

ON SOME NEW DISCOVERIES AND DIRECTIONS IN ZOROASTRIANISM.
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The purpose of this presentation is to take note of some significant achievements and discoveries in Zoroastrian studies and in the allied fields of pre-Islamic Iranian research generally over roughly the period of the past two decades; and to summarize one's own work in this area in the same time, suggesting also what new directions it might indicate as potentially fruitful for further scholarship. I am aware that this occasion brings together both academic researchers and members of a faith community. The activity of the Zoroastrian laity and priesthood in the range of Iranistics, from the history of religions to textual scholarship, linguistics, and ethnography, is prominent in the field, often of very great merit, and of long standing. Since Zoroastrian community life and Iranist scholarship in the modern period intersect at various points, I would start by addressing some of the parameters of the definition of Zoroastrianism, how these determine the character of scholarship, what problems they introduce into the study and practice of the religion at the present time, and how students of the religion deal, more or less successfully, with these problems when called upon to address them.

Zoroastrian devotion is based primarily upon the performance of material ritual analogous to Christian communion: diverse rites of purification, sanctification, and celebration that center ultimately upon the preparation and ingestion of *haoma* in the Yasna ceremony. The latter ceremony, in turn, is linked to a 72-chapter liturgical text in a marked sacred language, the Avesta, at whose core is the corpus of the Hymns of Zarathustra himself, the *Gathas*, and the *Yasna* "of the seven chapters", or *Haptanhaiti*—it may be mentioned in passing that Johanna Narten's edition of the latter, and her firm establishment of its antiquity and centrality, is one of the most significant contributions to Avestan scholarship in the period I will presently consider. As a religion that combines magical act with mantric utterance, Zoroastrianism can be studied in comparison with the closely akin Vedic religion and ritual. But as a messianic faith preaching normative revelations and engaged in a linear historical contest against the various kinds of evil that define the human predicament, the religion of the worshippers of Mazda may be considered just as fruitfully and correctly with respect to Judaism, a similarly ethnocentric religion of the book and the law, with which it has enjoyed a long and very positive relationship, and the romantic, messianic faith that grew out of Judaism, Christianity, whose eschatology and demonology it affected more permanently and directly, even if the historical record down to the Islamic era is one more of confrontation than of fascination.

So, just as Zoroastrianism stands in between the Semitic and Indic worlds, akin to both but ultimately perhaps most profoundly studied as itself, *sui generis*, so it resists easy categorization in the other ways religion acts in society and is susceptible to analysis and reform. Although Zoroastrian scripture presents a radical teaching about the cosmos that must logically address, and make demands upon, all mankind, and is in that sense

akin to evangelical Christianity, Zoroastrian society in history, especially in the strongholds of India and Iran, has been rooted in one kind of community, even in a particular caste. Therefore in the present era, when many Zoroastrians live in the secular, democratic West, where intermarriage, the free choice of a faith, and the liberal practice thereof are regarded as indicators of enlightenment, thinking about Zoroastrianism must confront the conundrum of conversion. When the communal structure, and clannish attitudes, that have practically served the community of the faith so well through a perilous history, now are challenged as variously impractical, hypocritical, or theoretically and spiritually inconsistent, students of the religion are often asked to address the problem and have to end up, if they do, taking sides on it. If they refuse to consider the matter, asserting with every good reason that it would be impertinent to do so, they still cannot escape the consideration, so clearly stressed by anthropologists, that a scholar in contact with another culture inevitably partakes in and affects that which he or she studies and must honestly confront the fact.

The second question that arises, in connection with the first, is that of monotheism and the omnipotence of God. Zoroastrianism arose in a polytheistic milieu with which it never severed its ties: the gods Mithra, Anahita, Verethraghna, and the rest have all endured, albeit within a system in which they are formally subordinate emanations of the single Creator Ahura Mazda. In Hindu India, reverence for multiple divinities, or manifestations of divinity, in whatever form or image, is not an issue. In Catholic Christendom, with its fertile iconography and worship of an already Trinitarian God, it is not an issue either, so long as the divinity in question is subsumed under the guise of a Saint, or of the Blessed Virgin. The very title of Raimundo Panikkar's book, *The Hidden Christ of Hinduism*, makes the point. However the principal ideological model of religion, at least until very recently, in the English-speaking countries where Parsis tend to prefer to live, and even more so in Muslim Iran, is of a single God who is entirely omnipotent and transcendent. The old question, *Unde malum?* "Where does evil come from?" is answered by Zoroastrianism this way: it comes from Angra Mainyu, a spirit of pure negation who has existed since before the world was made and who has been in conflict with Ahura Mazda ever since. When the innocent suffer, it is because of deleterious actions of this spirit the Creator God is unable to neutralize, though the faithful believe evil will, ultimately, be defeated. Now Christians see Satan as somewhat similar, though he is made simultaneously subservient to God. But Zoroastrianism is, in theory and practice, dualistic. By practice I mean that even when Parsis insist God is all-powerful and death comes by His decree and is part of the right and natural order of things, they still observe scrupulously rites of purification based on the assumption that death, dirt, disease, and so on are intrinsically alien to the cosmos and must actively be fought against.

Yet again, scholars are asked by Zoroastrians whose deep convictions are monotheistic, whether their religion is in fact describable as dualistic, whether there is one God or many, and so on. I once lectured to an audience of about a hundred Parsis in Lahore: it is not a very big community, though it is a venerable remnant of one, so the people in the hall could be said to express the majority view of a traditional Zoroastrian group. When I asked whether my listeners thought death the work of God, every single

hand in the room was raised. When I asked the same people whether they observed the traditional precautions against *nasa*, impurity, and went into details, they all did. So their Zoroastrianism was a matter of orthopraxy, correct action, as my beloved, departed teacher Mary Boyce, would say, rather than orthodoxy, correct belief as defined by the recognized, authoritative foundational scripture of the Good Religion. I say correct belief, based upon the most careful reading, not only of the *Gathas* themselves, but also of the subsequent theological literature of the Zoroastrian intellectual tradition, in Middle Persian (Pahlavi), and in the older writings in New Persian and Gujarati before the influence of English Protestants began to make itself felt in the nineteenth century. However, how far does one take this? If the good Parsis of Lahore believe, on the one hand, that God is all-powerful, but lead, on the other hand, a way of life of cleanliness, truth, charity, and the other virtues, then has not their religion become like any other ethical monotheism? If their departure from an older dualism substitutes worshipful mystery for rigid logic, who am I to say that one cosmology is wrong; the other right? The most I can assert is what the texts say, not how a religion ought to develop or change, much less what is or may be existentially true.

If it be objected that Zoroastrianism is a special human view of the world, different from the views of the other great faiths, and should be preserved as such, in the pristine and original form its texts outline, then one must also consider how to be consistent about what one saves and what one allows to go. I do not mean to accord credence here to the methods of those who willfully tamper with the translations of those texts to suit a predetermined agenda, much less of those who outrageously deride the Pahlavi corpus as corrupt or vicious. My question is, if one demands that the whole scripture be accepted literally, then one is forced to follow practices and rules no decent or sane person could possibly accept today. The Avesta enjoins, for instance, the practice of incest, called *khvaetvadatha*; but it condemns homosexuality as the very worst capital crime, worthy of immediate execution without trial. I and quite a few other Iranists in America and abroad are gay, as are many talented and dedicated members of the Zoroastrian community itself, from Bombay to Chicago. The subject is still a delicate one for Parsis bred in the gentle manners of the Victorian era, and gay Parsis are sometimes forced to be circumspect about their true feelings, but I still have never yet heard in any Zoroastrian gathering, whether orthodox or reformist, any hateful, homophobic remark. Indeed such a sentiment would seem to me to run counter to the generous spirit of the faith, rather than to express any orthodox value.

Similarly, most Zoroastrians of the present day find the idea of incest appalling, though there is evidence that their ancestors did not. As for intermarriage and conversion, I have never found any passage in the sacred books prohibiting either practice, though it is also true, as I noted earlier, that Zoroastrianism was overwhelmingly an Iranian national faith throughout history, the occasional Mazda-worshipping Turanian being at best the exception that proved the rule—and in any case all these Turanians had Iranian names and were probably an Iranian-speaking people to start with, if a refractory and demonolatrous one. Yes, conversion and intermarriage would change Parsi ethnic character, and members of the community have to weigh the probability of cultural change and the dilution or loss of many cherished features of material life against other

factors. One is the continuing diminution of the Zoroastrian population. Another is moral: can anyone, after all the monstrosities wrought by racists and fascists on this unhappy planet, really claim that the *ethnos* to which Parsis and Iranis belong is or could be intrinsically superior to any other? Parsis have come to America, Canada, Australia as welcome immigrants; but how dare one suggest that a *kusti*-wearing African-American, an Inuit, an Aborigine— one's host!— would somehow pollute by her presence a sacred fire?

Twenty years ago my answers as a scholar to all the issues above would have been text-based and assertively conservative, orthodox, and traditional. As I get older I find the business of religion to be messier, more realistic, personal and social than textual, cosmological and philosophical. Even the finest German scholarship is still just *Sprachwissenschaft* and *Religionsgeschichte*, at best handmaidens of real life as she is lived. Students of Zoroastrianism can neither evade the living questions of the faith, nor offer satisfactory answers to them. At best they can, while making clear their personal limitations and the constraints of their scientific discipline, work together with a community in transition.

In the mid-1980's I went to India with the purpose of studying Parsi Zoroastrian folk religion, a subject Modi and others had worked on long before, but on which much remained to be done. Since my training is philological, my investigations were large based on the texts read in rituals: the long choral songs for festive occasions called *garbas* in Gujarati; the poetic devotional prayers, suffused in Hindu and Muslim themes, called in Arabic *monajats*; the shorter, semi-magical prayers called *nirangs*, with their Pahlavi forbears and Muslim descendants; and various non-sacerdotal rites such as the reading by Navsari women at home of the historiola and aretology of *Mushkil Asan Bahram Yazad*, with its antecedent practices in Iran. I did much of my research with the late Shehnaz Munshi, who later co-authored with Philip Kreyenbroek the fine volume *Living Zoroastrianism*: the book deals with many of these subjects. In California I worked also with Parsi followers of the theosophical Ilm-e Khshnoom, and linked this strain of thought to mystical teachings within Zoroastrianism in Mughal India and earlier. My ethnographic work appeared in several articles, as did the research on mysticism. I also wrote a pioneering article on a several bas-reliefs from China which, I argued, portrayed in sequence the journey of a merchant, probably a Sogdian, and a Zoroastrian funerary ritual: this was published in Bombay before any other scholar's work on the subject was, and I lectured on my findings at the University of California, Berkeley. Prof. David Stronach strenuously criticized my ideas and suggested I was the credulous victim of an unscrupulous dealer in forgeries. Since then, numerous similar works of Sogdian funereal art in China with more or less overt Zoroastrian imagery, such as bird-like beings serving sacred fires, have been discovered in excavations and the study of these monuments has revolutionized our understanding of the attitude of Eastern Iranians towards religious iconography. Stronach has since apologized in a private letter and admitted my work has been entirely vindicated.

I did not continue these lines of research because Columbia University, where I worked, terminated the century-old program in Ancient Iranian studies, replacing it with

one devoted exclusively to modern Iranian Islam. One must reflect that at no point in these travails did the Zoroastrian community make any effort to save Columbia's venerable program or to help me personally. When I was without work, it was a fellow Jew and a scholar of Armenian, Michael Stone, who found me a job at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel, teaching Armenian and Iranian studies. Shortly after my arrival in Israel I was informed I had been appointed to the Mashtots Chair in Armenian Studies at Harvard; so I naturally focused my work thereafter on Armenian. Since my thesis dealt with Zoroastrianism in Armenia, there has always been a significant Iranian component in my Armenian work; and I shall get to that presently. There is a program in Ancient Iranian studies at Harvard, in which I always encourage my own students to study. At first I hoped that Armenian and Iranian together would form a powerful, interesting field; and I continued to do some Iranian work, writing, for example, papers on the Zoroastrian content of the Greek Derveni papyrus and on the Armenian versions of the tales of Rostam in the *Shah-name*. But as it turned out, no pupil of Prof. Skjaervo, the Aga Khan Professor of Iranian, has ever taken a single Armenian course, even though my courses on Armenian epic and folk religion have been of the most direct relevance to the Iranian field. Harvard is a place where they leave you alone if you stick to your own territory. It has a superb library and some fine students; but in fourteen years I have never had the sense of living in a collegial community of scholars. I mention all this in candor, to explain why in my own work I am moving gradually into the purely Christian aspects of the Armenian tradition, and towards the consideration of Armenia within the purview of Russian culture. So I shall discuss presently some of my work of recent years of relevance to the Zoroastrian field; but that work is in the main completed for the time being.

I have mentioned above the proliferation of discoveries in the field of Central and East Asian art that affect our understanding of Zoroastrian iconography. The major finds by Russian archaeologists of ancient urban concentrations in Bactria and Margiana in the 1980's-90's augment these: they suggest that the first settled Iranian regions to receive Zarathushtra's message, in the late second millennium B.C., were very much more sophisticated in their culture, politics, economy, than was imagined heretofore. The rich imagery of their ossuaries and tombs, so different from the relatively iconoclastic record of the Sasanians, is more likely to have grown in a settled and self-confident society than simply to have been absorbed hungrily from Indian and Chinese models. This does or does not alter our picture of the prophet himself, depending upon where and when one situates him. In my article in the book *A Zoroastrian Tapestry*, which is based upon a lecture given at Bombay— one of many sponsored by my old friend and classmate Khojeste Mistree and the Zoroastrian Studies center he founded and has guided all these long years— I proposed that Zarathustra came from what is now Kazakhstan, very far from any city. He lived in a semi-nomadic culture whose names and concepts were tied to cattle, horses, and camels. His own name, I argued, means "eldest camel", that is, the wisest and most prized one, the leader of a caravan. This suggestion has been challenged by pious believers preferring that the name of God's friend and messenger mean something more radiant and starry, as it did to the Greeks. But now we know that the title of all those Sogdian community leaders whose fancy stone tombs are being dug up in China means "caravan leader"; and the more brooches, appliqués, and other objects we

find in Central Asia proper, in the famed “animal style”, the clearer it becomes that the camel was for ancient Iranians one of the holiest creatures.

When Henning approached, somewhat sarcastically, the competing scholarly pictures of Zoroaster as “politician” or “witch-doctor”, one could still believe on the evidence that the prophet might have lived in Achaemenian Iran. One can no longer do so: all the evidence of a late date has been shown to be false. One might also then dismiss comparisons of the *Gathas* to shamanistic poetry, which was condescendingly thought of as a kind of narcoleptic nonsense that terrified the savage mind. We now know more about poetics, the role of the subconscious in the creative process, the amazing linguistic resources of some shamans— notably in Indo-Iranian Central Asia— and the way visionary religion works. To deny that aspects of Iranian religion, like Kartir’s vision, for example, can be studied with the model of shamanism, is not the statement of a tenable scholarly position, only an avowal of unscholarly prejudice. Now the questions posed about the prophet are more like whether he existed as a person at all. Skjaervo seems to answer in the negative, seeing Zarathustra as a legendary figure constructed gradually by tradition, and finding, correspondingly, many *topoi* of pan-Indo-European epic in the Avestan references to Zarathustra that support an oral evolution but militate against discoverable, personal authorship. Martin Schwartz takes a different view: in a series of studies of the text and language of the *Gathas*, he finds strong evidence of the distinct personality of an ingenious poetic visionary. More importantly perhaps, he finds abundant evidence of very complex patterns of alliterations and other manipulations of sounds and clusters of sounds across a text— verbal equivalents of a Bach fugue, as it were. Following the discovery of these acrophonic aspects, Schwartz has gone on to discern large symmetrical patterns of composition as well, where entire sections of one hymn are a kind of mirror image, or a reversal, of a previous pattern. These insights remind me of the sound-plays in Russian poetics, and the great, wing-like structure of Nabokov’s poem in the novel *Pale Fire*. Last year, an incredulous interlocutor at a conference in Bucharest wondered to Schwartz how an ancient prophet could have been as self-consciously a literary virtuoso as James Joyce.

An unintended result of the chaos in Afghanistan has been the unearthing and transport to the West of documents in the Bactrian language, an Iranian tongue of which hitherto very few monuments existed: a little epigraphy, some names and titles on coins, a few manuscript fragments. Nicholas Sims-Williams has deciphered and published the Bactrian documents with extensive linguistic commentary. The language is not very different from Sogdian; and it predictably contains much of the same religious terminology that one finds at the other end of the Iranian world, in the stock of loan-words into Zoroastrian Armenia of the Parthian period. For example: */vagholang/*, “temple”, from **baga-danaka-* “place of the god(s)”, cf. Sgd. */vaghdhane/*, and the Armenian toponym Bagaran. (It is interesting to note in connection with the latter, a pre-Christian holy place, that the mountain Sukavet rises nearby. I have studied the sacred associations of the latter place, which were recast in a Christian Apostolic legend, and have established its derivation from the name of the minor Zoroastrian *yazata* Saoka.) There are various theophoric terms with Mithra: the months Mirogan, cf. Arm. Mehekan,

from *Mithrakana-, the names Miran and Mirovandagh, cf. Pers.-in-Arm. Mihran, Mihrevandak.

My principal contribution to Iranistics is, understandably, in the field of Armeno-Iranica. Until her death in April 2006, Mary Boyce and I corresponded, frequently on a fortnightly basis (she never subscribed to electronic mail, nor, to the best of my knowledge, acquired a computer), on the Armenian section of volume four of her *History of Zoroastrianism*. This book, which covers the Parthian Arsacid era, was partially completed at her death; and Albert de Jong of Leiden University, to whom the manuscript has been entrusted for completion and publication, informs me the Armenian section, which I had thought was at most a chapter, comprises in fact a large number of chapters. I have agreed to his request that I survey and comment in writing upon the edited versions of these before printing; but I have not yet seen them. For some reason Boyce never showed me herself what she was writing, so beyond de Jong's comment that she largely agreed with my findings, in my book *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* and in subsequent studies, I have no idea what she wrote about the subjects upon which we did disagree. I mention these since one of them has been the principal object of numerous researches undertaken during my life at Harvard; and with a summary of these I shall conclude these remarks.

With the conversion of the Armenian people to Christianity over the course of the fourth century, churches and martyria were erected on the sites of the *bagins* ("image shrines"), *meheans* (perhaps at some point equivalent to "*dar-e Mehrs*") and *atrushans* ("fire temples") of the Zoroastrians. In some cases, Christian saints took the place of individual divinities: St. John the Forerunner (Arm. Hovhannes *Karapet*) acquires the features of Vahagn, i.e., Verethraghna; while the cult of the Holy Mother of God (Arm. *Astvatsatsin*) betrays aspects of that of Anahit. Other Zoroastrian sacred names became common nouns: the Amesha Spenta of Mother Earth, Spenta Armaiti becomes in Christian Armenian usage *s(p)andaramet*, a word for the subterranean realm. Yet other terms survived in a sort of demonized occultation: the old religious term for a *genius loci*, OPers. **khshathrapati*, "lord of a realm", for instance, becomes Middle Iranian in Arm. *shahapet*, and ends up— I have argued— as the house-spirit called the *shvod*, who lives in the walls in winter and is driven out in March. In the village of Tadem the being was more sinister: it dwelt in the dark rock behind where a spring welled forth, in *Shvodi blur*, "Shvod's Hill". Bride and groom accorded prudent reverence to the spirit by passing silently by Shvod's Hill on their wedding procession; but, rather like an Armenian Erlkönig, it still would swallow up now and then a child playing in the spring. In the Armenian Christian literature itself, the language of the Good Religion of Mazda-worship has left an indelible impression: God's miraculous activity is called *hrashakert*, from Avestan *frashokereti*, the "making wonderful" of the end of history; He is hailed by the word *p'arrk'*, "Glory!" from Avestan *khvarenah*; His cathedral is called a *tachar*, from the Old Persian term for a royal palace; and in the Middle Ages the girdle worn by an Armenian priest was called a *k'ustik*— the *kusti*. It will not come as news to anyone who has studied folk Christianity, from the Slavic countries to Ireland, that older faiths leave such substrates: what is interesting about Armenia is that it is the only Christian country whose substratum of this kind is Iranian, and not just Iranian, but clearly and

unmistakably Zoroastrian. This and more I set out to document systematically and to prove in *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*. Though there has been interest in producing Persian and Russian editions, the book and its author are not universally liked in Armenia itself, where such emphasis on the Iranian aspects of Armenian culture is seen, quite unfairly I think, as somehow a disparagement of the independent national genius. Certainly no such animus motivated this research; and if humanistic scholarship endures, it will be up to posterity to evaluate the evidence and pass judgment.

When I came to Harvard I turned my attention to the great Armenian folk epic, *Sasna tsrrer*, “The Wild Men of Sasun”. The epic exists in scores of partial or complete oral variants in various local dialects of Armenian collected by ethnographers over the course of a century; there is also a composite text in a standardized dialect. It tells the story of four generations of a clan of giant, recklessly brave heroes. The first are unequal twins, Sanasar and Baghdasar, born of a princess, Tsovinar (her name may mean something like “Lady of the Lake”), who has drunk of a milky fountain in the sea (Lake Van) and become pregnant. Sanasar goes into the depths of the lake to a shrine of the Virgin, where he is given his fiery sword, armband of the Holy Cross, and a talking steed. After fighting a dragon and undergoing other trials, he marries a mysterious, witch-like maiden and they have a son. The second chapter, or “branch” as the Armenians call it, concerns this son, whose name is Mher, that is, Mithra. After killing a ferocious lion he acquires the honorific epithet *arriutsadzev*, which can mean either “lion-shaped” or “lion-slayer”. He is unfaithful to his wife and they die young, immediately after the birth of their son, David. David of Sasun, the greatest of his line, vanquishes the perennial enemy—the Muslims, here called *krrapasht* “idolatrous” *Meser* “Egypt”. He and his wife bear the last of the heroic line, *P’ok’r* “Little” Mher. This young man, in the fourth branch of the epic, fights with his father, is cursed by him posthumously, and follows a raven to a cave where he is to remain in confinement, the wheel of the Zodiac in his hands, till the time comes around for the earth to be righteous again and for him to re-emerge and perform an unspecified apocalyptic act. In some versions of the epic this cave is a holy place mistaken by a village girl for a church; it even has features reminiscent of the *dadophoroi*, or twin torchbearers, of Mithraic bas-reliefs.

Several previous researchers, including Schwartz and Boyle, noted particular, obvious references in the epic to the Zoroastrian *yazata* Mithra, called in Armenian Mher; and had associated these with images particular to the Mithraic mystery cult that spread widely in the early Christian centuries through the Roman Empire. Armenian students of the epic of Sasun, the first oral variants of which were recorded and published only in 1874, noted the affinity of some images and themes to a much older epic cycle, that of the Artaxiad dynasty. This epic, of which only a few excerpts and summaries remain, faithfully recorded by medieval Armenian historians, deals with events and persons of two millennia earlier—the second century B.C. I undertook to find and analyze all the ancient material, see what internal thematic coherence it had, discover in other sources and collate parts of the story that seemed to be missing, explore the social and ideological significance of the survival of such an ancient relic within the context of Armenian Christian life, and, finally, evaluate the importance of the epic with respect to the sources, diffusion, and development of Roman Mithraism. Most of the studies that lay out the

fruits of this research are gathered and reprinted in my book, *Armenian and Iranian Studies* (in the series Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies, vol. 9, Cambridge, MA, 2004, distributed by Harvard University Press); I have finished three major additional articles since then on the epic: one has just appeared in the journal *RES*; another, in the *Journal of Armenian Studies*, Belmont, MA; and the third will be published in the *Proceedings* of the June 2007 Hebrew University conference on apocalypticism held by my pupil and now colleague, Professor Sergio La Porta.

Among the conclusions I have reached are these: the core material of the epic is native to Eastern Anatolia and dates back to the early first millennium B.C. Though the Armenian Artaxiad epic that took shape after the second century B.C. shares material with the North Iranian oral epic of the modern Alans, the *Narts*, it is more likely that the Alans borrowed from Armenian epic than the other way around. This argument is strengthened by my recent discovery of a Median character named Argawan who figures in the Artaxiad epic and reappears in a Circassian version of the *Narts*. F. Scott Littleton and Linda Melcor have argued in their book, *From Scythia to Camelot*, that Alans in the Roman army recounted the *Narts* and some characters and episodes therein— the Lady of the Lake, the sword in the stone, the casting of Excalibur into the sea— that do not have obvious Celtic antecedents were incorporated into the epic stories about King Arthur. I think they are probably right; except that all the episodes they cite I have now shown to have archaic and well-documented Armenian sources, in oral tales and hagiographic legends ancillary to the Sasun material. Then I have argued that the Armenian epic stories reflect the particular values of paramilitary fraternities of young men who paid special devotion to the *yazata* Mithra. These fraternities survived into the Middle Ages as the Armenian *yeghbayrut'iunk'* and *ktrchvorats' miut'iunk'*, the Persian *javanmardan*, and the *akhi* and *futuwwa* groups of Muslim Anatolia. Their original religious or moral orientation also endured, for they are known to have studied Neoplatonic wisdom. And recitation of such epic literature as the *Shah-name* accompanied their exercises and augmented aesthetically their instruction: such is the practice of the Iranian *zor khane* to this day. As for esoteric brotherhoods preserving special Mithraic features, one need look no farther than the practices and teachings of the *Ahl-e Haqq* and *Yaresan* orders of the Kurds— that is to say, of the lineal descendants of the Medes on the Armenian plateau and in northwestern Iran. The cult of Mithra would have originated, then, in Armenia, the westernmost stronghold of Zoroastrianism. Though the Roman sources trace the point of diffusion to the Anatolian coast and the operations of Cilician pirates, there might have been in fact multiple vectors, from trade along the Pontic littoral— where statuettes of the tauroctony have been found— to Alan cavalrymen in the Roman legions telling tales from the *Narts* in France and north Wales.

At our last meeting face to face, in London in the Summer of 2000, Prof. Boyce objected to these conclusions: an appendix written by Prof. Roger Beck to Vol. 3 of her *History* had asserted, after all, that Mithraism, whatever its Iranian trappings, was a local Roman invention. A distinct mystery religion within Zoroastrianism, she argued, was incompatible with the orthodox model of the faith. It seems to me, however, that Iranian religion, at least under the Arsacids, had room for considerable heterogeneity in cult and art and organization— Boyce's pupil Prof. Shaul Shaked, in his lectures published as the

book *Dualism in Transition*, argues that such diversity existed in the Sasanian period as well, a thesis that led to their personal falling out. There are analogies within coherent, dogmatic religious systems that make it possible to see a proto-Mithraism within the Zoroastrian cosmos: one might cite the cults and sodalities of saints in Roman Catholicism, or the divergent sects of Judaism that flourished at the time of Christ in the shadow of the Second Temple. My teacher and I agreed amicably to disagree, though we returned to the topic in letters: once she proposed that Little Mher's imprisonment in the Rock of Van was an addition, perhaps even Roman-inspired, to the epic as it spread to the Van area; so I had laboriously to explain that the epic actually *began* at Van and Little Mher's part concludes a coherent narrative and could not have been tacked on.

How does this change our understanding of Zoroastrianism? Well, for one thing it is fairly clear, at least to me, that Mithra's floppy felt hat, the so-called Phrygian *pilos* that became the Roman symbol of manumission and then our Liberty Cap, emblem of every democratic revolution of the modern age, is not some accidental Oriental trapping. Rather, it perpetuates a fundamental Zoroastrian belief. Man stands before God as his friend, enjoined to think for himself and then to exercise the right of moral choice. That choice will affect the very outcome of the cosmic conflict between right and wrong; so man's act is one of real importance, and that means he is a being of inalienable dignity. Skjaervo has shown how the Achaemenian inscriptions paraphrase the *Gathas*: the Cyrus cylinder, the farewell of Darius at Naqsh-e Rostam, are suffused with this spirit. "A great god is Ahura Mazda, who created this earth and that heaven, who created happiness for man," they declare; and the particular good news about God that Zarathustra first brought, has grown and spread. I have mentioned that Columbia University in my home town, New York City, used to teach Iranian studies. It now boasts instead Prof. Hamid Dabashi, who often publishes his inspired pronouncements in the English-language supplements to the Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahram*. Among these is a meditation on the twin towers of the World Trade Center as double erect phalluses whose castration is an inevitable and proper response to American imperialism, and a literary essay likening Azar Nafisi's interesting book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, to a torture session at Abu Ghraib prison. It should not come as too much of a surprise, then, when Dabashi has this to say about you: "There is scarcely anything in the pre-Islamic history of Iran, as we know it, that serves as a free and democratic, just and inspiring, ideal for a contemporary nation-state... The assumption that Cyrus the Great promoted 'human rights' wherever he went or that he freed Jews from slavery is very much on the model of George W. Bush's promotion of democracy in Iraq" (*Iran, A People Interrupted*, pp. 22-23). I hope Isaiah is hearing this: he called Cyrus the messiah. Even prophets, one supposes can suffer the occasional *lapsus calami*. The parts of the book where Dabashi discusses the Qajar period, for instance, or deconstructs and meditates upon the Iran of his youth are actually well written and absorbing, with a warm and delightful humor. But Zoroastrianism, Vladimir Nabokov, and the thousands of our fellow citizens who were murdered on Sept. 11, 2001 by Arab Muslim terrorists, are not politically correct. I should prefer to be politically incorrect.

To come back to Mithra's liberty hat. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York had invited me to speak at a fundraising reception whose centerpiece was a

fragment of a beautiful Mithraic fresco. I prepared a lecture on Mithraism, from Anatolia to Europe and beyond, with a final illustration of what I fondly consider the world's largest Mithraic monument: a bronze statue in the round of a woman in a Liberty cap, holding a torch, with the sun-rays of the typical Bactrian or Sasanian icon of Mithra framing her head. But the date of my lecture was Sept. 20, 2001, with the city still covered in smoke and ash; and my picture of the Statue of Liberty showed her torch aglow at night, with two vast towers, their windows sparkling, across the harbor behind her. And I read then the poem by a Jewish woman, Emma Lazarus, who died young that is engraven there, and shall read it now once more; for perhaps the most important phenomenon of all in Zoroastrianism in the last few decades is the growth of the new communities of America and the other free English-speaking nations like this one; so the poem, like the Armeno-Iranian Mithraic prototype of the statue, belong very much to you.

THE NEW COLOSSUS.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
 With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
 "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"