

DG McIntyre - Does Sad Dar Reflect Zarathushtrian Thought?

In most religions, there is a big difference between the history of the religion, and the teachings of its founder, and Zoroastrianism is no exception. To illustrate with a neutral example: imagine if a scholar were to describe Christianity based on its history, instead of on the teachings of Christ. Such aspects of Christianity's history as mandating the belief that the earth was the center of the universe as a tenet of religion (as Galileo discovered to his sorrow), the tortures of the Inquisition, the intolerance of Catholics and Protestants towards each other in the 16th and 17th centuries with Catholics burning Protestants and Protestants burning Catholics, the narrow orthodoxy of the Puritans who made life joyless, and burned innocent women as witches, these are all facts in the history of Christianity. Yet they are all very far removed from the original teachings of Christ.

Certain aspects of the history of Zoroastrianism are also far removed from the original teachings of Zarathushtra. There are many reasons for this. But I would like to mention just one: it is the fundamental difference between Zarathushtra's priorities as reflected in his own words in the Gathas, and the priorities of many institutional religions as reflected by the less enlightened minds who composed the Sad Dar.

Unlike the Sad Dar, Zarathushtra does not dictate in fact-specific ways how we must live our lives. Instead, he gives us a system. In a nutshell, his system is that we should use our minds / hearts, to search for truth and what is right (asha) and think it, speak it and do it, thereby fulfilling the two-fold purpose of life which is evolving spiritually ourselves, and at the same time, making our world a better place. The quest for truth with good thinking is a fundament of his teachings. He says:

“as long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth [asha]. Truth, shall I see thee, as I continue to acquire ... good thinking [vohu mano]...?”
Yasna 28.4 (Insler translation).

The Sad Dar by contrast, exemplifies the priorities of an institutional religion, two of which are control, and being the sole intermediary between man and God, so that a person is not permitted to think for himself, but must follow without question what the religious authorities prescribe, having been conditioned (usually by fear) to believe that his only access to the divine, is through obedience to such religious authorities. The Sad Dar, like many institutional religions, sought to maintain control over every aspect of a person's life by mandating a detailed, fact-specific, code of behavior which reflected the opinions of the religious authorities as to what was true and right. This is the exact opposite of Zarathushtra's teaching, which imposes no intermediary between man and God, and which requires that we must think for ourselves (an indispensable ingredient of the quest for truth). He says:

“... Reflect with a clear mind man by man for himself”
Y30.2 (Insler translation).

Indeed, even when Zarathushtra asks God Himself to instruct him, it is not through dictates or mandates, but through good thinking.

“...instruct through good thinking the course of my direction”
Y50.6 (Insler translation).

The Sad Dar was composed more than 2,000 years after Zarathushtra. According to E. W. West, whose translation is still regarded as definitive, approximately 4% of its words are Arabic, so it cannot have originated before the Arab invasion of Iran. One of the versions we now have was composed around 1531 AD. Another version by a different author, around 1495 AD. Both versions were composed by Zoroastrian priests of that time. One can only speculate about their intentions in composing this work. In my own quest for truth and what is right, I disagree with a great many of the Sad Dar's conclusions, which is my right as a Zarathushtrian. But the greatest wrong of which the authors of the Sad Dar are guilty, in my view, is that they attempt to do our thinking for us.

By mandating their own fact-specific code of behavior, they disregarded a core teaching of Zarathushtra the notion that religion is a quest for truth with good thinking, with independent thought, and with the freedom to make choices (and learn from our mistakes). Zarathushtra teaches that everything we do comes back to us 'the good and the bad' not by way of punishment, but as a means of enlightenment.

I sympathize with the thought to warn Iranians who are disenchanted with Islam, from seeking to glorify everything that pre-dated the Arab conquest of Iran, or even perhaps replacing one intolerant religious autocracy with another, both legitimate concerns. We have only to consider the government of the ayatollahs (and indeed of some intolerant pre-Islamic rulers of Iran as well) to appreciate the benefits of separating church and state. But we need to consider the lessons of history with a truthful, discriminating mind in recognizing in Iran's pre-Islamic past, both what was good and what was not good. In characterizing Sad Dar as a teaching of Zarathushtra, is not accurate. Zarathushtra's teachings are the antithesis of an intolerant religious autocracy. The quest for truth / right, the freedom to think for ourselves, the freedom to make choices, by definition, requires tolerance for a diversity of views.

Zarathushtra teaches that power (rule) is a trust, to be used to serve (an interesting paradox).

To speak of the caste system of the Sassanians and to state that Zoroastrian priests of that time considered ordinary Iranians to be unclean and untouchable, with due respect, I do not think that is entirely accurate. But even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that that was so, such practices are totally contradictory to Zarathushtra's teaching that something of God lives in all the living, the fire within. The Persian poet Jami expressed the same thought in this way:

Each essence is a separate glass
Through which the Sun of Being's light is passed,
Each tinted fragment sparkles in the sun
A thousand color, but the Light is One.
(as translated by Dr. S. H. Nasr).

The ancient kings of Iran, going back to the legendary Kavi Husravah (Kai-Khosrav), found a beautiful way of translating this core theological concept of Zarathushtra into something tangible, that people in general could relate to. Fire is a symbol of the divine Glory (this is also reflected in certain illustrations in the Shah Nameh, where, for example, certain people are depicted with fire surrounding their heads).

These ancient kings established fires on various mountain tops throughout Iran representing the divine Glory illuminating each segment of society: the priest, the warrior and the agriculturalist, in a delightful equality. (Sacred Book of the East Vol. 23, footnote 1, page 7).

The Glory (xvarena) in warriors was represented by the fire known as Adar Gushasp or Gushnasp, which King Husravah settled on a mountain in Azerbaijan known as Mount Asnavant. (SBE Vol. 23, footnote 7, page 7; and Bundahish 17.7, SBE Vol. 5, page 63).

The Glory (xvarena) in agriculturalist was represented by the fire known as the Burzin fire. It was established by King Gushtasp on Mount Raevant in Khorasan. (SBE Vol. 23, footnote 1, page 8, and Bundahishn 17.8, SBE Vol. 5, page 64).

The Glory (xvarena) in the priests was represented by the fire known as Adarapra, or Adar Farnbag. It also represented the illumination of science and learning (SBE Vol. 23, footnote 2, page 7), which at that time was the province of the priests and perhaps reflected Zarathushtra's thought that religion is a quest for the truth (asha) in the worlds of both mind and matter (Y28.4 and 28.2).

There is another Zarathushtrian tradition which also illustrates the fact that the concept of an 'untouchable', or even caste prejudice, does not exist in Zarathushtra's own teachings. It is the tradition of how the fire for a fire temple is created - fire being a symbol of the divine Glory within. It is created by mixing many different fires: the household fire, the fires used by a potter, a glass blower, a coppersmith, a goldsmith, a silversmith, an ironsmith, a baker, a furnace worker, a tinsmith, a shepherd's fire, a warrior's fire, fire from lightning, fire from

a neighbor's hearth, fire from burning a corpse, and fire from burning trash. What does this tell us? It tells me that the person who invented this ritual was using these symbols to illustrate the idea that the sacred exists in all aspects of life. To me that is very beautiful.

Zarathushtra teaches that the relationship between man and God is not that of a master to a slave, or even a father to a child, but rather, it is that of a Friend to a friend or a beloved to a Beloved.

If God is our Beloved Friend, and if He is a part of each of us, how can we consider any human being as untouchable or unclean? How can we be anything but friends with one another, regardless of diversities of race, culture, occupation, and the many other man-made classifications that divide us? And when we all understand this, and think, speak and act in accordance with this understanding, will the world be renewed? (what we call frashokereti)? That was Zarathushtra's objective. His words:

Therefore may we be those who shall heal this world!.....
Y30.9 (Insler translation).

Sad Dar, and many later texts, (most of them written by unknown authors several hundred years after Zarathushtra), are historical footnotes in the long history of Zoroastrianism. Even today, we have many different factions of Zoroastrians whose beliefs are inconsistent with Zarathushtra's own teachings. Those who have a passion for the truth and are independent minded, may find Zarathushtra's non-dogmatic, benevolent way of life deeply satisfying (as I do). If your readers are interested in Zarathushtra's own teachings, (as distinguished from historical footnotes like Sad Dar) they would do better to check out the many websites which give accurate information on this subject, albeit with a diversity of views that reflects our practice of the quest for truth with independent minds and hearts. For example: www.vohuman.org, www.zarathushtra.com, www.zoroastrian.org