A Zoroastrian Perspective on Just War in the 21st Century

Rashna Writer

The early decades of the 21st century are witness to a redefinition of the very conception of warfare. It is no longer confined to conflict between nations. Rather, trans-national conflict with an absence of rules that may have been thought to have governed warfare is gaining currency. The moral imperatives underpinning *Jus ad bellum* or why wars are fought, and *Jus in bello* the conduct of war are being lost in translation. Where states once took centre stage in waging wars, the proliferation of non-state actors with the ideology, arsenal and commitment to engulf a multitude of states in conflict suggests that the rule book has been discarded. The `war'/`wars' we are now engaged in – against global terrorism – will go on for years, perhaps decades. How do we recalibrate the waging of war and the moral theories pertaining to it if we are engaged in seemingly endless conflict? Thus, we are confronted in the new century with belligerence of terrifying magnitude. The dismantling of boundaries and the ubiquity of wars in our times begs the question: wither Just War?

If the definition of war changes, do the moral determinants that are applicable to the theory of Just War apply? This is perhaps the philosophical conundrum of our age.

To address the question of Just War from a Zoroastrian perspective, given the virtual universal amnesia regarding Zoroastrianism and the Zoroastrian peoples, it is helpful to start with a brief outline of the theology. Zarathustra the Iranian prophet is thought to have lived in the second millennium BCE and brought a message of remarkable vision and clarity for his fellow men. In the *Gathas,* the five great hymns composed by Zarathustra himself, he ascribes to Ahura Mazda (Wisdom Incarnate), the one uncreated God, that which is wholly good. Two original principles coexisting from the beginning were twinned as the two *mainyus*, the motivating forces confronting humankind. One is *Spenta* (benevolent), which adheres to Ahura Mazda; the other is evil, further identified as *Angra* (hostile and inimical). They are diametrically opposed in thought, word and action, the pivotal ethical triad of Zarathustra's teachings. 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 for the time being opposes goodness. The ethical message of Zarathustra is that the whole good Creation should unite to remove evil from this world.

Angra Mainyu, while being wholly evil, is finite in time. Ahura Mazda is assisted in this 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 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.[1] This, Zarathustra taught, is the God-given right of men, which is based upon an ethical structure encompassing respect for creation and man's compassion and care

[1] S Insler, `The Gathas of Zarathustra', *Acta Iranica* 8 (1975), p.33

for his fellow men. By the continual exercise of his choice between good and evil, man thus becomes, perhaps for the first time in human thinking, responsible for his own destiny.

It was this striking theological message, embraced by the Iranian peoples well before Cyrus the Persian created the great Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BCE), which became a distinctive feature of Iranian identity. Zarathustra had transformed the religion of the Iranians from polytheism to monotheism; and the Persian Empire, under three dynasties – the Achaemenids, Arsacid Parthians (BCE 247 – 224 CE) and the Sasanians (224 – 651 CE) – was underpinned by the Zoroastrian religion and its accompanying ethos. Even so, it appears paradoxical 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 texts and 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 execution of war and the administration of justice and the maintenance of peace, not forgetting the ethical injunctions.

The central and elevated position of the Persian king who ruled by divine right and who was imbued with the *farr*, 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.

While the predominant ethical dualism of Zoroastrianism 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 Sasannian epoch. He lived in the reign of Shapur II (309-79 CE). The Middle Persian Pahlavi texts generally attributed to him, the *Counsel of Adhurbadh, Son of Mahraspand* and *Some Sayings of Adhurbad Son of Mahraspand,* faithfully represent the great man's views.[2] 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, is one of moderation and eschewal of extremes. Thus:

> (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 Requiter.[3]

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[2] For a critical assessment and translation refer to R C Zaehner, *The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs,* London 1976, pp.97-118

[3] Ibid, p.110. The `Bridge of the Requiter' or the *chinvat peretu* the allegorical bridge humans cross over after death where their thoughts, words and deeds are tallied; the good proceed to *garo.demana* `house of song' (heaven), while the bad descend to *drujo.demana* `the house of deceit.

There can be no doubt 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? Much has been written of the development of the theories of *Jus ad bellum* and *Jus in bello*, underpinned by Christian thought; although we do not find much by way of dedicated theories of war in Zoroastrian literature. Nevertheless, an examination of the history of the Zoroastrian peoples and their empire shows that these ancient Iranians have left a legacy of high achievement in their treatment of the vanquished. Once engaged in conflict, there appears to have been a robust frame of ethical reference with relation to the vanquished.

The first, and arguably best known Persian – Cyrus the Great – the first Achaemenid ruler of international stature, set a precedent which was followed with occasional aberrations for tolerance and respect of foreign peoples, 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. Cyrus became king of Anshan (a province in southern Iran) in 558 BCE having successfully incorporated Lydia and defeated its monarch Croesus. The Phrygians, Mysians and other Asiatic tribes then quickly submitted to him; and was followed by the piecemeal submission of Greek cities. The surrender of Babylon in 559 BCE however, was Cyrus' greatest achievement. The `people of Israel' had been imprisoned in this city and the close interaction of the Persian and Jewish traditions, once the latter had been released from their captivity by Cyrus, is well documented. The Persian monarch issued his famous decree for putting an end to the captivity of the Jews and for rebuilding the temple of Jerusalem. The decree reads: "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus said Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, (he is the God), which is in Jerusalem. And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, besides the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem."[4]

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 subjects, but rather, encouraged them to continue to live according to their traditions. His elevation in the Jewish texts: "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..." [5], speaks to the statesmanlike conduct of *Jus in bello* established by the founding father of the Persian empire which developed into the template of early Iranian imperial theory. Here was a man who demanded of his victorious troops that: "I ordered that none of the houses of the people

[4] Ezra i. 1-4. The Holy Bible (Oxford: OUP)
[5] Isaiah 45.1

be ruined. I ordered that none of the citizens should be put to death."[6] His revolutionary behaviour in the realm of war and conquest was thus to become the ideal to which later Zoroastrian monarchs aspired.

Whereas ancient conquerors generally acknowledged no right but that of force, Cyrus's career suggests he took another view. He did not lack ambition: after all, he was intent on building an empire. But "he reverenced the laws, and knew that there are unjust wars...In the beginning of his wars, Cyrus founded all his hopes of success on the justice of his cause...The succeeding victories of Cyrus had the same principle of justice on their side..."[7]

The overall record of the Achaemenid monarchs' treatment of the vanquished as recorded by foreign observers, stands the scrutiny of close examination. Herodotus attests that the Persians were generous in their treatment of conquered peoples, and they would show honour to an enemy who had fought valiantly.[8]The sons of rebel chiefs were treated with great consideration, occasionally being permitted to rule over their father's territories[9]. At times, the conquered king spent the remainder of his life at the Persian court as an honoured guest of the king[10], Croesus of Lydia having been one such. Espousal of religious freedom for the conquered peoples appears to have been well established by this Persian dynasty; as monarchs and their satraps were prepared to promote their subjects through endowments so long as the foreign divinities were not antithetical to the interests of the empire. Naturally, these places of worship were expected to pay taxes to the Persian exchequer, and acknowledge Persian suzerainty. Wieshöfer argues that "this principle of religious policy was actually observed by all Persian kings".[11] Even so, 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 upon rebel chiefs. Those inhabitants who acted treacherously against the Persian army were on occasion, put to the sword, or sold as slaves.[12]

While relatively less is known of the Arsacid Parthian epoch, it is possible to extrapolate from the sources an evaluation of this immensely underestimated dynasty. It was out of Judaism, which had by then been in contact with Zoroastrianism 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. A perusal of Roman historians[13] who would after all, have been a hostile source on the Parthians, acknowledges nevertheless, that they behaved well to captives and fugitives who were

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[6] See, Translation of the Text on the Cyrus Cylinder, transl. Iving Finkel (London: The British Museum)
[7] As quoted in Charles Rollin, *Ancient History: History of the Persians Primary Source Edition* (USA: Nabu Public Domain Reprints) p. 53
[8] Herodotus, *The Histories,* transl. Aubrey de Sélincourt, revised by A R Burn (London: Penguin, 1972 [1954]), 6:30, 7:81, 238
[9] Herod.3:13
[10] Herod. 1:130, 153, 207, 3:36
[11] Joseph Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia* (London: I B Tauris, repr. 2001) pp.57-8
[12] Herod. 3:147, 159, 8:53
[13] Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities,* Loeb Classical Library; George Rawlinson, *The Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy,* "The Geography, History and Antiquities of Parthia", (London 1873)

treated with kindness and respect; that they were scrupulous in observing their given word and remaining faithful to treaty obligations.

The somewhat hubristic war instigated in 53 BCE by Marcus Licinius Crassus who, with an army of some 40,000 men encountered a somewhat lesser force of about 10,000 Parthian horsemen on the open plain at Carrhae (modern Harran), where the Roman army was routed, and Crassus himself killed in battle and beheaded, remains among the better known confrontations of the Parthian era. From the latter's perspective, this was an unnecessary confrontation; and Plutarch records the dénouement in dramatic detail as the severed head of Crassus was presented to the Parthian king, Orodes, while he listened to an actor declaiming some lines from Euripedes' play *The Bacchae.*

The overthrow of the Parthian dynasty by the house of Sasan, fellow Iranians, would have profoundly shaken not just the domestic society, 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. Thus, missionary activities in lands contiguous to Iran and in distant parts of the empire, with converts being sought among Iranians themselves, came to vex Sasanian monarchs, in addition to other considerations. Arguably therefore, for the first time in Zoroastrianism's long history, Persian monarchs, followers of Zarathustra, engaged in state-sponsored religious oppression of foreign faiths.

The seemingly endless wars between Rome and Persia "went on and on, century after century" and "become part of the apparatus by which Persian Shahs and Roman Emperors alike justified their rule".[14]The difficulty of analysing – from this distance in time – ancient wars, depends to some extent which version we choose to accept. A case in point is the defeat of the Roman Emperor Valerian who, besieged by troubles at home, led an army against the Sasanian monarch Shapur in 259/260 ACE. His defeat at the hands of the Persians is commemorated on the rock carving at Naqsh-e Rostam which shows Shapur on horseback receiving the submission of the Roman emperor. The accounts of what precisely happened to the emperor however differ substantially. The Roman version is that after some years of humiliation, Valerian was eventually flayed alive and his skin stuffed with straw and exhibited as a reminder of the superiority of Persian arms. The inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam however, says the Roman captives were settled in various places around the empire, and there is evidence of this at Bishapur and at Shustar, where Roman engineers were engaged in the construction of a combined bridge and dam. It is possible to suggest that Valerian ended his days as *pontifex maximus* of a Persian city,[15] not least, given the evidence of Shapur's humane conduct and the spirit of the Naqsh-e Rostam relief itself.

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

[14] Michael Axworthy, *Iran Empire of the Mind* (London: Penguin 2008), p.47
[15] *Ibid* p. 48

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.[16]. On such occasions when 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 seven 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 dispatched with a bag of salt sealed with the royal ring, signifying the sanctity of the oath.[17]

Zoroastrian intellectuals do not appear to have theorised on the execution of war; or if they have, such writings are not well known. However, there can be no debate that Zoroastrianism underpinned three mighty Iranian empires for almost a millennium (notwithstanding the interregnum of Alexander of Macedon) from 550 BCE to 651 CE; and countless wars were fought and won (and lost) by Persian armies. With some exceptions, Persian monarchs appear to have set impressive standards in relation to our contemporary notions of *jus in bello*, more especially in the treatment of the vanquished. Indeed, the Sasanian monarchs who strenuously fought the Byzantine monarchs would legitimise their wars as a means of securing Zoroastrian Iran's interests from being over-ridden by Christian encroachments. (Iranian converts to Christianity were considered fifth columnists, more inclined to owe their loyalty to the `Caesars' than the Shahanshah, and hence dangerous to Iranian national interests). The Sasanian monarchs would argue that thus, they adhered to the concept of *jus ad bellum,* given that maintaining the security of the state was their primary duty.

Zoroastrian Iran is today a distant memory. The Arab conquest of the country – and its empire – in the seventh century would transform the land from Zoroastrian to Muslim, obliterating the old order and installing the new. Over time – from 651 CE to the present day – the Zoroastrian peoples are a minuscule minority in Iran (as are those Zoroastrians, known as Parsis, who sought refuge in India), and by definition, are not decision-makers in questions of war and peace that Iranian or Indian governments might take. As Iranian or Indian citizens, although these Zoroastrians may not participate in whether or when their respective countries take to the battlefield, individual Zoroastrians in both countries have been, and still are, members of the armed forces of their respective states. As such, they must fulfil their role as fighting men. Illustrious Zoroastrian soldiers in the contemporary era are not hard to find: in 1935, during the Pahlavi era in Iran, the four-star General Nozari was an acknowledged favourite of Reza Shah, who conceded on a visit to the army school that "You are a Zoroastrian. We need more people like these real Iranians here".[18] In India, Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw has been spoken of as "one of independent India's greatest generals", a national hero credited with playing a major role in the military campaign in 1971 which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. Not just his strategic vision, his fearless challenge of politicians, but Manekshaw's treatment of prisoners of war marked him out as an outstanding soldier. It is tempting to suggest that a certain ethical underpinning, perhaps subliminal, shaped these fighting men, given that both high ranking soldiers were Zoroastrians by birth and upbringing

[16] G Rawlinson, *The Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy, The Geography, History and Antiquities of the Sasanian Empire* (London 1873), p.404
[17] A Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides,* (Copenhagen: 2nd ed. 1944)
[18] R Writer, *The Reshaping of Iran From Zoroastrian To Muslim,* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press 2013), p.383

although neither appeared to parade their religious beliefs. This speaks to a long tradition in Zoroastrian history: wars are an unfortunate feature of human experience, but if they are to be undertaken, application of a moral yardstick – just war – ought to be the goal.

Zoroastrians are arguably, among the smallest religio-ethnic group today; spread thinly in Iran, India, Pakistan, Australasia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Europe, the United Kingdom, North America. It bears reiteration that contemporary Zoroastrians are not in a position to decide whether or when the country in which they are domiciled goes to war. Those individuals who are members of the armed forces of their respective countries are fighting men and must engage in whichever theatre their national government engages in. As such, the intellectual demand on the individual Zoroastrian fighting man or woman must be the internalisation of Zoroastrian theology as outlined above: man's individual responsibility for his actions, thoughts and words as stated in Yasna 32.2.

However, the world these fighting men inhabit is immeasurably different from that of even a generation ago. In every respect, the first two decades of the twenty-first century has seen a virtual revolution in the political, social and technological spheres so that the criteria needs to be pertinent and usable in situations not neatly classifiable as wars in the standard historical sense. It is no exaggeration to suggest that globalised jihadi warfare has altered `war' as we know it. While it is possible to debate whether or not this activity constitutes war is a moot point: it confronts almost every part of the globe and challenges the very underpinnings of Just War theory. The `lifestyle jihadist' [19] has reconfigured the concept of war. We are confronted by a multitude of battles and a proliferation of front lines, so that we have acquired a chilling familiarity with instruments of mass killings.

The pertinent question today is whether we can construct a theory for the conduct of war when the dispersed but lethal antagonists are guided by a passionate nihilism. Whereas Just War argues for morality in going to war which ought to be a last resort, and once engaged in, for the protagonists to exercise a disciplined pragmatism; globalised jihadi warfare argues for a continuous, immutable cause of war: the transformation of the *dar al-harb* to the *dar al-Islam.* The jihadist's argument that he or she has divine sanction to kill the unbeliever, as well as those of the *umma* but not a member of their sect, has in real terms, thrown the rules of war up in the air: modern conflict/s has ushered in an era of chaos for which there seem to be no easy answers.

What can Zoroastrian thinkers contribute to our dysfunctional world? We have seen how Adharbad's concept of moderation in all things was the lodestar that guided the Zoroastrians once their land had been overtaken by the Arabs. Persian monarchs, although they did not articulate the theory of Just War, appeared, in most instances to have weighed up whether or not the next confrontation was a just cause; while for the most part, demonstrating a level of tolerance for the vanquished. Further back, Zarathustra himself, made the choice between good and evil the cornerstone of his teachings.

Having said this, we must acknowledge that the technological advances made today – unthinkable to the denizens of even the mid- to late-20th century – has so transformed war, and that modern wars are so beyond the imaginings of generations that preceded ours, that we must

[19] See David Aaronovitch, "There's only one answer to `death style' jihadists", *The Times,* London 20 November 2014

redefine war itself and how modern wars demand to be fought. As for the individual Zoroastrians, the theological imperative remains unchanging: the Gathic teachings and perhaps, most pertinently, Yasna 30.2. Even so, the emphasis on free will as set out in this stanza imposes upon each individual responsibility and an uncompromising awareness that the choices made on this earth will be judged `before the great retribution'. This accountability applies to king and commoner alike: the former, when he decides to go to war – the morality of going to war at all (*Jus ad bellum*) and how the war is waged (*Jus in bello*) – and the latter, whether in positions of policy makers or soldiers. The brutality of man killing his fellow man cannot and must not be undertaken lightly. Arguably the only moral reasoning ought to be that war is only ever the last resort.

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