

## Sassanid Religion and the Decline

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**Abstract:** Zoroastrianism was initially an universally obeyed and secular religion which emphasized on the man's will along with afterlife, but gradually it was influenced by ascetic religious and philosophical circumstances and tended toward fatalism, anchorite and surrendering fate as well as paved the way for the religious declining of the Sassanid which was considered as a pillar for Sassanid dynasty establishment like feudalism.

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### Introduction

Religion plays very important role in constructing the civilization of tribes and nations in a historic era. Religion in the old time was more critical than secular and laic systems of today, so that in the countries with feudalism structures, formal religion was considered as an important factor in durability and consolidation of a society, in contrast the opposite political movements were demonstrated in the form of faith and religion which was propounded in the concept of Bad religious and good religious. As Marxists and Western liberal scholars have interpreted, there is no disagreement on it, the Sassanid dynasty was known as a feudal system by the strong religious institutions and spiritual hierarchy which demonstrated a feudal community, its founder, the First Artaxerxes had strived initially to make the religion as its ideology and through it create an ideological unity among the tribe and nation resident in Iran. From the beginning, Zoroastrianism with its special features was considered as a model for a dynamic and creative civilization and people with determination and perseverance, because the faith had given a lot of importance to men and their will and made them free from fatalism and determinism rule on their fate. In Tetser letter, it is well noted and written that: "In the Zoroastrian religion, it is commanded to avoid seclusion, worshiping the God in solitude of mortification and hermitage. He in his letter, referred to Avesta that says: "The man with wife is preferred to the one who lives single, the man with a shelter is preferred to the one with no house, the one with one son is better than the one without son, and the rich man is better than the poor." Mary Boyce, researcher in Zoroastrianism refers to the choice right in the religion and writes: "The choice is so important in the Zoroastrian religion principles that it can be certainly said it is a religion of choice. Angra Mainyu selected the evil and devil by its own will and intention." Some researchers suggest that the duality and dualism in

Zoroastrianism is a sensual, mental, and moral issue, which is deposited in the human nature. However belief in duality and dualism in creating the existence would be taken meaningless and unreasonable because the duality is a moral issue which is in the human nature and it is based on the Zoroastrian thought. So belief to the both good and evil mainyu namely Spenta mainyu which is the source of goodness, purity, truthfulness in thought, word and deed and the other Angra mainyuis as a source of all devils and evils in thoughts, words and deeds are not something out of human nature and so are not appeared in the lifeless nature and inanimate world but they are in human nature from the beginning of the creation abstractly such as dream world which are moveless and inactive, based on the Gathaa teaching, by entering to the world they may become active in the nature of human as result of his choice that is done by freedom and liberty, so the evil and goodness may be significant. Being aware of the choice right and power gradually increase the sense of responsibility in people, while since he is the decision maker on choosing the goodness over the evil, a moralist person will be emerged. Zoroastrianism principal have been mentioned in zoroaster's Gathats and bring up belief to be pure monotheism and moralist and responsible person. The following principles belonging to Zoroaster Gathas are recognized by Dr. Bahar: «1 - there are two forces of rightness and badness in the world, 2 - Ahura Mazda is the great god, He is the creator Sepanta mainyu which has a twin called Ahrimen. 3 - In addition, Ahura Mazda has six other figures and rules the world by assistance of these seven appearances. 4 - All creatures in the world whether human or devil is liberal to choose good or evil. "Thus Zoroaster in Gatha does not believe to a god other than the One God. He is opposite to sacrifice rituals and intoxicating drinking, human should know his creator by his wisdom and choose the sepanta mainyu to be saved. The Zoroastrianism with

these principles and properties emphasized on human freedom and free will also knew him accountable against his selection, gradually were exposed by competitor flows and religions so that most of the principals were deviated and a passive immoral and somehow polytheist human was replaced by the first Zoroastrian one. One of the Zoroastrian declining aspects relates to the Zurvanism which is a historical form of Mazdaism and originated from Magianism in Achaemenian era and has been seen in Sassanid period of time. When Ahura Mazda had being lost his status gradually as God and considered as equal as one of the two mainyu name Sepenta mainyu opposed to Angra Mianyu that is why the Zurvanism was formed. Sepenta mainyu was in an infinite light and by contrast, the other namely Angra mainyu was in an infinite darkness. Since these two mainyu limited each other, hereby they would be bounded and thus they should be originated from an infinite nature that was Zurvan or unlimited time or space. Arsi Zener writes about it "Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda) is introduced as the father of Sepenta mainyu so he is probably the father of Angra mainyu in Gathas. But in the later (New) Zoroastrianism, the Ohrmazd and Sepenta mainyu are equal. Thus, it was necessary to find a father for Ohrmazd because it had become as one of the twins. One of them was in an infinite light and the other was in infinite darkness. Therefore each of them bounded the other, and none had surpassed on time and space. Thus, the rvanists knew unbounded time and space as father of the two bounded mainyus.

"Believing to the Zurvan had moral and behavioral negative results among the followers.

Considering that in this view, the Sepenta mainyu had been raised from the neutral time and space, a kind of the materialism and fatalism dominated on Zurvanism beliefs. Everything has been taken as Zoroastrian characteristics such as free will, reward and punishment, heaven and hell, Ohrmazd and Ahriman were laid aside.

Zener believes that "Zurvanism materialism denied three principals of Zoroastrianism. 1- Existing of goodness God and evil mainyu, 2- Human freedom and will in selecting between goodness and badness, 3- reward and punishment for human beings for their good and bad deeds.

Questioning the human will freedom that was the most important element in Zoroastrian religion led to fatalism and determinism which effects can be seen in Sassanid era.

Christian Sen writes about it: "At this time the belief of Zurvanism which was spread during the Sassanid era led people to determinism and it was as fatal poison that paralyzes the spirit of the old Zoroastrianism. Zurvan was the old God and father of Devil and Ohrmazd, He was not only known as finite

time but his other name was destiny." He refers to a story in Mainog-i - Khirad which is influenced by Zurvanism. "Although a man possesses the strong intellect and powerful knowledge, He will not be able to overcome the destiny." Historical studies show that there was a Zurvanism tendency at the beginning of the Sassanid dynasty and most of political and religious figures tended to it.

Manes who was favored by Shapur, the first, tended to Zurvanism that's why he has not known Ahura Mazda but Zurvan as superior God. Even Kirtir, the great hierarch, who finally could bring forth and institutionalize Zoroastrianism as a formal religion, had Zurvanism tendency and then became opposite to Zurvanism so knew Manes dangerous for Zoroastrian.

Zurvanism is likely to have been prevalent more in Bahram v and Yazdegerd II era.

Kertir action for formalizing the Zoroastrian religion played an effective role to encountering materialism and fatalism of Zoroastrianism-Zurvanism which was prevalent in that period of time but it seemed that the theosophical religious and thought flows as well as fatalism were so strong in Iran that almost all of the religious movements had such tendencies and influenced by foreign neighbors like India, Greece led Zoroastrian to passiveness and fatalism.

Manichaeism with its pessimistic nature and desire to asceticism and mortification had been successful during the third century AD since the critical situation of the period of time prepared the conditions for such trends.

Dr. Bahar writes on the Manichaeism tendencies "The fundamental difference of Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism is its view to the world, because in Zoroastrianism, the hurmazd world is good and fragrant and save the people, meanwhile on Manichaeism, the world originated from devil and it is evil, so the reproduction and agriculture just help the spirit captivity sustainability. So Manichaeism is with pessimistic nature."

Mazdak also was the supporter of ascetical and virtuous actions even vegetarianism by his mysterious interpretation of Avesta.

Not only in Iran the religious and reformative flows tended toward asceticism and world-denying, as Max Veber says, flying from this world, but also neighbors send out mysticism waves to the country. As if the mysticism discourse and avoiding the material world was dominant in those days against which the Zoroastrianism resisted. Duchenne Gymen writes about it: "Mazdakism who had struggled against all forms of mortification strictly, inevitably influenced by an ideal that is preached by Christian,

philosopher, Agnostics, Manichaeism, Mazdakism and Hindus."

Zener certainly knows materialism influenced by India and Greece. Although India society is called Iran sister and they influence each other in some affairs such as class structures, in the country orientation toward asceticism and world-denying so that as Zener says, the asceticism virtues were respected and endeared in it, self-denying is the gravity center of their religious beliefs and thought.

Christianity so affected the people of the land during the Sassanid era that someone believe that if Islam had not come into Iran, it finally dominate on Zoroastrian, it was an ascetical religion and ceremony in which initially the imitation of the world was considered blameworthy and the world was without nobility beside afterlife. The Holy Christ spent his life ascetically which led her to be inattentive toward spouse and offspring and world. So some mystical flows in Islamic world made the Holy Christ as a model of ascetic and mystic. Renaissance in Christian world was considered as a reaction to Christian ascetic thought which had negated the world, thus its follower had to strive additionally which was shown in the flow of secularism. While the religion like Zoroastrian had no need to the flow since it was initially a secular religion that gave genuineness to the world. Zener writes about it: "Zoroastrian is materialism in entire of its religious steps in which the material world is considered as a tangible state of spiritual world so that the one would be sent from the other one, relied on it and all of them have sustainable worth. Importantly, according to some of the other researchers on Zoroastrian School, the world is considered superior to the afterlife in the religion.

Mary Boyce writes in this regard: "It is surprising that Zoroaster prefers the mundane position to divine world. Because in his view the world is a creation of the divine to which the grace of tangibility and perceptivity is being added. However turning from heaven position to mundane is not meant as falling and descending but it is as perfection and ascending".

In Zoroaster viewpoint to exist world structure, the human working and strive are emphasized and prevent them to be passive and inattentive to material issues. Mary Boyce writes in this regard: "The purpose of Mazda in holding mundane is practical stability against maliciousness that the belief is called the universe agreed duality."

In following, she writes about the virtues of working as "according to Zoroaster only the unremitting and good-mannered labor and strive can remedy the human being. No pleading or resorting neither for forgiveness and compassion nor for interest and desire are not accepted from the God. "

The magi in Median era who had been become the clergies of Zoroastrian religion influenced the religion by their tendencies and beliefs, and led the religion that initially emphasized on faith and ethic toward canonical dos and don'ts so that at the end of Sassanid era, it became to a lawful inflexible and dead religious which enact a religious law for every small aspects of human life that Zoroastrian follower had no power to escape the situation. Christian Sen writes that: "Zoroastrian in the next evolution was affected by Median Magi thought and so lost its freshness and was formed into inflexible and boring jurisprudence principal.

In Sassanid dynasty as a feudal system in which the feudal aristocrats and nobles have privileged situation, Zoroastrian was turned into an ideology for the system and reproduce its benefits.

Emphasizing on feudal benefits was so that the magi actually blocked the way for society class evolutions by enacting religious rules. In feudal system gradually the way will be paved for developing and evolution the capitalists since the security resulted from equilibrium between aristocrats and nobles with government will pave the way for capitalism.

By growing and expanding urban areas and developing the capitalism private sector who handled the industry and commerce in the period of time in Sassanid dynasty, it was needed that an evolution be occurred in production relations to support their benefits in the field of law, jurisprudence and norms. But Zoroastrian clergies (Mobad) not only did not pay attention to the leading class requirement but also prevent any evolution in the society by enacting rules opposing to capitalists' benefits. Pirnia refers to the issue and writes: "Some beliefs that were entered into Zoroastrianism by magi made some class of people unsatisfied specifically the city-dwellers and professionals for example they forbid reddening iron in fire and making the copper red in it because of fire holiness. Also the seafaring was not accepted for water holiness. Magi solidity was cause for advancement of other religions in Iran." Max Weber knew the Zoroastrian religion with anti urban tendencies since just agriculture was acceptable by the God and all of them were a reflection of noble feudal thoughts who was the carrier of the religion. It was not reasonless that when Arab attacked Iran, capitalist was the first class that welcome them, since in Iran there was a meaning vacuum that no reformative movement did not succeed to fill it.

Max Weber says: "There are two directions in any society, one of them is rational direction or technology and professional field or material evolution and the second is irrational direction that is tradition, religious and philosophy field. "

Human as a wise being should define himself and his environmental world that is charged by irrational direction. If the definition consist with rational direction of society, human feel identity, otherwise a meaning vacuum will be appeared in society that allow the revolutions and social uprising.

In the condition in which an interpreter(s) want to fill the vacuum by new commentary on tradition or religion or presenting a philosophical thought, if he successes to find some followers, he will win likely.

The society of Sassanid era can be investigated by the Max Weber theory- there was a meaning vacuum in the dynasty thus reformative movements like Manichaeism and Mazdakism tried to fill the vacuum by new commentaries of religious that did not success, the subsequent kings regardless to the society demand just sought to consolidate the power bases that's why some of the classes of people were indifferent against the Arab attack and some others support them because they know Arab equalitarianism interpretation as an answer to this class meaning vacuum. In Manichaeism attempted to pay attention to leading capitalist class need as well as Mazdak movement answered to the low class of society by new commentary of tradition and religious but their defeat make people disappointed about internal reformations. Anyhow defeat of reformative internal movements, defeat of Sassanid kings against the foreigners, internal war between the mass and nobles and power struggle among the seniors and the leading active religious and as Max says the world accepted religion so that there is no impact of the positive aspects of the religion at the end of Sassanid. Christian Sen writes about it: "the Zoroastrian religion that was considered as formal religion in the country of Sassanid era had been based on the principles that became completely empty and inane at the end of this era. So the decline was decisive and inevitable."

Christian Sen refers to ascetical flows such as Christians, Agnostic, Manichaeism, Mazdakism and influence of Indian thought on Zoroastrian religion and knows it as major factor in declining the religion. He follows: "Influenced by the new thought, the initial optimism which was the base and fundamental of Zoroastrian and encourage people to work and strive was faded and broken, also the tendency toward asceticism and abandonment that were privileged in Iranian sects against Zoroastrian gradually entered into it and destruct the base of the religion.

Dr. Daryaie also confirms Mystical and ascetic movements in late of Sassanid dynasty and writes, "it is probable that at the end of the Sassanid period, there have been not only the monasticism but also ascetic inward developments. These trends may lead to the formation of groups is Zendican. Zendican were probably Sufis believed ascetic live or mystic desires

influenced by Christianity or Buddhism. They probably laid the foundation of Sufism in Islam. "

Along with Zoroastrian declining which show itself in determinism and fatalism, prevalence of fetishism, fortunetelling and paying attention to astronomy at the end of Sassanid period aggravated the situation and was the origin for unwise behavior of Sassanid kings.

Duchenne Gymen knows and writes Khosro-parviz as same as this and writes:" Khosro II is the last important Sassanid kings. He had believed all sorts of superstitious and fortuneteller or magician surrounded him, even he knows astronomy, too. "

Althaim also writes about "During the Kingdom of Khosro Parviz the symbolic concept of the sun and the universe was common again ... Tendency toward symbols testify the hypothesis of prevalence of astronomical and planetary belief. The influence of astronomer was never disappeared in Chaldean lands; it was comprehensive and dominant during the last king of Sassanid and this influence was so that Khosro Parvis was forced to kill his most loyal servant." Also, Zarrinkob confirmed this irrational and unwise act and writes:" His (Khosro Parviz) belief to superstitions of astronomers, diviners and fortunetellers made him hesitate in taking decisive decisions, also his belief to vow, omen or vision made his decisions without rational necessities and resulted from his interest in seraglio and exaggeration in companionship with women". Of course, Zarrinkoun interrelates Khoasro Parvis superstitious belief to harem and long companionship with women that explain part of the fact that meanwhile society tendency toward Zurvanism and determinism, lead reasonably people to astronomy because human is deprived of will and is dominated by destiny, he can ask the astronomer to show him to show destiny to him. Of course Zoroastrian Clergymen started some reformations to prevent the overall decline of the Zoroastrian religion of Zoroaster, but this seemed to be that too late.

After Iran defeat Muslim Arabs and after their power was lost, the think for reform the childish aspects of Zurvanism fables and cancelling worshipping the Sun as well as reviving the monotheism tradition of Zoroastrian religion.

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