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A Crisis for the Faithful

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The Parsi bodies are piling up in India. Parsis are modern adherents of the ancient Zoroastrian faith that emerged in the 6th century B.C. in Persia, predating Christianity and Islam. According to many scholars, Zoroastrianism influenced these religions and Judaism with its fundamental concept of a dualistic world of light versus darkness, with a good God pitted against the forces of evil.

In the earthly realm of humans, Parsis also believe in the ritual purity of fire, soil and water, elements that shouldn't be sullied by pollution from a defiling corpse. So while virtually all other cultures dispose of their dead by burial or cremation, Parsis have followed a more unusual method. Yet after millennia, that method now has been called into question, forcing a crisis of faith whose only answer is adaptation.

In a ritual so old it was described by Herodotus, Zoroastrians have laid out their dead atop Towers of Silence to be exposed to sun, sky and—most importantly—vultures. These massive harbingers of death with eight-foot wingspans once numbered in the millions across South Asia and could strip a corpse to the bone in hours. Yet their service has come to an abrupt end in the past decade as the vulture population plummeted due to a fatal reaction to a common painkiller given to the livestock and humans that the birds eventually feed upon. Ongoing habitat shrinkage has exacerbated the decline. With vultures virtually extinct, the Parsis are left struggling with the question of how to preserve traditions when modern forces conspire against them.

This threatened custom is just one more blow to a religion already perched on the edge of annihilation. Though tens of millions of Parsis once lived across Asia, now there are only an estimated 140,000 world-wide, with the majority in India and the next-largest group in the U.S. Most are based in Mumbai, where they own 155 pristine, park-like acres that shelter the squat stone Towers of Silence amid a dappled sunlit forest.

Vultures haven't been seen in Mumbai for years. The Parsis have attempted to replace the service that the birds provided so seamlessly, for so long, with a series of failed technologies, including ozone machines and chemicals to accelerate decomposition. They've settled on solar reflectors directed at the bodies to speed up the process of decay without violating the fundamental tenet of their religion to avoid fire. The most orthodox of priests disapprove even of this, claiming that it's tantamount to cremation.

Priests aren't the only ones holding the line against modernization. "People say the Towers of Silence are antiquated, that we should move on to cremation and forget our tradition," says Khojeste Mistree, an Oxford-educated Parsi scholar. "I'm totally opposed." Prof. Mistree and others in the Parsi governing body insist that the solar collectors are working.

Not so, according to Ms. Dhan Baria, a 70-year-old Parsi. After her mother's death in 2006, and following the leads of rumors about accumulating bodies, she hired a photographer to sneak into the towers. Gruesome photos confirmed the gossip. Now an active reformer, Ms. Baria believes that Parsis should have access to burial or

cremation, with full rites permitted on the sacred grounds, in order to avoid the fate of her mother's body, which remained on the towers long after her death, exposed through the treetops to some high-rise apartments of upscale Malabar Hill. In December, I walked through the grounds surrounding the towers with Ms. Baria. She pointed into the forest, where peacocks strutted about, and lamented repeatedly, "Why can't this space be used as a cemetery?"

Ms. Baria is typical of a growing group of Parsis who believe their faith must adapt in order to survive. Her photographs of decaying bodies heightened the divide within a dwindling community already fractured over other matters of tradition, including conversion and intermarriage, that vex various religious communities, including American Jews, in the face of modernity.

With the conventional Parsi priests offering what are, in effect, one-stop funeral services at the Towers of Silence, reformers feel unable to effect change within their religious community. Instead, some are turning to the Indian legal system. In a discrimination case now before the Gujarat state high court, a Parsi woman who married a non-Parsi is suing for the right to enter fire temples and to participate in last rites for her parents —practices that have traditionally been forbidden to non-Parsis or to those whose faith is questioned because of intermarriage.

"This powerful, vociferous minority of reformists doesn't know the religion," responds the Oxford scholar Mr. Mistree.

But what is "the religion"? To persist for millennia, Parsis have adapted many times over, emigrating from their native Persia in the 10th century and adjusting to India. They then spread out in a global diaspora to places where they have adopted burial and cremation because there simply are no Towers of Silence or circling vultures. Tradition is the bedrock of faith, observances and ritual the fundamental and physical manifestation of belief. Yet there are circumstances where, in order to uphold convention, it is necessary to reshape the foundation, carve here and add there, so that "the religion" might endure for millennia to come.

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