much as I can I have resisted the temptation to be judgmental and dismissive. In view of restrictions of space these areas of research can only be touched upon very briefly and all would require extensive critical discussion and contextualization. A critical discussion of the work outlined in the following pages would have required a series of articles running at least into the same length as Widengren’s in the early issues of this journal.¹⁴

In many cases only some key works will be highlighted from a much wider bibliography.¹⁵ The following catalogue is more than a mere bibliographical repertory because it sketches developments in scholarship and points to areas of scholarship that implicitly or explicitly have

¹³ There is no hard dividing line here, but in general more recent works are emphasized more.

¹⁴ Note that my focus here is on the one hand more narrow than Widengren’s, who was interested in Iranian pre-Islamic religious history in a much wider sense (including e.g. Manichaeism); on the other hand my focus is broader since Widengren was not at all interested in the modern periods.

¹⁵ In the following account, only in cases where relatively little other original research has been done have I added references to my trilogy.

challenged or changed received notions of Zoroastrianism. The areas covered do not therefore amount to a phenomenological or historical map. Note also that scholarship on only indirectly relevant areas such as the origins of the Indo-Iranians, Indo-Iranian poetry, the political, social, economic, and cultural history of ancient and Islamic Iran as well as of colonial and post-colonial India, postcolonial diasporas, or even purely philological studies (often of single words or verses) without direct relevance for the study of religion will not be touched upon. However, the lines between direct and indirect importance are often blurred, and other authors would naturally have made different choices.¹⁶ Diacritics are used sparingly throughout this article.

1. *Zarathustra and the Old Avestan Texts*

The distinction between two layers within the corpus of texts usually assembled in “the Avesta”¹⁷ has been one of the main impulses of the modern study of Zoroastrianism since the second half of the 19th Century (Haug, Spiegel, Darmesteter). Roughly a century later, the so-called Erlangen school (which is not a school in a proper sense) has placed the study of the *Gāthās* on a new linguistic and philological basis. Helmut Humbach’s translation from 1959 was a watershed (see Kellens 2006). Johanna Narten’s study of the second main text in the so-called Old Avestan language, the *Yasna Haptanhāiti*, published in 1986, has widened the view of the Old Avestan corpus.¹⁸ Around the

¹⁶ See also Cantera (2002) for an excellent up-to-date bibliography listing 484 items published since 1975 grouped into the following twelve categories: 1. handbooks and general accounts; 2. primary sources; 3. the figure of Zarathuštra and his religious reform; 4. the religion of the Achaemenians; 5. doctrines (including dualism, deities, protology, eschatology, and apocalypticism, as well as Zoroastrianism and forms of social organization such as kingship, tri-functionalism, law, and miscellaneous items); 6. rites, cult, and ritual practices; 7. mythology; 8. astrology and astronomy; 9. Zoroastrianism outside of Iran; 10. Zoroastrianism in the modern period; 11. heresies, sects, and political history of the Sasanians; 12. influence on and contacts with other religions. Cantera provides very brief introductions to these topics, sometimes garnished with his own evaluations or short comments on the development of scholarship.

¹⁷ For the name *Avesta* see now Sundermann (2001d) with the interesting hypothesis of a Christian inspiration of the word (meaning “testament”).

¹⁸ See now Hintze (2007a) for an English edition cum commentary by a former student of Narten.

year 1990 substantial new translations with commentaries were published (Kellens and Pirart 1988, 1990, 1991; Humbach 1991; Humbach and Ichaporria 1994). Especially the interpretations of the Belgian philologists Kellens and Pirart have challenged a number of assumptions that were hitherto taken for granted (except those, of course, on which their own approach was based).¹⁹ Their claim that Zoroaster could have been neither the reciter nor the author of the *Gāthās*²⁰ is the most provocative of their reinterpretations,²¹ and has created quite some stir.²²

At Berkeley, Martin Schwartz is engaged in a new systematic interpretation of the *Gāthās* based on structural elements in the composition of the texts (Schwartz 2002 [2006]). From a different philological point of view this approach has been derided (in oral communication at a recent conference) as “Cabalistic.” Based on insights from the study of other literatures, the Dutch scholar Philip Kreyenbroek (based in Göttingen) and the Norwegian scholar Prods Oktor Skjærvø (based at Harvard) have emphasized the oral character of the Avestan texts (Kreyenbroek 1996, 2006; Skjærvø 2005–2006), which accordingly would necessitate other interpretative approaches. The ritual dimension of the texts has been strongly emphasized by Humbach, Kellens and Pirart, and more recently by Skjærvø (2002, 2003b). Panaino, however, has at the same time pointed out that a ritualist interpretation should not be taken to a priori exclude speculative, ethical, and philosophical dimensions of the texts (Panaino 2004b).

The textual chronology of the Avestan corpus,²³ especially with regard to the status of what is generally referred to as Old and Young Avestan

¹⁹ See Hultgård (2000a) for a discussion of a number of key issues. He also compares the discussions around the year 1900 to the debate in the late 20th century. See Shaked (2005:189–199) for a critical discussion of what he perceives as “an excessive reliance on the linguistic data of the Rigveda” (189) amongst the scholars of the so-called Erlangen school. Shaked believes that their methodological premises are “likely to lead to a distortion of the contents and message of the Gathas” (189).

²⁰ See Stausberg (2007b) for the modern invention/discovery of Zarathustra’s authorship of the *Gāthās*.

²¹ Also in a number of other works Kellens has challenged several received interpretations in Zoroastrian Studies.

²² Reactions from the Zoroastrian communities were remarkably calm.

²³ The compositional status of the arrangement of the textual corpus cannot be described as a “canon,” see Stausberg (1998d); Panaino (2007:31).

(thereby implying a chronological relationship) has become a matter of intense dispute (e.g. Skjærvø 2003–2004; Panaino 2007). Moreover, the existence of an intermediary stratum, Middle Avestan, has recently been suggested (Tremblay 2006a). However, from the point of view of a wider contextualization it has been lamented that there is as yet no philological work done which specifically aims at making the textual findings comparable to archaeological data (Kuz'mina 2007:458).

Since Zarathustra²⁴ is, in one way or the other, intimately linked to the *Gāthās*, any interpretation of the date of this text implies a statement on the date of Zarathustra.²⁵ The latter question remains as much a mystery as it was in the 19th century, with the only difference that hardly anybody these days would situate him in Western Iran. The debate has been further fuelled by the work of Gherardo Gnoli, who has supported Henning's earlier (1949/51) but commonly dismissed theory of the date 618–541 BCE for the life of Zarathustra (Gnoli 2000). However, despite all the learning that went into his somewhat labyrinthine book, it seems that Gnoli has so far convinced hardly anybody — apart from his own faithful students. Gnoli's analysis builds on the convergence of several traditions from antiquity that, he argues, all implicitly or explicitly point to this date. Ironically, an American popular “independent scholar” has recently used some reports from Greek and Roman historians claiming a much earlier date for Zoroaster as “evidence” to support a presumed convergence between the teaching of Zarathustra and the findings of Late Neolithic archaeology, which would make Zarathustra into the leader of the new movement that gave rise to the successful diffusion of an agricultural way of life (Settegast 2005). This thesis, pointing to the other extreme in the historical scenario, seems so unlikely, unconventional and speculative that it has been hardly discussed or taken seriously in scholarly circles, but it may well be attractive to Iranian nationalist discourse.

²⁴ The two main etymological explanations (“possessing old camels” vs. “camel-driver”) have recently been supplemented by a new one: “who likes camels,” see Périkhianian (2007).

²⁵ For some hypotheses on Zoroaster's homeland see Boyce (1992); Khlopın (1993); Sarianidi (1998). See Shaked (2005) for a discussion of the problem of origins in general.

2. *The Younger Avestan Texts*

Writing in the late 1990s I still felt entitled to bemoan the relative neglect of the Younger Avestan texts compared to the Old Avestan corpus (Stausberg 2002a:107). This picture has changed somewhat to the better in the past years. Although we are still lacking studies of many daily prayer texts assembled in the so-called Small Avesta (*Xorde Avesta*), there now at least exist a summary of their content and a study of their place in ritual practices (Choksy and Kotwal 2005) as well as an analysis of the compositional structure of texts recited at each of the five divisions of the day (Hintze 2007b). Moreover, some new editions and translations, usually provided with introductions and occasionally also with notes, but rarely with substantial commentaries, have been published.²⁶ To some extent, these recent contributions facilitate the work of the historian of religions. The studies of some of the greater hymns (Yašts) have, as part of the interpretation of the texts, also touched upon questions of ancient Iranian and Zoroastrian mythology (e.g. Panaino 1995; Humbach and Ichaporia 1998; Pirart 2006; Kellens 2007). Unfortunately, there is still no comprehensive study of that topic.²⁷ (Maybe the shadow of Dumézil is still felt as too overpowering?)

The study of these texts to some extent bridges the distance between the *Gāthās* and the later Zoroastrian history. However, it should also be pointed out that we are still lacking a study, not to speak of an up to date edition and translation, of the *Vendidād* (*Vīdēvdāt*), an often quoted key-text for much of what is perceived as typically Zoroastrian practices such as the disposal of the dead, the significance of the dog, and the rules regulating menstruation.²⁸

Recent studies of the names of the god Ahura Mazdā and the deity Vaiiu (Panaino 2002) and of the logic and formation of epithets in the Avesta (Sadovsky 2007) will be of interest to historians of religions. The exemplary collaboration between a Western philologist and a learned

²⁶ I.M. Steblin-Kamensky has published a new Russian translation of selected Avestan texts in 1993.

²⁷ Colpe et al. (1986) presents a (now somewhat dated) comprehensive repertory. For the mythic theme of the great winter see now Hultgård (2007).

²⁸ But there now is the Videvdad-project: <http://www.videvdad.com/> (November 29, 2007).

Parsi high-priest has greatly helped to understand a hitherto hermetically sealed treatise of ritualistic matters, the *Hērbadestān* and *Nērangestān* (Kotwal and Kreyenbroek 1995, 2000, 2003). Also some other Avestan texts no longer used in liturgical contexts have been studied (e.g. Piras 2000).

3. *Middle Persian Translations of the Avestan Texts (Zand)*

The *Hērbadestān* and *Nērangestān* are examples of texts where the Avestan and Pahlavi (Middle Persian) versions form an organic unity. In their edition Kotwal and Kreyenbroek therefore present both versions alongside each other. Not all Avestan texts have Middle Persian translations and commentaries, but many do, including the *Gāthās*. While the Zand, i.e. the Middle Persian translations cum annotations, were previously often dismissed as worthless from a philological point of view, they have in recent years been rediscovered with regard to their importance for philology as well as the history of religions. It is increasingly realized that the Zand was ascribed revelatory status alongside the Avesta. We now have some exemplary studies of the translation techniques (Josephson 1997; Cantera 2004), while the study of Zoroastrian exegesis, compared to what has been done for Jewish traditions, is still in its early stages (Shaked 2003; Elman 2006). Gignoux has made a first attempt to set up an inventory of the different commentators in the Pahlavi scriptures (Gignoux 1995). The reluctance to look at texts from both the Avestan and the Pahlavi angle may also be grounded in the academic division of labour which separates the study of ancient Iranian texts (often in departments of Indo-European Studies) from the study of Middle Persian (mostly, if done at all, in departments of Iranian Studies). Up to now research has not yet crossed the threshold of the Middle Persian stage. Translations of Zoroastrian texts into New Persian or Gujarāti are still not being studied at all.

4. *Pahlavi Texts and Sasanian Law*

The study of the Pahlavi literature seems to proceed as slowly as ever, but at least some important texts have been studied in the past two decades, also by Iranian scholars. Moreover, we now have quite an up-to-date survey of Pahlavi literature (Cereti 2001). However, the inher-

ent difficulties of that language (beginning with the script) require patience for progress in Pahlavi studies.

Several Middle Persian texts discuss legal matters, including a large collection of edited judgments from pre-Islamic times that probably served as a practical handbook for judges. Since it rarely gives the reasons for the judgments it reports, the underlying legal theory and rules of jurisprudence have to be reconstructed tentatively (Jany 2005). The text has been edited and translated both by a Russian and a German scholar (Perikhanian 1997; Macuch 1993). One interesting aspect is that the text witnesses a degree of professionalization and differentiation of law from religious frameworks. This is especially remarkable given the claim made by several texts that the Avesta and the Zand constituted the ultimate legal sources and in view of the fact that there was an overlap between judiciary and priestly functionaries. The importance of the legal dimension is underlined by the idea — as expressed in several texts — that religions operate as “laws.” A core element of ancient Zoroastrianism is the family. Accordingly, there is an extensive family law, which has now been studied (Hjerrild 2003). The Zoroastrian concern with the fate of the soul in the other world has been translated into the legal reality of structures that can be loosely described as charitable trusts (Jany 2004). The impact of Sasanian law on later Islamic law in Iran has sometimes been pointed out, for instance with regard to trusts and temporary marriages (Macuch 2006). But a comparative analysis has concluded that “we cannot prove that Sasanian legal thinking has anything to do with *uṣūl al-fiqh*” (Jany 2005:327). One of the most exciting developments in the study of Zoroastrian-Sasanian law, as Albert de Jong has reminded me, is the recent exploration of parallels and relations with Talmudic law (see Macuch 2002 and Elman 2004 [with a review of previous research]). Unfortunately, the post-Pahlavi legal texts and traditions have so far not been studied at all.

5. *Astrology*

Astrology has been an implicit embarrassment to all views of Zoroastrianism that take the doctrine of free-will and ethical choice as the fundamentals of the religion. Nevertheless, the presence of astrology is an

empirical fact.²⁹ In recent years, Italian scholars have presented pioneering work on the Middle Persian texts dealing with astrology and its cosmographical, eschatological, mythological, political, and military implications (Panaino 1999; Raffelli 2001) as well as the wider inter- or transcultural contexts of astrology (Panaino 1998), with Iran being “on the road” between Babylonia and India. Gernot Windfuhr has repeatedly argued that astrological patterns are a key to a number of fundamental issues of ancient Zoroastrianism (e.g. Windfuhr 2003). Later and contemporary astrological practices will, one hopes, eventually also be deemed worthy of being studied.

6. *Greek and Roman Sources*

Greek and Latin sources link Zoroaster to astrology. Just note the Greek rendering of the name Zarathustra as alluding to a star (*astron*). In 1997, Albert de Jong published a groundbreaking re-evaluation of the Greek and Roman reports about Zoroastrianism, to some extent providing a counterbalance to the picture of the religion painted by the Iranian sources written for the most parts by priests. Unfortunately, there is still no comparable systematic study of the Oriental Christian and Jewish sources on Zoroastrianism. Some studies have been published on the “influence” of Iran on Greek culture and religion, including work written by classical philologists and historians of Eastern Mediterranean religions (e.g. Bremmer 1999, 2002; Burkert 2004).

7. *Politics and Religion in Achaemenian Iran*

As the first major transnational empire of the ancient world, Achaemenian Iran is the subject of perennial interest for scholars; however, there are ebbs and flows in this field of study as well. Currently, we are in the midst of a flow. Major exhibitions took place some years ago in London and Speyer (illustrated catalogues!); in 2006, Pierre Briant, the author of the most complete study of the empire published so far, set up an internet museum.³⁰ At the same time, we have in recent years witnessed

²⁹ An analogous observation can be made for magic, for which we are still lacking a comprehensive study (in any historical period).

³⁰ <http://www.museum-achemenet.college-de-france.fr> (accessed January 4th, 2008).

the attempts by several scholars writing in German, French and English to highlight the importance of the religious ideas and rhetoric underlying the imperial projects of the kings (Ahn 1992; Kellens 2002; Pirart 2002; Skjærvø 2005; Lincoln 2007; for a different evaluation see de Jong 2005). Still, Zoroastrianism was hardly the official or state religion of the empire. It seems that one impact of the work of the bureaucracy of the empire was the change of the Zoroastrian calendar (by adding a further five days to the $12 \times 30 = 360$ days of the earlier version), with important ramifications for the shape and “logic” of Zoroastrian festivals (Boyce 2005 [with a review of the literature on the intricate problems surrounding the calendar]).³¹

8. *Zoroastrianism under Hellenistic and Arsacid Rule*

Compared to the Achaemenian and the later Sasanian empires, the epitomes of Persian political grandeur, the “intermediary” periods have attracted less scholarly attention. It is basically the merit of Geo Widengren, Carsten Colpe and most of all Mary Boyce’s massive history-project to have unearthed the importance of these periods for the history of Zoroastrianism (Boyce and Grenet 1991; volume 4 on the Arsacids/Parthians is currently being prepared by Albert de Jong for publication). Apart from being unduly neglected in comparison to the other two main dynasties, the Parthian period is of interest for the comparative historian of religions because it may have been at that time that Zoroastrianism made an impact on early Christianity — a problem of recurrent interest on which some scholars have thrown new light in the recent decade on individual motifs (see Hultgård 1998a, 2000b, 2000c), especially concerning apocalypticism (Widengren, Hultgård and Philonenko 1995; Philonenko 2000; Frenschkowski 2004 [illuminating also from a methodological point of view]; for surveys of Iranian apocalypticism see Hultgård (1998b); Kreyenbroek (2002)). With Judaism Zoroastrians shared an even longer history, with points of contacts stretching from the Achaemenian Empire to modern Iran, India, and the diasporas. Interestingly, the case for putative Iranian influence has traditionally been made for Jewish texts or communities with relatively little direct

³¹) This lengthy article on the development of the calendar from pre-Zoroastrian times to modernity presents Boyce’s powerful vision of Zoroastrian history in a nutshell.

exposure to Iranians, while the Irano-Judaic contacts and interactions that took place with regard to Babylonian Jewry, i.e. Jewish groups that were living alongside Iranians in the Iranian Empires, have only recently been explored more systematically (Herman 2005). Among the various scholarly contributions to the relationships between both religious traditions one should especially note the series *Irano-Judaica: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture Throughout the Ages* published by the Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East in Jerusalem; five volumes have been published so far (1982–2003), with at least two more in the pipeline.³²

9. Sasanian Religion

Several sources testify to the special importance Zoroastrianism had for the Sasanian kings and in the framework of the Sasanian state. The beginning of the empire witnessed attempts at reorganizing religion, apparently in order to create an ideology of “unity” for the new empire (de Jong 2006). Gnoli has argued that the idea of “Iran” obtained a new religious significance in Sasanian propaganda (Gnoli 1989, 1993). Religious titles, myths and epical traditions apparently played a large — but disputed as for the details — role for the self-understanding of Sasanian kingship. This state of affairs has in earlier scholarship been theorized as a Sasanian “state-church.” The different titles, schools, and functions of “priests” in the Sasanian empire are now somewhat better understood (e.g. Gignoux 1986; Shaked 1990a). More recent scholarship, however, has painted a more complex picture, and the “state-church” theorem has been questioned, at least as a static institution, though the idea still has its supporters. One now rather points to historical change from early to late Sasanian periods as well as to the plurality of religious practices, ideas, and movements in Sasanian Iran (Shaked 1994a), not only with regard to movements such as Mazdakism (e.g. Crone 1994) and Zurvanism, a variant interpretation of protology mainly reported by Armenian, Syriac and Greek Christian and later Islamic secondary sources. The older literature classifies Zurvanism as a “heresy” (but some claim

³² Colpe (2003) assembles studies pertaining to the relationship of Iranian religions with their Western neighbours by this highly original author. See now also Sundermann (2008:155–160) for the Iranian background of the demon Asmodaios.

that it actually was the “orthodox” faith of many Sasanian kings).³³ The emphasis on religious plurality is reinforced by works of art of various genres as well as coins, seals, bullae and other materials. Magic and other forms of “popular religion” (Shaked 1997) have been studied, and the picture of the relationship between the different religions in the Sasanian empire has become more complex.³⁴ The various religions situated within the orbit of the Sasanian Empire (including but not limited to Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism) were on the one hand well-demarcated and partly also rival communities, but at the same time there is evidence that they shared common concerns and forms of religion generally classified as magic and popular religiosity. The encounter or confrontation with rival religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism took several forms including mutual resentment (Williams 1996), polemics (Shaked 1990b; Ahdut 1999) and redefinitions of religious self-understanding (De Jong 2003). The statement that “while publications on Sasanian primary sources . . . have noticeably increased in recent years, historical syntheses and historiographical treatises remain scarce” (Shayegan 2003:363) is even more true for the religious than the political and social history of the last pre-Islamic empire.

10. *Iran Major*

Recent research has emphasised the local and regional variability of Zoroastrianism. Some Greek and Roman sources point in this direction (de Jong 1997). There is a dissertation on Zoroastrianism in Armenia (Russell 1987) and a series of follow-up articles by the same author (Russell 2004). Armenian Zoroastrianism apparently was markedly different from the South Western Iran version of the religion (as attested in later sources). While Zoroastrianism in the Caucasus needs to be explored further — especially the case of Georgia requires greater attention — there now are some exciting studies of Zoroastrianism in Eastern Iran in the wider sense (often referred to as Central Asia), mostly in Bactria and Sogdia (in today’s Uzbekistan and Tajikistan). Philologists have continued to study Bactrian and Sogdian documents. While we

³³ De Blois (2000:6) suggests a Greek origin of the Zurvanite myth.

³⁴ A series of publications on Christianity in the Sasanian empire have been published in recent years.

have Christian, Buddhist, and most of all Manichaean writings in Sogdian (for a survey see Tremblay 2001), Zoroastrianism is attested in that language only by fragments. New textual materials from Bactria have been unearthed and are being studied, but it seems that few of these documents have explicit religious content; sometimes, however, they do have implications for religious history, for example with regard to the calendar (Shaked 2004). The arts of Central Asia in general and Sogdia in particular have been recovered by archaeologists and art historians, especially from the former Soviet Union. Works addressing the religious dimensions of the arts and archaeology of Central Asia, many of them by the Russian archaeologist Boris Marshak (e.g. 2002) and the French archaeologist Frantz Grenet, point to some remarkable differences compared to Western Iranian and Avestan Zoroastrianism with regard to institutions, religious practices and representations as well as to the organization of the pantheon (see also Tremblay 2006b). Some Chinese and Japanese scholars have in recent years begun to explore the East Asian history of Zoroastrianism from antiquity to the present (Ito 1980; Guangda 1994, 2000; Baiqin 2004; Aoki 2006a). Since this scholarship is mostly in Chinese and Japanese, it is hardly being noticed by American and European scholars.

11. Islamicization

The religious plurality of Sasanian Zoroastrianism is still mirrored by the early Islamic reports (e.g. Shaked 1994b). Even the Pahlavi texts, the majority of which were written or, in the case of older cumulative traditions, assumed their final shape in the Islamic period, are less homogenous doctrinally than is commonly assumed. The Arab conquest and the subsequent Islamicization of Iran fundamentally changed the societal status, religious shape and social context of Zoroastrianism. With the marginalization of the communities, their theological and mythological horizon naturally became more restricted. In the East, Islamicization led to the total disappearance of Zoroastrian communities. While these changes appear radical and dramatic in retrospect, Islamicization was quite a complex process that did not take place overnight. Jamsheed Choksy has produced a pioneer study for the first centuries (1997). More research is needed.

12. *The Zoroastrian Legacy in Islamic Iran*

While Zoroastrian communities disappeared, elements from pre-Islamic civilization and Zoroastrianism were absorbed into Islamic Iranian culture in general and in royal contexts in particular. The Islamic conquest of Iran was counterbalanced by the Iranian conquest of Islam. Some elements of such processes of transfer and appropriation have been studied with regard to law (see above) as well as (among other aspects) proverbs, stories, literary motifs, tropes of royalty, ideas about the worship of the soul (for all these examples see Shaked 1995) and festivals (Cristoforetti 2002). Ehsan Yarshater, the editor of the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, has published an extensive survey of the state of knowledge with regard to Iranian themes in, among others, the Koran and the hadith, and has challenged some widely accepted views about the Iranian presence in the Islamic world (Yarshater 1998). Students of folklore and regional ethnography have repeatedly pointed to pre-Islamic legacies in narratives, practices, and languages, but this question has not been studied systematically. All these issues, which are situated at the crossroads between different branches of scholarship, are far from exhausted.

13. *Zoroastrianism in Modern and Contemporary Iran*

On the mental map of many people Zoroastrianism is an “ancient” religion. Speaking to various audiences, I have often encountered surprise at the very existence of Zoroastrians in contemporary Iran. Again the academic division of labour seems to have impeded scholarly work. Iranologists not specifically working on pre-Islamic culture are as a rule not interested in Zoroastrian matters. Zoroastrians are hardly ever mentioned in books on modern and contemporary Iranian history and culture. The little scholarly interest there has been (apart from Mary Boyce, see above) has come from social anthropologists (Fischer and Abedi 1990; Kestenberg Amighi 1990).³⁵ My own work (Stausberg

³⁵ In Iran, Katayoun Mazdapour has published substantial work on the Zoroastrian dialect spoken in Yazd (known as Dari). Anahita Farudi and Maziar Toosarvandani from the University of Virginia have started the Dari Language Project (<http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/~dari/index.html>; accessed April 2nd, 2008).

2002b:152–262) and that of Choksy (2006a) represent initial surveys, but much more primary research is needed.³⁶

14. Parsi Studies

Compared to the dearth of studies on the Iranian communities, the Parsis are much better studied. There is published work on Parsi history, both on pre-colonial times (Kamerkar and Dhunjisha 2002) including the publication of some primary sources (Cereti 1991, 2007) and, even more so, on the colonial period with an emphasis on Bombay (Palsetia 2001). There are several studies of Parsi politicians, business-people, industrialists, journalists, charity, and theatre. Parsis themselves keep on publishing eulogies of their heroes. Turning to religion, a recent volume assembles studies of religious texts and performances as well as social, economical, political, and religious history (Hinnells and Williams 2007). A substantial account, in the making for three decades now, by Hinnells and Jamasp Asa, a Parsi high priest, is awaited any time now. The Japanese scholar Harukazu Nakabeppu has done extended long-term fieldwork in an old priestly centre in rural India, but since his publications are in Japanese they have made no impact on Western scholarship. Other notable work includes an experiment with applying a post-colonial perspective on the recent trajectories of the community (Luhrmann 1996) and, more relevant for the study of religion, a volume based on interviews with middle aged or elderly (predominantly) lay persons in Mumbai, providing valuable first-hand insight in the range of religious mentalities and practices among urban Parsis (Kreyenbroek 2001). Despite all these studies (plus the semi-scholarly work done by Parsis themselves), there are still quite a few lacunae regarding a number of aspects, most visibly with regard to Parsi history outside Mumbai city.

15. Diaspora

Already from the late 18th century, the Zoroastrian communities in India and Iran were affected by national and international migration. Migration has accelerated in past decades, probably resulting in the

³⁶ Sarah Stewart (SOAS) has recently initiated an ambitious project.

most radical geographical and demographical change of Zoroastrianism throughout its long history. Zoroastrians have migrated to Sri Lanka, Burma, East Asia, East and South Africa, Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and other places. It is the lasting merit of John Hinnells to have observed, documented, and analysed these processes since the 1970s, resulting in two major publications, one on Zoroastrianism in Britain (Hinnells 1996), and one on the world-wide diaspora (Hinnells 2005; for Sri Lanka see now Choksy in Hinnells and Williams [2007]; for Japan see Aoki [2006b]). In his work Hinnells mostly focuses on the Parsis and pays considerably less attention to the Iranians. (Iranian Zoroastrians are likewise virtually absent from the vast literature published on Iranian diasporas.) More ethnographic work is needed, for example with regard to religious practices. Hinnells' impressive database was created in the 1980s. It will therefore be of crucial importance to keep the record up to date (for a 2003 survey on Zoroastrians in the UK and parts of Europe see Mehta in Hinnells and Williams [2007]).

16. Gender

Attention to the effects and implications of gender in religion has in the past two decades become part of the ABC of religious studies. Not surprisingly, then, gender roles, stereotypes, and constructions have been studied with regard to ancient, medieval, and modern Zoroastrianism (e.g. de Jong 1995, 2003b), also with respect to implicit gender politics in embryological speculations (Lincoln 1988). Some studies address the position of women in ancient Iranian history (Brosius 1996; Rose 1998) and in Sasanian law (Elman 2003, 2006). Further work has been done on different types of female religious performances (Phallipou 2003; Stewart and Kalinock in Stausberg 2004b). There now exists a first book-length summary (Choksy 2002) of some general issues which, however, is unlikely to remain the final word spoken on this matter.

17. Purity and Rituals

Rules of purity have been addressed in social anthropology, notably by Mary Douglas. This has stimulated greater attention to the paramount importance rules of purity and practices of purification have in

Zoroastrianism (Choksy 1989; Williams 1994; de Jong 1999). The related areas of rituals and performances have likewise emerged as major topics in the study of religions, especially in connection with anthropological approaches. Again, this has had resonance in the study of Zoroastrianism. There has long been a “ritualist” trend in the interpretation of early Zoroastrianism (see above § 1). The age-old debate on the botanical identity of the Haoma used, or rather produced, in the priestly liturgies, has recently been continued and enriched by new hypotheses, coming also from Indologists (see Flattery and Schwartz 1989; Oberlies 1998; Falk 2002–2003; several articles in the *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 9/2003). When it comes to the actual ritual practices, not only do we now have authoritative descriptions and studies of several priestly rituals, most of all the Yasna (Darrow 1988; Kotwal and Boyd 1991; Williams and Boyd 1993 [in relation to aesthetical theory]; Windfuhr 2003; Fischer 2004; Skjærvø 2007), and animal sacrifice (de Jong 2002), but also analyses of funerals (including important archaeological work on the development of funerary structures), initiations, shrines and pilgrimages, prayer texts, royal rituals, lay and females performances, to name only some (see Stausberg [2004b]; for an inventory of ritual practices among contemporary Zoroastrians in India and Iran see Stausberg [2004a]). All these fields, however, are far from exhausted. Among many other things, we are still lacking a substantial study of Zoroastrian fire-temples (for some preliminary surveys see now Choksy [2006b, 2007]; the archaeological documentation needs to be further systematized).

18. *Western Perceptions of Zoroastrianism*

There is a long history of outside perceptions of Zoroastrianism. Recall the Greek and Roman reports. However, there are also other Oriental sources available, mainly by Christian and Islamic authors (e.g. Shaked 1994b; Stausberg 1997). Already from antiquity there is a tradition of pseudepigraphical materials attributed to Zoroaster and some of his associates (Beck 1991; Stausberg 2007b). In Western Europe, we find since the Renaissance wide-ranging discursive representations of Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism (also iconographic visualizations, for which see Stausberg 1998c), far beyond the limits of scholarship. By now there are two studies of the appropriation of Zoroaster in Western European intellectual and religious history, one focusing on the early modern period

(Stausberg 1998a), another giving snapshots taken from a larger chronological framework, all the way from the Greek reports to Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* written in the 1880s (Rose 2000; on Nietzsche see now Mayer 2006). With Nietzsche, Zarathustra became part of popular culture. The post-Nietzschean Western history of Zoroaster still remains to be written, which should ideally be done by incorporating a history of scholarship.

Prospects

As will have become clear, some areas of scholarship are more off the beaten track than others. The intensity of the debate, the speed of innovation, and the available research output are generally higher in areas with more participants, but sometimes individual scholars have been able to open the doors to new arenas. In some cases, there are vast terrains to be discovered behind these doors, whereas other arenas can turn out to be just large enough for one book or two.

In some cases, the innovations consist of reinterpretations of already available data based on established methodologies. In other cases, new source materials are being explored. A third type of innovation results from the application of new methodological and theoretical insights or approaches deriving from other research fields to the study of Zoroastrianism.

In all these areas productive research will hopefully continue, especially in such areas where study has only just begun. Hopefully, research will also take quite unexpected turns and address at least some of the various lacunae pointed to above. The various developments taken together imply the need to move conceptually beyond essentialist notions of the religion in order to obtain a more complex picture of Zoroastrianism. It is likely that the predominance of rather normative views of Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrian history in the past — for instance with regard to the importance of certain kinds of source materials, periods, and protagonists — has obscured other significant research options.

In light of the fragmentary situation of the field, the future prospects for the study of Zoroastrianism in general are difficult to assess. Since several subject areas are dominated by single individuals, their disappearance (be it only for changing research agendas) may paralyse the

further development of such fields. On the other hand, the recently created academic positions devoted to the field (in London and Toronto) raise the hope for its more sustainable development.

Our survey of recent research achievements has illustrated the tendency that certain hot topics in the general study of religions have also made an impact on Zoroastrian studies. Although the results of such attempts may not always have been as substantial as one might wish, the trend of moving from general insights to the study of the particular is likely to continue. Some areas where I actually do hope for this development to take place include the study of visual and material cultures, which would help to move beyond a textual model for the study of religion. The study of material cultures would focus, among other things, on food and eating, consumption, clothes and clothing, home furnishing and domestic interiors, architecture, place, and landscape. Furthermore, the economic and legal frameworks of the communities have not been much studied, in particular with regard to the Iranian communities.

Apart from such developments, which some may regard as rather fancy and which all privilege the modern periods, in the study of Zoroastrianism much homework still needs to be done, and one could easily play the ball back to the philologists. For despite some exciting developments in Old and Middle Iranian studies, as a historian of religions one would wish the philologists not to forget the elementary tools of the trade. While we now finally have some grammatical surveys of Avestan — one in German and one in Spanish — we still have to largely rely on a dictionary from 1904. An up-to date dictionary of Middle Persian is likewise lacking — as well as a grammar — and many key texts still need to be properly edited. Above all, the Zoroastrian literatures in New Persian and Gujarāti are situated in academic no man's land and have to a large extent remained *terra incognita* for Zoroastrian studies³⁷ (an exception confirming the rule is Vitalone [1996]).³⁸ Accordingly, a fair amount of mapping and surveying still needs to be done.

³⁷ This criticism applies to my own work as much to that of other scholars.

³⁸ Some further books are in the pipeline, including a work on Persian Zoroastrian prayer poetry by Beate Schmermbeck and a study-cum-edition of the main poetic Persian text on the migration and early history of the Parsis in India by Alan Williams (see also Williams in Hinnells and Williams [2007]).

Only once that work is done will the scholarly community be able to bridge the late Medieval or early modern periods and the modern and contemporary histories and thus produce a comprehensive picture of Zoroastrian history.

To conclude, the field is extremely fragile, but the good news is that an abundance of research options remain open. The question of the origins of Zoroastrianism still seems as open as ever, and a comprehensive study is needed. Although philologists keep on referring to the Vedas in order to throw light on the Avestan texts, only some topics have been investigated in a comparative manner (Hintze 2000) and no systematic study has been attempted. There are also basic questions of a historiographical nature that need to be addressed. As for the field of modern and contemporary Zoroastrianism, which to my eyes is one of the most under-researched areas, my own research agenda points towards a study of two contradictory and even antagonistic developments: modern Zoroastrian esotericism as it developed in early 20th century India (see Stausberg 2002b:118–127) and non-ethnic Neo-Zarathushtrianism which has taken global dimensions since the Iranian Revolution (for a sketch see Stausberg in Hinnells and Williams [2007]).

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