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Eventisation of religion: the 12th World Zoroastrian Congress in New York City as an identity-oriented event

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ABSTRACT

Interested in the modern transformation of religious events, I discussed the 12th World Zoroastrian Congress, held in New York City in 2022, as a social construct. The Congress is the most important Zoroastrian community festival, held every four or five years since 1960 and perceived as a platform to strengthen the sense of belonging and interact with co-religionists from all over the world. Based on a qualitative methodology, I analysed it as a transnational gathering that oriented attendees to a specific vision of the cultural program and Zoroastrian collective identity – multifaceted, constantly negotiated and transformed, referring to universalistic values, emphasising equality and inclusivity, and challenging essentialised identities that were popular among previous generations. I demonstrated how the event promoted the identity characteristics of modern religious diasporic communities and was open to marginalised or excluded groups such as women or people born outside traditional Zoroastrian families.

KEYWORDS Zoroastrians; Zoroastrianism; Parsis; festival; eventisation; collective identity

Introduction

We live in times of eventisation, including the eventisation of faith (Pfadenhauer 2010), in times of immense popularity of festivals and collective celebrations on various scales. Event tourism makes people move around the world, enjoy moments detached from everyday life, celebrate and pause, experience new states of consciousness and indulge in rituals and reflection (Fournier 2019; Procter 2004). Collective events enable cultural exchange and the revitalisation and preservation of culture, positively impacting community development, and provide entertainment, education and opportunities for social interaction (Jepson and Clarke 2016, 3–4).

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Although the COVID-19 pandemic suspended festivals and popularised online events instead, many people waited to gather offline as soon as the pandemic subsided. Zoroastrians, followers of the ancient Iranian religion, were waiting to celebrate the 12th World Zoroastrian Congress (WZC), planned for July 2022, in New York City. Despite the still relevant threat of COVID-19, 75% of would-be attendees signed up through early-bird registration. The event attracted 1,200 participants from 16 countries – about 1% of the global Zoroastrian population of just over 100,000 members.

Zoroastrians are scattered around the world and despite its small size, the population is diverse, divided by worldview differences and those resulting from the cultural distance between Zoroastrians originating from Iran and Parsis – descendants of Zoroastrians, who migrated from Iran to India centuries ago. Due to the differences, the lack of central religious authority and the political difficulties of moving between some Zoroastrian-populated countries (for example, the obstacles for Iranians living in Iran to obtain foreign visas and for American and British citizens to travel to Iran or Americans of Pakistani origin to India), there is no collective religious celebration of the common shape and pilgrimage site of significance for the entire population.¹ However, the idea of community gatherings is strong among Zoroastrians, who perceive them as a platform to strengthen collective identity, interact with co-religionists and even meet a future spouse, as some Zoroastrians value endogamy. Besides the WZC, which is the most important and popular event, there are others, some several decades old, such as the World Zoroastrian Youth Congress (to connect Zoroastrian youth between the ages of 18 and 35), the North American Congress and the conventions of the World Zoroastrian Chamber of Commerce (to facilitate Zoroastrian networking and increase trade and economic prosperity).

The WZC is held every four or five years since 1960. Some were organised in Zoroastrian homelands: in Tehran and Mumbai; others were held by the Zoroastrian diaspora, including the one in NYC and the previous one in Perth in 2018. Their attractions include lectures on a variety of topics, interactive events and art performances. Dwyer and Jago distinguished two types of festivals: large mainstream festivals for a large audience and events with a strong community dimension, stressing non-economic objectives and providing social impact (Dwyer and Jago 2019, 43–44). WZCs fall into the latter category. They are planned, themed events, created by a community to celebrate its way of life, highlighting a particular space and time (cf. Jepson and Clarke 2016, 3–4), and as such they are the subject of my reflection, providing an insight into the modern eventisation of Zoroastrianism.

Scope and methods of research

Since the classic contributions of van Gennep, Durkheim and Turner to understanding community gatherings and collective rituals, studies on festivals and events have developed widely (Jepson and Clarke 2016; Testa 2019). Recent scholarships present how events allow participants to identify with the local community or place and contribute to their promotion (Bres and Davis 2001; Pedrana 2015), decrease cultural awareness and community engagement in cultural life (Gordin and Dedova 2016), manifest and reaffirm communal and religious identities (Araujo Aguiar 2019; Liutikas 2016; Wise 2015), communicate cultural heritage (Flinn and Turner 2015; Fournier 2020; Zammit 2015), revive local and traditional forms of culture (Muktupāvela and Laķe 2020; White 2015), entertain and create memories (Kinnunen and Haahti 2015).

The WZC fits into what Getz categorised as widespread festivals with heritage and religious themes, including popular in North America 'community festivals' that offer a combination of entertainment, spectacle and sports, and foster community cohesion (Getz 2007, 33). Festivals with a strong community dimension, including WZCs, are symbolically constructed 'as significant community moments' (Procter 2004, 60). Through a cultural program that communicates to the audience the distinctive attributes of the community and its relationship to the surrounding world, they orient attendees towards a specific collective identity, modelling the collectivity boundaries and the criteria of belonging to it (Eisenstadt 2003, 82–83).

To create identity, collective events highlight certain symbols, values and narrations (Procter 2004, 64). However, their rhetoric is not accidental and the process of creating it is not unidirectional, as events activate and are activated by ideas that are already in circulation (Duffy and Mair 2015, 54). The cultural program is designed by 'community evangelists' (Procter 2004, 63; cf.; Eisenstadt 2003), that is, community leaders, enthusiasts and entrepreneurs. Its final structure, planned in detail to create specific experiences for attendees, depends on the expectations and attitudes of a variety of people involved, including producers, stakeholders and attendees, who would not come if the event had no meaning to them.

What significantly impacted the 2022 WZC's program was its organisation by the North American diaspora, co-hosted by ZAGNY (Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York) and FEZANA (Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America), and the fact that a large part of the audience came from the continent. North America has become home to an expanding, demographically young and diverse Zoroastrian community. According to data collected by Zoroastrian organisations, in 2012 the Zoroastrian populations of India (61,000) and Iran (15,000) decreased significantly from their

2004 numbers, while that of North America (over 20,000), comprising both Iranians and Parsis, saw a significant increase² (Rivetna 2012, 3–4). Understanding North American Zoroastrianism is particularly important, as diasporic communities influence Zoroastrianism in ‘old’ countries by way of transnational networking, financial support and the establishment of world-wide bodies (Hinnells 2005, 2).

In this paper, I examine the WZC as a social construct, which means an event shaped by decision-makers and other involved people not as a unique experiment but in a recognisable format with collectively assigned and generally recognised meanings (Getz 2007, 182, 199). Through participant observation conducted during the WZC in NYC, I gathered extensive data, including field notes, photographic documentation and printed materials received by Congress attendees, supplemented with online materials issued by its organisers. I have participated in all the panels I describe here. I was one of the few attendees from outside the Zoroastrian community, which enabled me to observe from a distance. Nevertheless, the fact that I had studied modern Zoroastrianism for years allowed me to follow the processes happening in the community and to connect with many of its members on different levels. At such events, I am not just an outside observer, but a participant, which deepens my perspective.

I subjected the data to the qualitative content analysis. In the analytical section of the article, accounting for the strategies employed in the event’s design, I demonstrate the three key themes around which the WZC message was built. Then, based on these findings, I answer the question of to what collective identity the event oriented members of Zoroastrian community. Reflecting on the WZC as a social construct is not new in my scholarly expertise, as I participated in the 2018 WZC in Perth (Niechciał 2020b, 2020b), so the findings presented here are of a comparative nature and contribute to a general reflection on transnational ethno-religious identities.

World Zoroastrian Congress as a community-oriented festival

Belonging

One of the main topics raised at the WZC in NYC was belonging. The event was tagged with the slogan *Bridging the Global Zarathushti Existence*, referring to the strengthening sense of cohesion and belonging of the attendees to the transnational Zoroastrian collectivity. The idea was for attendees to spend time together not only inside the conference rooms, but also at meals and coffee breaks, the gala banquet with dances and extra-priced events, such as the river cruise or Broadway shows recommended by the organisers. Universal topics discussed on stage, including good life, healthy ageing, building relationships and dealing with crises, united the audience across

ethnic or worldview divides. Universal values were raised, such as universal harmony, respect for others and care for the environment, and narratives valued personal experiences as appealing to the audience.

A message to reach the audience was to educate themselves about their heritage and religion. In general, Iranian and Parsi Zoroastrians are relatively well-educated and value education. For Parsis, education has been an identity marker since the development of modern-style education in nineteenth-century India (cf. Palsetia 2017, 22–25). A recent quantitative survey among the global Zoroastrian population (also presented at the WZC) found that very few Zoroastrians had no exposure to religious education. Respondents indicated that lack of knowledge of religion and rituals threatens the future of the community and when asked about the most significant factor in strengthening its future, nearly half of them chose ‘teaching the next generation about Zoroastrian religion and culture’ (Engineer, Turtle, and Stewart 2023). The WZC program fit such expectations through talks about shared heritage, including *Legacy Project ‘Zoroastrian Footprints Worldwide’*, documenting the history of Zoroastrians in their traditional regions. Exhortations for self-education in Zoroastrianism came from the stage: for example, Narges Kakalia from New Jersey, on a panel *Identity, Belonging and Community in Zoroastrianism*, emphasised how education provides a sense of attachment. Jamsheed Choksy from Indiana University, a Parsi who migrated to the US and became a scholar here, praised the support of the Zoroastrian community for his academic career. He encouraged the audience to study history, explore various available materials and appreciate what Zoroastrians have in common, instead of wasting time on endless debates – he referred to extensive disputes, dividing Parsis. Yet another Parsi academic, political scientist Rashna Writer from London, emphasised the need to learn from each other and research one’s own religion, which is particularly important given the growing number of Zoroastrians marrying outside their community. There were also sessions on development and innovations in religious education, and in the closing words of the event, the audience was encouraged to ‘do our homework’ by educating themselves.

The issue of belonging relates to the transnational integrity of Zoroastrians. From the stage, mentions of joint charitable activities were made, such as those provided by the Global Working Group.³ Described activities included assistance to victims of COVID-19, which Parsis provided not only in India, but also to Zoroastrians in Iran, and online activities to unite community members scattered around the world but struggling with the same pandemic. Narration valued Zoroastrian charity and helping the needy, which, for the wealthy Parsi community, has become another significant trait in their self-image since the nineteenth century (Palsetia 2017, 16), and is important for Zoroastrians around the world as derived from Zoroastrian values (Engineer, Turtle, and Stewart 2023, 173–177).

However, in many ways, the WZC in NYC was very much a diaspora festival. The panellists who talked about Zoroastrian identity in fact referred to their diasporic identity and the abovementioned panel on identity featured only speakers living in the US. An important theme was finding a life path in a new homeland. For example, Homa Dashti from California, who came from Iran as an eight-year-old girl, spoke of the trauma of being torn from her environment. She emphasised how finding her Zoroastrian identity in a diasporic context and interacting with Zoroastrians helped her recover from an emotional crisis. She spoke movingly about working through this crisis thanks to 'a lot of prayer, a lot of yoghurt and a lot of therapy', as she said jokingly referring to the fact that she had abandoned her career to make traditional Iranian yoghurt.

During a session presenting youth leaders, it was stated that many of the youth and their future children are no longer American Iranians or Parsis, but Americans, with a different perspective on Zoroastrian heritage. At various moments during the event I traced references made to reinforce its attendees' sense of being at home in North America. Recalled was the American interest in the history of the Persian empire, exemplified by an image of Zoroaster over Madison Square and the popularity of names like Cyrus and Darius among Americans. Jamsheed Choksy challenged the community 'decay' feared by those dismayed by the demographic decline of Zoroastrians and called it 'nonsense', indicating the community's organisational growth, the establishment of new temples and the appearance of many Zoroastrian weddings in North America. Arzan Sam Wadia, the President of FEZANA and a Co-Chair of the WZC, stressed that the Zoroastrian community is the only diaspora that does not fight for a home and does not talk about returning, but has a home where it is. However, I found this statement exclusionary for some Iranians who, unlike Parsis, had not necessarily left their homeland for better career prospects but fled as refugees.

In addition to social and cultural community integrity, some activities built a sense of belonging to religious collectivity. On the first morning, there was a procession of priests with candles, who reached the stage and sang a prayer there. In the introductory words of the WZC organisers, there was a reference to the need to promote Asha, that is, a Zoroastrian principle that governs the world, meaning 'order, truth, justice' (Boyce 1979, xv). With a prayer for strength and health, referring to the 'mercy' and 'love of the Almighty', which allowed everyone to gather here, a high priest from the Atash Bahram temple in Udvarda, Dasturji Khurshed Dastoor, began his introductory words. He also ended the event with a prayer. Armita Dalal, a priest assistant (*mobedyar*) from California, with meditation and prayer began the session *The Era of Awakening! Hear from our Female Mobed-yars*.⁴ Religion was also

incorporated to the performance *The Story of Creation* by members of the Zoroastrian New York community.

Zoroastrianism was also shown in relation to other religions. The session *Faith Matters* was introduced as follows: 'we hope to promote harmony amongst the followers of all faith traditions'. The speakers representing Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Sikhism spoke of how religion grounds a person and faith matters in modern times. The session fit into interfaith activities popular among Zoroastrians in North America, as opposed to communities in Iran and India, less engaged in this movement.

Inclusivity

Another major theme of the WZC was inclusivity. The organisers stressed the merging of differences and, on the first morning, organised a presentation of country flags, inviting delegates from all countries present. Astad J. Clubwala from ZAGNY, a Co-Chair of the event, spoke about how community members are different but created by one Supreme Being. He called for respect for diversity; by mentioning the differences of countries, upbringing and world-view, he drew attention to the difference between Iranians and Parsis. Unity was also encouraged by Mobed Ardashir Khorshidyan, the head of the Zoroastrian Priests Council in Tehran, in his video speech in Persian, and by Khursheed Navder, the President of ZAGNY, who urged for 'bridging gender, age and faith differences' and establishing argument-based dialogue.

The age or generational divide results from the fact that first- and second-generation immigrants have different expectations about what being part of a Zoroastrian community gives them and how local Zoroastrian associations should function. At the youth session, young people talked about the global unity of their generation, supported by new technologies and networking, which would bury the differences, starting with the regional ones. Other activities that engaged young people were held on a small stage, including workshops and a session advertising the Return to Roots program, designed to encourage young Zoroastrians to explore their ancestral heritage.⁵ However, the networks described by young activists connected Parsis from old homelands and the Iranian and Parsi diaspora, but bypassed young Zoroastrians in Iran. Certainly, factors such as constraints on internet access in Iran and language differences play a role (Persian is a challenge not only for young Parsis, but also for some Iranians born in the diaspora, and English proficiency among young Iranians in Iran varies), reinforced by the political uncertainty that separates Zoroastrians in Iran from the rest. I spoke with a young Parsi leader and got the impression that she did not really have an idea of how to engage her peer co-religionists living in Iran in joint activities, even though she cooperated with Iranians in the diaspora.

Inclusivity is related to the controversial issue of community boundaries and the spread of Zoroastrianism beyond the families that have practised it for generations. Important words came from Justice Rohinton Fali Nariman, a former judge of the Supreme Court of India, in his lecture *Gender Equality: The Rights of Parsi Women after the Advent of the Constitution of India*: Reflecting on the Parsi migration to India, he said that their ancestors came to preserve religion, not 'race'. He challenged the claims of conservative Parsis to equate Zoroastrian heritage with 'blood' and 'race', who legitimise this idea by referring to *Qesse-ye Sanjan* [the story of Sanjan]—a myth about their ancestors landing in Sanjan, a town in south Gujarat, India (Boyce 1979, 166–67). Despite the absence of such wording in the text itself, Parsis colloquially invoke the text as the source of the prohibition against proselytising and converting outsiders to their religion (cf. Bharat 2017, 128–29). In the early twentieth century, this idea found support in eugenicist principles, essentialising Parsi identity criteria (cf. Sharafi 2015, 17–22).

The boundaries of Zoroastrian collectivity were challenged by the presence of Kurds from Iraqi Kurdistan who had left Islam for Zoroastrianism. They, like some Iranians and Tajiks, present themselves as 'reverts' who returned to the religion of their ancestors, which makes them less foreign and more easily accepted by traditional Zoroastrian communities than converts without any connection to Zoroastrian culture. At the WZC, Faiza Foad, in a session *One Zarathushtra, Many Zoroastrians: Iraqi Kurds Reclaim Their Heritage*, shared her personal search for Zoroastrian identity, and Mathew Travis Barber from the University of Chicago provided a lecture *An Overview of the Kurdish Zoroastrian Movement* on the history of the Parsi contacts with Kurds and the development of Zoroastrianism in Kurdistan.

An even bigger challenge was the session *Contemporary Research on Modern Narratives to a Zoroastrian Identity*, in which two young scholars from the University of London, Nazneen Engineer and Ruzbeh Hodiwala, presented research projects that I would collectively describe as exploring the crossing of traditional boundaries of Zoroastrian identity. Engineer talked about the identity formation of children having one Parsi Zoroastrian parent and one non-Parsi and non-Zoroastrian parent. Hodiwala touched on a more controversial issue from the perspective of traditionally understood Zoroastrianism, that is, the identity of people who did not come from Zoroastrian families, but became 'Zoroastrians by choice'. Moreover, such a person participated in the panel on identity: Anne Khademian, a former President of the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington, who was an American raised in the Lutheran church. After she married a non-Zoroastrian from Iran, they joined Zoroastrianism and they are raising their child as a Zoroastrian. For Anne, Zoroastrian identity was not inherited from ancestors but gained through a 'long journey' involving studying and multiple conversations with Zoroastrians; this was the story of not simply being

a Zoroastrian but becoming one. Answering questions from the audience, she said that no one has the right to tell a person whether or not he or she is a Zoroastrian, gaining applause.

Other personal stories told on stage showed that today Zoroastrianism cannot be reduced to a black-and-white division between those born Zoroastrian and outsiders. An example was provided by James Ball from New Jersey, who was born in a mixed family: his father was an American Christian and his mother was a Zoroastrian from India. To employ good values raising him, they approached the Baptists. Raised without much understanding of Zoroastrianism, James, as an adult, travelled to India, where he interacted with his Parsi relatives and the local Zoroastrian community, and began discovering his Zoroastrian identity. Eventually, he married a Parsi from Pakistan, and this brought him even closer to Parsis: His wife provided his life with a 'cultural connection' and he provided hers with a 'spiritual connection'. This example showed the multidimensionality of Zoroastrian identity, as in the traditional Parsi interpretation, he would be lost to the community: as the son of an intermarried woman, he could not be accepted as a Zoroastrian, marry a Parsi and initiate their children to Zoroastrianism.

On the last day of the WZC, the results of a survey conducted among the attendees were cited: about 70% of them agreed that Zoroastrianism is a set of certain rules and behaviours, not something you have to be born to; a similar percentage would accept the initiation of people from mixed families or have no ties to Zoroastrian families at all but simply chose this religion. These results fit well with the vision of Zoroastrianism presented by the organisers of the WZC and resonate with the fact that most of its attendees were recruited from the diaspora – such a perspective is a hallmark of American Zoroastrians.

Equality

The third main theme of the WZC was equality. It appeared to bridge other characteristics differentiating Zoroastrians, mentioned above, but gender equality came to the forefront. An important element of the WZC program that was devoted to discrimination against women was the abovementioned lecture by Justice Nariman. He was introduced as a person who supported allowing women of all ages to enter the Sabarimala temple of India – it was a reference to Nariman's contribution to judicial lifting of the ban on entering the important Hindu pilgrimage site in Kerala state by women of menstrual age, specified between 10 and 50. Although this case was not related to Zoroastrianism, it served as an allusion to what is still taboo among some Zoroastrians: the exclusion of menstruating women from rituals. Not age is important for Zoroastrians, but the fact that at a particular moment a woman menstruates; blood itself is not considered impure, but its outflow outside the

body, resulting from the evil's attack, violates the idealised physical state of humans. Purity laws required women to be isolated while menstruating and then cleansed ritually (Choksy 2002, 58–62). Currently, the main remnant of these practices is to prevent menstruating women from visiting places of worship and participating in religious practices.

The Zoroastrian vision of women as temporarily impure due to recurrent menstruation has also restricted women from serving as priests. In 2011, women were allowed to become priest assistants in Iran and more recently, there have been a few of them in North America, ordained either in Iran or by the North American Mobeds Council. However, this still stirs controversy and, unlike men, even women from priestly families are not allowed to become full priests. Here the WZC challenged traditional norms, not only by having female priest assistants participate in the opening priestly procession, but also by giving them a separate panel, supporting a change in the gender structures of the priesthood.

Nariman elicited applause touching another subject related to gender equality: According to Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, everyone has the right to freedom of religious practice and 'everyone' includes women, regardless of whom they married. In saying so, he referred to the fact that in India, where endogamy had become a defence mechanism employed by Parsis against assimilation, in the twentieth century Parsi women faced discriminatory regulations that excluded them and their children from the community and banned them from religious rituals and entering fire temples (Writer 1994, 56–59; 111–15). Although some also oppose the intermarriage of Zoroastrian men, it is women who are victims not only of legal discrimination but also of emotional suffering: Studies indicate that in India they receive less support from their parents than men who marry non-Zoroastrians (Bharat 2017, 266–268). This issue occurred in the intimate story in the panel on identity, shared by Narges Kakalia from a Parsi family from Karachi. While growing up, she was expected to marry a Zoroastrian, because, according to her mother, it was the only possibility to remain a Zoroastrian. However, Narges married a Jew she met in the US, and they are raising children as a 'multifaith family'; her mother never accepted this and until her death did not want to meet her son-in-law and grandchildren. I felt that this story caused a stir among the audience, which I link to the fact that intermarriages are relatively common in the diaspora, and it is difficult to justify such a conservative attitude.

The panel with the significant title *We, the Zoroastrian Women: Voices of Today, Leaders of Tomorrow* brought another powerful message concerning women. Katayun Kapadia, an active community leader, spoke not only of her personal experiences as a woman from a traditional Zoroastrian community and a conservative Parsi family, but also of the problems of all women: the difficulty of gaining voice and respect in a masculine world,

the perception of women as aggressive when they fight for their rights and the need for greater participation of women in leadership positions. Shahin Bekhradnia, an Oxford-based Parsi scholar and activist, stressed that gender equality had appeared in the *Gathas* (the oldest Zoroastrian hymns attributed to Zoroaster) and that the ‘obscurantist perspective’, allowing discrimination against intermarried women, had been influenced by later texts distorting the message of religion. She encouraged – again, promoting education – not to listen to others, but to independently seek information, overcome ignorance, and on that basis to demand equality and wisely implement equality teachings in lieu of accepting male authority. Rashna Writer spoke of women as guardians of heritage and keepers of memory, having a special role in the diaspora context of changing identities and the survival of Zoroastrianism. She added that, while debatable by conservative Parsis, it is impossible to ignore the increasing number of intermarriages.

Gender equality covers not only women, but also the LGBTQ+ community. This is even more controversial, as in the Zoroastrian theology it appeared only in the narrow sense of male homosexuality, embodied in anal intercourse, forbidden as instituted by the forces of evil (Skjærvø 2004). The acceptance of LGBTQ+ people was manifested at the WZC gala banquet: On the stage, young people sang about equality and acceptance, there were rainbow flags and the song *We are the Champions* by Freddie Mercury, a famous bisexual singer of Parsi descent.

Discussion: identity promulgated by the World Zoroastrian Congress

I analysed the WZC as a space of symbolic practices that can perpetuate or resist prevailing values and norms (Getz 2007, 32–33). Considering its high attendance, it has been a hallmark event for the transnational Zoroastrian population. Although organised by a religious community, it fits the changes seen in modern times: with the processes of revitalisation, commodification, heritagisation, globalisation of tastes, cultural diffusion and the influence of the mass media, traditional festivals and rituals have changed considerably; celebrations of the major life-cycle and yearly rituals have been giving way to newly invented festivals in thematic events format (Fournier 2019, 18–19). Instead of celebrating religiosity, WZC was designed as a joyful cultural community festival to celebrate its ethno-religious heritage, an entertaining event with artistic performances and a convention that served discussion, education and networking.

Getz pointed out that the explicit theme of a festival is not necessarily the best indicator of its meanings (Getz 2007, 33). My analysis showed that the theme of the 2022 WZC, *Bridging the Global Zarathushti Existence*, was fairly

well connected to the set of meanings provided by the event, but also showed nuances: the leading themes were belonging, inclusivity and equality. What came to the fore was the fact that the organisers gave voice to people who did not fit the traditional image of a Zoroastrian, including those either marginalised or excluded from the community, such as intermarried women and their children, and people born out of Zoroastrian families but claiming the Zoroastrian identity.

Understanding the importance of such an openness needs reflection in the context of the complexity of the Zoroastrian identity. Although ancient Zoroastrianism spread throughout the Persian Empire, the subsequent spread of Islam led to declining numbers. The threat of assimilation and extinction in Iran and the need to adapt to the hosting society in India have reinforced the importance of strong boundaries, separating others from Zoroastrians defined by essentialised attributes. However, currently Zoroastrians comprise a diverse population without a central authority that could impose a common conversion-related policy or intermarriage rule, so varied attitudes range between the conviction that only those born in an Iranian or Parsi Zoroastrian family can become Zoroastrians and the belief that Zoroastrianism can be a religion of choice (cf. Niechciał 2020a).

The discussion of conversion is especially heated in light of the decline of Zoroastrian population: There are no data concerning Iran, but according to Mumbai statistics, in 2011, there were 741 deaths for every 100 births (Rivetna 2012, 8). Some believe that allowing new members into the community may prevent the disappearance of Zoroastrianism. Although the Kurdish representation of so-called 'reverts' was already present at the WZC in Perth to reclaim their Zoroastrian heritage, stirring up controversy, in NYC the Congress organisers went even further, hosting a talk on 'Zoroastrians by choice' and inviting an American convert. The legitimisation of an absolute outsider's experience of achieving Zoroastrian identity completely undermined the traditionally understood identity and Zoroastrianism as an essentialised ethno-religious phenomenon.

Some see another rescue from the demographic decline in allowing children who have a non-Parsi (or non-Zoroastrian) father to get initiated to Zoroastrianism. Despite the reluctance of conservatives, intermarriages are already present in Zoroastrian communities and statistics showed an upward trend for both North America and Mumbai between 1991 and 2011 (there were no data for Iran, where law limits intermarriages by forcing religious minorities marrying Muslims to convert to Islam). In North America, the percentage rose from 23.7% to around 60%, while in Mumbai from 20.5% to 38.9% (Rivetna 2012, 6). More recent data are available for the latter area, where intercommunity marriages accounted for 47.5% in 2022 (Parsiana 2023). Furthermore, a survey published in 2023 showed a high degree of Zoroastrian acceptance of intermarriages (77.4% worldwide and 90.5% in the

diaspora) and of children of mixed couples as Zoroastrians (75.2% worldwide and 89.0% in the diaspora) (Engineer, Turtle, and Stewart 2023, 23–24). Despite these changes, my observations among Zoroastrians show that the lack of inclusivity is still an essential topic and stories of non-acceptance, fuelled by the fear of extinction of Zoroastrianism, resonate louder than the above numbers. Such concerns resulted in raising this topic at the 2022 WZC, although studies indicate that in the case of India, with a drastically low Parsi fertility rate, the initiation into Zoroastrianism of children of mixed heritage would not stop the demographic decline (cf. Shroff and Castro 2011). No similar research has been conducted in North America, but Zoroastrians here are more likely than those in South Asia to have two or more children (Engineer, Turtle, and Stewart 2023, 33), so accepting children of mixed couples may have a greater impact on the number of Zoroastrians.

The issue of intermarriage and its relation to women's rights, ran through the entire event in a way that was unknown at the 2018 WZC in Perth. It showed the change over a few years, but it also was an outcome of specific power relations, since every such event is defined by those who have the influence on its design (Barab and Duffy 2000). While in Perth, due to the location, many WZC participants came from India, the WZC in NYC was a predominantly North American event, hosted and largely visited by the generally more open community – presumably not only the cost and difficulties of the journey but also the threat of COVID-19 played a role in discouraging potential participants from, for example, India. The Parsi diaspora communities settled due to business and trading opportunities in the nineteenth century in Asia and Africa survived by limiting social contacts with the outside world, but in North America, the fear of losing the Zoroastrian identity triggered different survival strategies. No longer immersed in exclusively Zoroastrian circles, migrants have prioritised the transmission of shared heritage and religious education. Furthermore, an identification with a new homeland has appeared, not present in the old diaspora, as the friendlier and multicultural environment of Canada and the US has encouraged newcomers to identify with the host nations (Hinnells 2005, 701–707).

The context in which the 2022 WZC was held allowed a public challenge to not only traditional Zoroastrian identity, but also the traditional genderisation of Zoroastrianism. At the Congress in Perth, women were among organisers of the event and held a session presenting their activities, but in the social frame shaped in the twentieth century, when women gained access to education and careers, but were still expected to marry a Zoroastrian and remain outside of religious structures. The topics of accepting intermarried women and admitting their children to resolve the decline in attendance at Zoroastrian temples in India were marginally raised and attracted little attention; behind the scenes, I was told that this was due to the pressure of India's conservative Parsi leadership. At the Congress NYC, the situation of

intermarried women was officially framed as discriminatory. Such women publicly marked their presence as rightful community members, challenging traditionally gendered structures and contributing to the feminisation of Zoroastrianism by accepting female transmission of heritage in families, where the father is a non-Zoroastrian.

Moreover, there was criticism, not present in at the Congress in Perth, of menstruation restrictions – in NYC women challenged the traditional view, which restricted them from becoming priests as they failed to maintain ritual purity. One female *mobedyar* was allowed to pray with male priests on stage in Perth, criticised by the conservative Parsis, but in NYC, female *mobedyars* not only participated in public prayers, but also had a session with an emancipatory tone. Although on a small stage, contrary to a panel of male priests hosted on the main one, this signalled a noticeable change, which may open when women, traditionally restricted by patriarchy to domestic rituals within endogamous marriages, will be performing duties of full priests.

The last two WZCs have also illustrated the mechanism of religion seizing a cultural character, transformed into a popular in the modernity 'cultural religion' (Demerath 2003, 227), which prioritises identification with religious heritage over personal religious commitment. I have described a similar phenomenon in the context of the Zoroastrians in Iran, where public celebrations of religious holidays, including the most important seasonal festivities called *gahambars*, are enhanced by cultural events, including poetry recitations, concerts and lectures. Religious acts are simplified, and the same is true for doctrine – through their simplicity they appeal to an average audience looking for simple moral guidance (Niechciał 2013, 139, 173–174). Festivities based on such premises attract diverse Zoroastrian audiences and contribute to inclusivity and overcoming differences, not to the popularisation of religious rituals. I noticed this trend already at the Congress in Perth; in NYC, interfaith activities popular among North American communities were present, bringing forward rather universalistic than particularly Zoroastrian values. Designed this way, the WZC is intended as a 'symbolically and behaviorally framed' (Procter 2004, 59) moment in the life of Zoroastrian collectivity, offering something for all its differing members.

In modernity, traditional rituals are turning into festivals. Religion as a phenomenon in which church-controlled collective life comes to the fore is now giving way to individual interpretations and experiences, and the believers themselves choose the events expected to be memorable to them. Through the process of eventisation, churches are trying to rejuvenate and adapt to modern expectations by designing events that innovatively combine elements of religious practices with a large, attractive cultural gathering, as exemplified by the Catholic Church's World Youth Day (Pfadenhauer 2010). What Australian, and North American Zoroastrian leaders proposed fits into this trend: WZCs are professionally designed, high-quality

hybrid products, contributing to strengthening belonging to the Zoroastrian community, with elements of traditional religiosity present but marginalised.

Planned events such as WZC are intended to provide an experience of liminality by means of a special space, time and realm of existence, filled with symbols and practices contrasting with everyday life, to completely engage participants and let them lose track of time (Getz 2007, 11–12). They foster the *communitas*, that is, a spontaneous and egalitarian mode of social relations, contrary to day-to-day hierarchical relations (Turner and Turner 1982, 202). At the WZC in NYC, the inclusivity and breaking hierarchy was extended not only to gender but also to age differences, ‘bridging’ generations of Zoroastrians on a scale not seen in Perth. While youth were underrepresented in Australia, North American organisers largely engaged the youth to co-organise and participate.

However, in one dimension, the 2022 WZC contributed to building the dam instead of a bridge. The 2018 WZC in Perth was Parsi-dominated, as Parsis statistically dominate Iranians in the Zoroastrian population and have a wealthier, secure community, and a trip from India to Australia was relatively easy. Although some potential participants were not allowed to leave Iran to participate in the event in Perth, it still gathered a group of Zoroastrians from Iran, including community leaders. Nevertheless, the political situation effectively prevented arrival from Iran to the WZC in the US; Iranians from the diaspora were not common either. The dominance of Parsis was visible in stories about the transnational activities of young Zoroastrians, which excluded Iranians in Iran, and about the perception of the diaspora-homeland relationship, which excluded Iranian refugees; it was also visible in the selection of music for a dance party and a book on Parsi cuisine as a welcome gift. Although the recorded message of the Iranian main priest was played to the audience, it was not translated into English from Persian, which Parsis generally do not understand, creating another barrier. Thus, while on a general level, the WZC was a product to bridge diversity and sustain inclusive identity by appealing to universal values such as education, charity and oneness, it also brought some divisions to the surface.

The WZC as an identity-shaping event reflects the general trends visible in the constitution of collective identities that emerged after the middle of the twentieth century. In particular, its last decades brought a hitherto unknown development of transnational networks or organisations, contributing to the emergency of identities transcending political or national boundaries (Eisenstadt 2007, 113–14). Globalisation and transcontinental migrations challenged prior frameworks, and, as in other major religions, in transnational, mobile Zoroastrianism, attempts to reformulate relations to the social arena and collective identity construction are visible.

Eisenstadt noticed a growing emphasis on the ‘inherent authentic universalism’ (Eisenstadt 2007, 117) of collective identities and the shift of reconstructed ethnic, local and religious identities – now transnational, immersed in universalistic terms and supported by educational programs, public communication and media – to the centre, previously taken by the homogenising programmes of national states. The WZC’s program, seeking a balance between the identity of a religious community and inclusive, universalistic values, linking Zoroastrians transnationally, has fit into this trend.

Conclusions

According to Eisenstadt, to understand the modern world, we have to reconstruct ‘story of continual development and formation, constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs of modernity, and of distinctively modern institutional patterns, of multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt 2000, 592). The story of the WZC as a transnational communal event promulgating a specific vision of cultural program and collective identity – multifaceted, constantly negotiated and transformed – contributes to such understanding. The essentialised components of identity, so popular among previous generations, have been overshadowed by universalistic values and emphasis on equality and inclusivity. The 2022 Congress in NYC promoted an identity that is characteristic of diasporic communities, visible in other religions in the diaspora, such as Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity (Eisenstadt 2000, 2007), opening up to marginalised or excluded groups.

I was interested in the WZC as a social construct and interpreted its meanings by considering the social forces and trends, including demographics and migrations, that impacted on the event (cf. Getz 2007, 65). Comparing the two subsequent Congresses allowed me to indicate changes and situate the events in sociocultural contexts. Considering the perspective of cognitive psychology, I believe the organisers planned it not only to be ‘memorable’, but also to be ‘transforming experiences’ that will result in durable changes in attitudes or behaviour (Getz 2007, 181). However, intentionally produced cultural meanings are subjectively filtered and this opens the way for future research of the reception of the WZC and its impact on the Zoroastrian community.

Notes

1. One of the key festivals is the New Year, but due to calendar differences, it is celebrated by Iranians at the beginning of the astronomical spring in March and by most Parsis in August (cf. Niechciał 2019). The nature of common holidays is also somewhat different in the two communities. Regarding religious

pilgrimages, Iran hosts significant sites (called *pirs*, with the most famous Pir-e Sabz near Yazd) that should be visited on designated days in the ritual calendar of Iranian Zoroastrians and Parsis have their own sites in India (the most sacred is Atash Behram in Udvada).

2. External data show the same trend. The Indian Census recorded 69,601 Parsis in 2001 and only 57,264 in 2011, and current demographic trends indicate a decline since then (Raju and Singh 2017). There is no exact data on Zoroastrians in Iran, where national censuses are not a reliable source of information, but the scholarly literature confirms a large decline in this population in recent decades (Niechciał 2024; Stausberg, Tamimi Arab, and Maleki 2023, 828) and my recent inquiries indicate 10,000–11,000 Zoroastrians in Iran. North American data from 2012 included only those officially registered with Zoroastrian organisations, so there may have been more; more recent estimates range between 25,000–35,000 Zoroastrians.
3. The organisation was founded in 2009 in Dubai, with the aim of connecting Zoroastrians across borders, networking and creating a platform for Zoroastrian leaders from different parts of the world to cooperate. More information available at <https://gczt.org/global-working-group/>.
4. The category of *mobedyar* emerged in twentieth-century Iran to denote trained laymen allowed to perform most of the priestly duties (restrictions on *mobedyar's* duties are interpreted differently in Zoroastrian communities) to cover the shortfall in the number of practicing hereditary priests (*mobed*).
5. <https://zororoots.org/about/>

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