

SOAS  
LECTURE: 20 November 2007

*Peace and Justice in the Zoroastrian Faith*

Zarathustra the Iranian prophet was born in the second millennium BC and brought a message of remarkable vision and clarity for his fellow men. The Gathas, the 5 great hymns composed by Zarathustra himself in which he develops his teachings, remain to the present time the most sacred part of the Zoroastrian inheritance. Thus, a brief overview might help us better understand the development of a distinctive ethos which came to underline Zoroastrian civilization from its remote antiquity to the present day.

The elevation of the Zoroastrian faith to national stature and awareness of it beyond Iran's geographical boundaries began by degrees with the establishment of the Median Empire (614-550BC). Its' successor, the Empire of the Achaemenid Persians, who fashioned the first world empire and who ruled over the Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Ionian Greeks, Jews, Arabs and Iranians, lasted from 558-330BC. The foreign interlude of Alexander of Macedon's conquest of Persia ended with the establishment of the Arsacid Parthian dynasty in 247 BC; and finally, the empire of the Sasanian Persians which lasted from 224 to 651AD when Iran succumbed to the Arab conquest. The imperial Iranians would have brought their Zoroastrian religion and its attendant value systems to the attention of their extensive empire. Zoroastrian Iran for some thousand years therefore, exerted considerable political, military and economic might from the River Indus to the shores of the Black Sea, and from the Caspian Sea to the Nile. When the ancient Persians deliberated on peace and contemplated the essentials of justice, they would have done so from a distinctly Zoroastrian perspective.

A few words on Zarathustra's message would be useful. Surrounded as he must have been by fear of wrathful pagan gods and goddesses, and the lawlessness of marauding tribes, Zarathustra stressed in his teachings the fundamental distinction between good and evil and his profound belief in the justice of God.

Thus in the Gathas Zarathustra perceives of Ahura Mazda as the one, uncreated God. In Yasna 44, Zarathustra asks:

“I ask Thee, O Ahura Mazda! Who is the Creator of Truth? Who laid out the paths of the revolutions of the sun and the stars? Who makes the moon wax and wane? Who balanced the earth and the heavens? Who is the creator of water and vegetation? Who gave swiftness to the winds? Who was the fountain source of benevolent light and its absence? Who created the phenomena of sleep and wakefulness? Who created the dawn, the noon and the night which remind man of his duties? Who is the creator of the angel of devotion and love, Spenta Armaiti? Who planted the feeling of love in the heart of the father for his son?”

Zarathustra replies:

“O Ahura Mazda, I have come to this perfect realisation through Thy Holy and Divine Wisdom that Thou art the Creator of all.” (Pour Davoud, *The Gathas of Zarathustra*, Bombay, 1927, pp. 46-7).

Thus, Zarathustra attributed all that is good as emanating from Ahura Mazda. Two original principles co-existent from the beginning were twinned as the two *mainyus* – motivating forces, confronting humankind on earth. One is *Spenta* (holy, virtuous), which adheres to Ahura Mazda; the other is evil, further explained as *Angra* (hostile and inimical). They are diametrically opposed in Thought, Word and Action, the pivotal ethical triad of Zarathustra's teachings: *humata, hukhta, huvareshtha* (good thoughts, good words, good deeds). The Prophet is most painstaking in stressing the complete antithesis of *Spenta Mainyu* and *Angra Mainyu*. He cautions us through an allegory whereby one communicates to the other thus:

“Neither our thoughts nor teachings nor intentions, neither our inclinations, nor words, not even our actions or conceptions nor our souls are in agreement”.

The one is the author of life and progress, the other of non-life and regression. All the bad in the world is attributed to evil, which temporarily opposes goodness. The ethical message of Zarathustra is that the whole Good Creation should unite to destroy evil.

There is therefore, no compromise with *Angra Mainyu* in the Zoroastrian tradition. However, *Angra Mainyu*, while being wholly evil, is finite in time. Ahura Mazda is assisted in his task of overcoming evil by a heptad of *Amesha Spentas* (Bounteous Immortals), and *yazatas* (those worthy of reverence). Man and the other creations of Ahura Mazda, the physical manifestations of the *Amesha Spentas*: sky, water, earth, animals, plants and fire are to work in harmony, thus linking the material and spiritual worlds. Man's role in this scheme of things is pivotal. He is given choice and free will. In Yasna 30.2 we are told:

“Listen with your ears to the best things. Reflect with a clear mind – man by man for himself – upon the two choices of decision, being aware to declare himself to Him before the great retribution.” (S. Insler, “The Gathas of Zarathustra”, Leiden, *Acta Iranica*, 1975, p.33).

This, Zarathustra taught, is the God-given right of men, which is based upon an ethical structure encompassing respect for the creations and man's compassion and care for his fellow men. By the continual exercise of his choice between good and evil, man thus became, perhaps for the first time in human thinking, responsible for his own destiny. The heaven or hell he went to after this life was deemed to be the direct result of his thoughts, words and deeds. The future resurrection of the body and the Last Judgement after which everlasting life for the reunited body and soul would ensue, are, in Zoroastrian terms, the ultimate “making good” (*Frasho-kereti*) of Ahura Mazda's good creation.

Delving a bit further, Zarathustra's teachings suggest that the universe is animated with life, emanations of divinity, the *Amesha Spentas* pervade it, and virtues such as justice are incarnated in the *yazatas*, in this case, Rashnu – which personifies justice. It is right and proper therefore, to rejoice in the blessings life has to offer for they are no snare or delusion, but our rightful circumstance. Where the world has been polluted by destitution, tyranny, death etc. by the alien spirit of *Angra Mainyu*, man is instructed to fight for its purification with the firm assurance that virtue will be rewarded. Since the Gathas themselves explicitly state that all humans are spiritually alike before God and are endowed with the will to make the crucial moral choices of life, the Zoroastrian message therefore, endorses as a matter of dogma the principle of human rights and the equality of men under just laws.

Since Zoroastrian theology is the foundation of the ancient Persians' perceptions of human rights various texts referring to man as Ahura Mazda's *hamkara* (co-workers), reiterate the theme. The *Denkard* refers to:

“Man's humanity is his salvation and his adornment.”

Since man's duty is to combat evil by fighting for good and thereby expanding Ahura Mazda's creations a central theme of the religious duty of man is to respect his fellow men: both their rights and integrity. Indeed, *Denkard* (III) lists among the products of Zoroastrianism: generosity, observance of law, virtuous actions and human justice. To quote from the text:

“The just man is the counterpart of the Lord Ohrmazd. When a just man acts, then his action becomes that of Ohrmazd.”

There is therefore, an explicit religious emphasis on justice for all regardless of social standing. While this became an integral part of the Zoroastrian heritage, its roots are clearly to be discerned in Zarathustra's Gathas themselves. The western world was acquainted with the characteristic feature of Iran in Herodotus' succinct line:

“The laws of the Medes and Persians which altereth not.”

It appears paradoxical therefore, that a civilization based on so uncompromising an ethical infrastructure could have evolved an empire which strode the world like a colossus. However, an examination of Zoroastrian religious texts and an analysis of imperial Iran and its treatment of its subject peoples, gives an

insight into the reconciliation of two seemingly irreconcilable propositions: war and the conquest of territory; and the administration of justice and the maintenance of peace.

In Zoroastrian terms, the ideal conception of a good ruler is outlined in the *Afringan* prayers. It emphasizes a just and religiously tolerant exercise of authority:

“...A good government is that which keeps and directs the country to be prosperous, its’ poor to be without distress, its laws and customs to be just, which cancels unjust laws and customs.”  
(*Mino-i-kherad*, XV, 16-17, Pahlavi text quoted in J.J. Modi, *Moral extracts from Zoroastrian Books*, Bombay, 1925, p.44).

This later prayer is in keeping with the Gathic spirit: (Y 48.5)

“Let those of good rule rule over us – not those of evil rule – with actions stemming from good understanding and with piety.” (Insler).

The central and elevated position of the Persian kings who ruled by divine right and who were imbued with the *farr*(NP) or royal glory, and whose position since antiquity as ‘the King of Kings of Iran and non-Iran’, had long since established itself as a critical element of Iranian national consciousness. The Shahanshah thus presided over Iranshahr the sphere over which the religion of Zarathustra was dominant. Thus the linkage between the Zoroastrian religion and the state was a central feature of pre-Islamic Iran. The religion of Zarathustra, which assigns to the Creator the divine Wisdom, was not consigned to abstract principles alone. God’s word and scheme of things were deemed to operate on earth within a definite social structure, one which would emulate the natural order (*asha*), and this structure was the social hierarchy of the state.

Indeed, the king of kings ruled by divine right, and it was royalty’s primary duty to defend the faith. Royal power, based firmly on the Good Religion ensures a just society:

“...the Empire will prosper, the common people will be freed from fear and enjoy a good life, science will advance, culture will be looked after, good manners will be further refined, man will be generous, just, and grateful; many a virtue will they practice, and perfect will their goodness be.” (*Denkard* 2 vols. (ed.) D.M. Madan, Bombay, 1911, 335.20-336.2).

The religion of Zarathustra was seen therefore, as the cornerstone of kingship in Iran, as the *Denkard* further emphasized:

“Religion is royalty, and royalty is the religion.” (DkM, 47.6).

While the predominant ethical dualism of Zoroastrianism which enjoins the vigorous combating of things *ahrimanic* (evil), the keynote however, remains, moderation in all things. This theme is thoroughly expounded by Adhurbadh, generally regarded as the last great exponent of Zoroastrian orthodoxy of the Sasanian epoch. He lived in the reign of Shapur II (309-379AD). The Pahlavi texts generally attributed to him, the *Counsel of Adhurbadh*, *Son of Mahrspand* and *Some Sayings of Adhurbad Son of Mahrspand*, faithfully represent the great man’s views. [For a critical assessment and translation refer to R.C. Zaehner, *The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs*, London, 1975, pp. 97-118]. It reflects what Professor Zaehner describes as the “morality of an aristocratic and urbane society”. There is no advocacy of extremes of self-sacrifice to be found in Adhurbad’s counsels, no directives to love one’s enemy or to turn the other cheek. Indeed, Adhurbad would have considered it excessive to love one’s enemy. It was considered judicious however, to keep out of the way of one’s enemy. The emphasis throughout, in all the sayings attributed to Adhurbad is one of moderation and eschewal of extremes. Thus he advises his audience:

“(3) Do not harbour vengeance in your thoughts lest your enemies catch up with you.  
“(4) Consider rather what injury, harm and destruction you are liable to suffer by smiting your enemy in vengeance and how you will (perpetually) brood over vengeance in your heart. Do not smite your enemy in vengeance, for it is plain enough that whoever puts vengeance even for a

trifling thing, out of his mind, will be spared the greatest terrors at the Bridge of the Requirer.” (Zaehner, 1975, p110, cf. *Pahlavi texts*, pp.144-53).

Adhurbad’s reflections encapsulate a particularly Zoroastrian ethos:

“They held this too: Even if a poor man is of bad religion or not of righteous behaviour, one ought to give him something. A man who gives drives, for his own part, out of the world the demon called Want, and rejects from himself adversity and harm.” (VI, 292)

Rather interestingly, Adhurbad projects the act of giving, i.e. generosity, which he perceives as evolving from a small seed into a giant oak, in time, one which can give shelter to the world at large:

“This too is thus: From gratitude there comes about possession of fortune, from possession of fortune there comes about kindness, from kindness peace, from peace confidence, from confidence friendship, from friendship love, and from love the maintenance and the nourishment of people in the world are joined.” (VI, C51).

Now let us locate these impressive principles within the demands of *realpolitik* and the role of war and peace as the imperial monarchs and their political advisors would have perceived them. While the religious emphasis on right choices and avoidance of *ahrimanic* thoughts and words and deeds would have been strenuously emphasised within the Zoroastrian home and community life, Herodotus draws an interesting pen-picture of the contemporary Iranians, especially the education and training of Iranian youth. The martial spirit, courage and even a warlike disposition were fostered in the youth. Prowess in arms were highly regarded (Herod. I.136), while a disinclination on the part of the subject to enlist at the king’s call when he went to war, was a capital crime. Thus, the conscientious objector would have been shown scant mercy by the army chiefs! Darius, Herodotus informs us, was petitioned by a father who had three sons to spare one from joining an expedition, with the result that all the three sons were put to death by royal order, to set an example to others (Herod. 4.84). Military service was thus enforced on all who could bear arms, with the exception of the priests.

Not just the Achaemenid monarchs, but their Parthian and Sasanian successors too, held in great esteem the warrior’s profession. Like his Achaemenian predecessor, Sasanian kings led their armies personally in times of war. The *Shah-name* elaborates on how the Shah would first offer prayers at the fire temple at the commencement of hostilities and at their close. The *Denkard* refers to the qualifications of a warrior as being stout in build, of impetuous valour and ready to meet death with indifference. (DKM, vol 2, p. 95; vol 5, p.299).

Since the ancients engaged in hand-to-hand combat, while in our own times we engage in technological warfare, there were religious rituals which accompanied the advance of armies of yesteryear. Again, Herodotus has left for posterity graphic details of the Persians at war.

While on military campaigns, the magi accompanied the army with the sacred fire which was kept alight on the battlefield, and continued to offer prayers in its presence for the triumph of Persian arms. Herodotus mentions in connection with the expedition of Xerxes, the chariot drawn by eight white horses with the charioteer walking behind on foot holding the reins in his hands, since it was considered impious for a mortal to mount the sacred car. (Herod. 7.40).

In terms of military technology and strategy, we have descriptions of the Parthian epoch from their rivals for world domination, the Romans. While the latter were invincible on foot, the Parthians were master archers. The ‘Parthian shot’ was, and still is, proverbial:

“The enemy who pretends to flee, and suddenly turns around and aims his deadly arrows at his pursuer”.

Gradually, the Parthian tactics became the standard method of warfare in the Roman empire. When in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, Procopius of Caesarea compared the fighting methods of the Homeric age with those of his own time he stressed the contrast between the archaic warriors on foot and the modern

“...expert horsemen who are able without difficulty to direct their bows to either side while riding at full speed, and to shoot an opponent whether in pursuit or in flight”. (Procopius, *History of the Wars I*, “The Persian War”, i.14).

He was thus crediting Parthian military tactics.

There can no doubt therefore, that the ancient Iranians were a great martial peoples: expansion of territorial boundaries and the maintenance of vast areas of conquered lands was a central feature of their foreign and military policies. And since warfare, with its inescapable corollary of death and destruction must ultimately remain by definition, an *ahrimanic* activity, qualitatively distinct from the ethical precepts of Zarathustra’s teachings, how then did the Zoroastrian monarchs equate their numerous wars and conquests with the peace and justice of the realm required by their divine right to rule?

It is in their treatment of the vanquished that the ancient Iranians have left a legacy of high achievement.

The first, and arguably best known Persian – Cyrus the Great – the first Achaemenid ruler of international stature, set a precedent which was followed with only the most occasional aberrations for tolerance and respect of foreign peoples: both, their religions and cultures. Since the Achaemenids were the first to achieve Iranian unity, and indeed, unity over diverse elements of the oriental world, they not only founded a world empire but a world civilization with very wide influence.

A synopsis of Cyrus’s career, which set the standards of tolerance in religious and cultural matters, was innovative for its time. As such, it bears recounting. Cyrus became king of Anshan (a province in southern Iran) in 558BC having successfully incorporated Lydia and defeated its’ monarch Croesus. The Phrygians, Mysians and other Asiatic peoples then quickly submitted to him; which was followed by the piece-meal submission of Asiatic Greek cities. The surrender of Babylon in 539BC however, was Cyrus’s greatest achievement. The ‘people of Israel’ had been imprisoned by the Babylonian tyranny and the close interaction of the Persian and Jewish traditions, once the latter had been released from their captivity by Cyrus, is well documented in the Book of Isaiah. The Persian monarch had established a reputation for just rule over his expanding empire. He made no attempt to impose the Iranian religion on his alien subjects, but rather, encouraged them to continue to live according to their traditions. This statesmanlike kindness extended to the Jewish exiles in Babylon who were permitted to return and rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, financed by the Persian exchequer. Not surprisingly, Cyrus has been exalted in the Jewish texts. Indeed, he remains the only gentile to have been referred to as the “anointed one, the Messiah” (Isaiah II).

“This is what Jehovah has said to his anointed one, to Cyrus whose right hand I have taken hold of to subdue before him nations...” (45.1)

“I myself have roused up someone in righteousness. He is the one that will build My city and those of Mine in exile he will let go, not for a bribe, nor for bribery.” (45.13).

In 1879, a cylinder of baked clay was unearthed in Babylon. It was an edict by Cyrus containing 45 lines in the Akadian script, and is better known as the ‘Cyrus Cylinder’. In this, he presented himself to his subject peoples, specifically the Babylonians, not as an alien conqueror, but as one chosen by their own deities to rule their kingdom in peace. He stated that he became

“...the King of Babylon...whose rule [the gods] Bel and Nabu love, whom they want as king...My numerous troops walked around in Babylon in peace, I did not allow anyone to terrorize any place...I strove for peace in Babylon, and in all other sacred cities.” (E.T. in J.B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Princeton 1969, pp. 315ff).

While it must be conceded that Cyrus's religious tolerance might indeed, have stemmed from his appreciation of *realpolitik* – he had, after all, conquered nations whose civilizations pre-dated his own – and as such, imposition of foreign religious codes on a disparate empire would have been wholly impractical in military and political terms; nevertheless, the numerous foreign notices of his tolerance and generosity towards the vanquished from Greek sources, in addition to textual references in the Hebrew Bible, emphasize the fact that in an age when plunder followed rapidly on the heels of victory, here was a man who demanded exemplary behaviour from his troops.

“I ordered that none of the houses of the people be ruined. I ordered that none of the citizens should be put to death.” (‘Cyrus Cylinder’).

His revolutionary behaviour in the realm of war and conquest was to become the ideal to which later Zoroastrian monarchs aspired.

The era of Darius overlaps with the Hebrew prophets of Ezra, Haggai and Zachariah. The re-building of the Temple in Jerusalem, decreed by Cyrus, remained to be completed. The Persian governor of Jerusalem commissioned an enquiry into the matter and Darius, upon disclosure of the records agreed to uphold the commandment of Cyrus. Ezra records it thus:

“And they completed this house by the third day of the lunar month of Adar – that is in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the King” (Ezra 6.15).

Not just the Jewish nation, but the Elamites too, were permitted by Darius to continue worshipping their own ancestral gods, and even received grants from the royal treasury for this purpose, as is attested to by tablets inscribed in the Elamite script found at Persepolis.

Darius's inscriptions in Old Persian on Naqsh-e Rostam, a sheer mountain cliff near Persepolis, repeatedly stresses his Zoroastrian beliefs. He ascribes all his victories to Ahura Mazda:

“A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created happiness for man, who made Darius king, one king of many, one lord of many...Ahuramazda saw this earth turbulent then he bestowed it on me, he made me king...Me may Ahuramazda protect from harm, and my royal house and this land...O man, that which is the command of Ahuramazda, let this not seem hateful to you! Do not leave the right path, do not rebel!

Darius was indeed, not just a follower of the Zarathustrian message, but he appears to have a clear grasp on the nuance of political propaganda.

It would appear from accounts by Herodotus that a general legal precept for Persian kings was:

“a praiseworthy law...which suffers not the king himself to slay any man for one offence, nor any other Persian for one offence to do incurable hurt to one of his servants. Not till reckoning shows that the offender's wrongful acts are more and greater than his services, may a man give vent to his anger.”

The ancient Iranian legal system therefore, aspired towards a Gathic concept of justice which the state sought to exercise on Iranian and non-Iranian subjects. This goal may, perhaps, have been helped by the Persians' well-known respect for honesty, as Herodotus explained:

“They hold lying to be the foulest of all.”

Indeed, he observed that the Persians did not permit themselves to speak of what they were not allowed, which accords with the essential Zoroastrian teaching that man must be good in word as well as in deed.

Perso-Jewish relations continued to flourish. A later Achaemenid monarch, Artaxerxes I, appointed Nehemiah to govern Jerusalem. Soon after this appointment, the prophet Ezra was commissioned by the

King to go to Jerusalem to investigate the laws of their God. The Letter giving that decree is preserved in the Book of Ezra (7.12-14):

“And this is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra...by me an order has been put through, that everyone in my land of the people of Israel and their priests and levites that are willing to go to Jerusalem with you, should go. In as much as from before the King and his seven councillors [an order] was sent to investigate concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the law of your God...”

Not surprisingly therefore, the overall record of the Achaemenid monarchs' treatment of the vanquished as recorded by foreign observers, stands the scrutiny of close examination. Herodotus confirms that the Persians were generous in their treatment of conquered peoples, and they would show honour to an enemy who had fought valiantly (Herod. 6:30; 7:81; 238). The sons of rebel chiefs were treated with great consideration, occasionally being permitted to rule over their father's territories (Herod. 3:13). At times, the conquered king spent the remainder of his life at the Persian court as an honoured guest of the king (Herod. 1:130; 153; 207; 3:36), Croesus of Lydia having been one such.

Certainly, the Achaemenid record is not without blemish. There were instances of harsh treatment of those considered dangerous enemies of the state. Crucifixion, or the mutilation of limbs were punishments inflicted on rebel chiefs. Those inhabitants who acted treacherously against the Persian army were on occasion, put to the sword (Herod. 3:147; 159; 8:53), or sold as slaves.

While relatively less is known of the Arsacid Parthian epoch, yet it is possible for us to extrapolate from the sources an evaluation of the Parthians. It was out of Judaism, which had been in contact with Zoroastrians for five centuries, that Christianity arose in the Parthian period.

The political determinants of the age were armed resistance of the Parthians to the remorseless encroachment of Rome throughout the Middle East. The numerous battles fought between Parthia and Rome for hegemony of strategic areas continued with a monotonous regularity. Throughout the period however, and very much in keeping with the earlier Iranian practice, the Arsacid Parthians continued to maintain good relations with the Jews, whether as overlords of the Babylonian community, or as neighbours. Indeed, a number of Jewish works composed at this time reflect Zoroastrian ideas. A perusal of Roman historians (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Loeb Classical Library; George Rawlinson, *The Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy*, “The Geography, History and Antiquities of Parthia”, London 1873) who would, after all, have been a hostile source on the Parthians, acknowledge that they behaved well towards captives and fugitives who were treated with kindness and respect, and that they were scrupulous in observing their given word and remaining faithful to treaty obligations. In this respect, it may be argued that the Parthian record was more distinguished than that of their inveterate enemy, the Romans.

The overthrow of the Parthian dynasty by the house of Sasan, fellow Iranians, would have profoundly shaken not just domestic politics, but the empire as well. The Sasanian dynasty continued to challenge the might of Rome, while in the east, Buddhism was expanding vigorously in the Indo-Iranian borderlands and in the west Christianity was ardently seeking new converts. Even the Jews proselytised, though on a relatively modest scale, around this time. Thus, missionary activities began to mushroom in lands contiguous to Iran and in distant parts of the empire. Significantly however, missionaries sought converts among the Iranians themselves. This came to be a highly contentious issue with huge political ramifications, which resulted in the Sasanian kings and their influential high priests dealing harshly with foreign religious groups as well as Iranian converts – now deemed a threat to national security – harshly. Thus, for the first time in Zoroastrianism's long history, the kings were prepared to persecute a person on the grounds of their religious affiliation.

The high priest, Kirder – arguably one of the most influential priests in Zoroastrian Iran, and more accurately a politician priest – took strenuous measures to reduce the ranks of foreign religions within Iran:

“Great blows and damage came upon Ahriman and the devs, and the doctrine of Ahriman and the devs departed the land and was no more believed. Jews and Buddhists and Brahmins and

Mandean Christians...and Manichaens are being smitten in the land.” (Kirder’s inscription at Sar-Mashhad, translated in French by P. Gignoux, *Journal Asiatique*, 1969, pp. 387-418; 29-30).

Kirder also claimed that:

“...many people who were unbelievers became believers; and many a one there was who held the doctrine of the devs, and through me gave up that doctrine.” (i.45).

Thus we have evidence of perhaps the first state-sponsored religious oppression of foreign faiths occurring in 3<sup>rd</sup> century Iran. This apparent reversal of the earlier practice of religious tolerance, while it was justified in terms of national security insofar as foreign missionary activity within the realm came to be seen as a destabilising element, the Sasanian authorities were, in fact, even more ruthless in their suppression of what they perceived as heresy. There was scant mercy for those Zoroastrians who were seen to have deviated from the accepted religious norms. A striking illustration of this is a review of the role of Khosrow I who came to the throne in 531AD and occupied it for nearly half a century:

“His present Majesty, the King of Kings, Khosrow son of Kavad, after he had put down heresy and irreligion with the fullest opposition, according to the revelation of the religion in the matter of all heresy, greatly strengthened recognition of the four estates...And at the assembly of the provinces he issued the following declaration: `The truth of the Mazda-worshipping religion has been recognised. Wise men can with confidence establish its reality through discussion. But effective and progressive propaganda should be, essentially, not through discussion, but through good thoughts, words and acts, and the inspiration of the best spiritual worship of the yazads, paid purely in conformity to the holy word. What the chief priests of Ohrmazd have proclaimed, do we proclaim, for among us they have been shown to possess spiritual insight...The realm of Iran has gone forward relying on the doctrine of the Mazda-worshipping religion, which is the synthesis of the accumulated knowledge of those who have gone before us, (intended) for the world. We have no dispute with those who have other convictions, for we possess so much (truth) in the records, by books and memoranda, and also in the common tongue by way of exegesis – in short, the whole original wisdom of the Mazda-worshipping religion.” (DKM 413.9-41).

Once Khosrow had re-established security for the state religion, he abandoned his former rigidity and displayed a relative leniency:

“The Mobedan mobed submitted for our attention [the case] of several persons whom he named who belonged to the nobility...The religion of these persons was contrary to that which we inherited from our Prophet and the learned men of our faith. [The Mobedan mobbed warned us] that those persons were proselytizing in secret for their religion and inviting people to adopt it...I gave orders to have these heretics brought into my presence, and to dispute with them...Thereafter I commanded that they should be banished from my capital, my country and my empire, and that all those who shared their beliefs should follow them.” (M. Grignaschi (transl.) “Quelques specimens de la littérature sassanide...” *Journal Asiatique*, 1966,p.18).

The aberration of religious intolerance as exemplified by some later Zoroastrian monarchs appears however, to have been grounded primarily on political considerations: national security interests. Thus Zoroastrian heretics were viewed as a fifth column. There was never a concerted attempt at evangelical zeal to convert foreign peoples so that the instances of harsh treatment of groups of persons in the comparatively few instances that reach us through the records, reinforces the overall perception that Zoroastrian Iran dealt more harshly with the Zoroastrian heretic than it did with subject peoples who, once they acquiesced to Iranian rule were granted imperial protection and were permitted within certain guidelines to continue in their traditions.

As if by way of confirmation of this assessment, we have a letter from Hormazd IV (579-90AD), Khosrow I’s son, to a leading mobed [priest]:



“Even as our royal throne cannot stand upon its two front legs without the back ones, so also our government cannot stand to be secure if we incense the Christians and the adherents of other religions, who are not of our faith. Cease, therefore, to harass the Christians, but exert yourselves diligently in doing good works so that the Christians and the adherents of other religions, seeing that, may praise you for it and feel themselves drawn to our religion.” (From the German translation of the surviving Arabic rendering by T. Noldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Arab Zeit der Sasaniden aus der Arabischen Chronik des Tabari*, Leiden 1879, p.269).

While the Sasanian monarchs were unquestionably exercised by the multiplicity of faiths they encountered in their subject peoples, and continued to rigorously maintain a state orthodoxy within the Zoroastrian fraternity at home, nevertheless, external affairs, issues of war and peace, were seldom neglected. Once hostilities ceased and truce was negotiated, the Sasanians appear to have followed the earlier precedence of seeking, as far as possible, a just and equitable peace.

Thus, when Justinian’s envoys arrived at Ctesiphon to negotiate peace terms with Khosrow I, the latter suggested that a truce should be concluded between the Persians and Romans for five years before they could finally settle the terms of peace. It was arranged that during the period of the truce, the causes that had led the two nations to their present state of incessant hostilities should be carefully analysed with a view to its eradication by mutual understanding. (G. Rawlinson, *The Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy, The Geography, History and Antiquities of the Sasanian Empire*, London 1873, p.404).

When on such occasions a truce was faithfully observed, a treaty followed whereby the nations agreed to remain at peace for the duration of the treaty which was specified as 7 or 30 or 50 years, or for all time. The contracting parties exchanged oaths and hostages. The documents were then sealed with the royal seal and was dispatched with a bag of salt sealed with the royal ring, signifying the sanctity of the oath. (A. Christensen, *L’Iran sous les Sassanides*, Copenhagen 1944, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).

Given the record of Zoroastrian Iran’s commitment to peace and justice in its realm and the upholding of what we moderns would refer to as human rights, it is worth concluding with a story, told by Masudi, of the great King Khosrow I, who was, and remains, best known in the Zoroastrian world by the fond title given to him by his people, ‘Anoshirawan’, the Just.

“The Ambassador of the Roman Emperor was shown and admired the magnificence of the palace of Noshirwan. But having observed that the square in front of it was irregular in shape, he enquired the reason and was informed that an old woman owned the adjacent land which she refused to sell at any price, and that the King would not take it by force. The Ambassador exclaimed, ‘This irregularity is more beautiful than the most perfect square’”.

Even the great Khosrow could not bring himself to deny his humble subject her inalienable right of retaining her ancestral property, even though the Shah himself wished to purchase it. Justice after all, when applied to all, rich and poor, men and women, in an even-handed manner, remains then, as it does now, the mark of civilized man.

Ancient history is only of real interest insofar as it helps shed light on the present. The historical record of Zoroastrian Iran is impressive; the Parsis, domiciled in India following the Arab conquest of Iran, appear to have made an impression not just on their new compatriots, but on visiting foreigners as well. Indeed, it would appear from the sources as though the Parsis were continuing the long tradition of upholding the essence of the Zoroastrian ethos.

To live in peace in one’s adopted country, to demonstrate a respect for the new culture and live by its rules is not as easy as it sounds – certainly judging by our own contemporary soul searching when discussing the subject of refugees. So, some of the jottings on the Parsis, by those outside the tiny community, sheds an interesting light on this minority. James Ovington, the Englishman, observed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century:

“...they shew a firm Affection to all of their own Sentiments in Religion, assist the Poor, and are very ready to provide for the Sustenance and Comfort of such as want it. Their universal

Kindness, either in employing such as are Needy and able to work, or bestowing a seasonable bounteous Charity to such as are Infirm and Misreable, leave no Man destitute of Relief, nor suffer a Beggar in all their Tribe..." (*A Voyage to Surat in the year 1689*, (ed) H.G. Rawlinson, London 1929, p. 218)

While Mahatma Gandhi, in a speech in Karachi on April 1, 1931 said:

"The Parsi community is such a marvel that it does not need the protection of anyone. It finds its way and protection by its wisdom, intelligence and ability. Their charities are so famed in the country that it has no parallel, that is their protection."

Perhaps this says it all; and links Zoroastrianism's ancient past with its relatively recent present.