The Winds of Dissonance In the Sands of Time: Eschatology and Changing Belief Among Zoroastrians across History

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Mary Boyce (1984) states that Zarathustra was "the first known millenarian in the wider sense of that term," and that Zoroastrianism stands as an archetypal millenarian faith. Possessing one of the oldest religious traditions, Zoroastrians have engaged with their eschatological beliefs for millennia. More recently the modern psychological tool of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) has been applied to the study of failed prophecy in the context of millennial movements. In this paper, I propose that applying cognitive dissonance theory to changing Zoroastrian eschatological beliefs can give fruitful results. However, some unique features of Zoroastrianism raise important caveats and distinctions required of a dissonance model. Particularly, a chief feature of the most ancient Zoroastrian beliefs is the emphasis on self as agent: each individual can contribute toward bringing about the wonderful-making of the world (*Frashokereti*, *Frashegird*). The *Gathas*, the poem-songs attributed to Zarathustra, invoke a collective effort of the righteous, who through the support of divine order or truth (*asha*), move the world toward this renovation at the end of time.

I argue that in considering changing Zoroastrian eschatological beliefs, we should focus on the perceived role of self as possessing causal power and how this perception can lead to dissonance in the face of perceptions of failed self- and collective-efficacy. This may result in the "externalization" of a desire for self-collective-efficacy, whereby a revised belief in and wish for a Savior figure resolves eschatological beliefs and hopes. Such a thesis offers important distinctions to consider when applying dissonance theory to various millennial (and,

more generally, mass social movements). Particularly, one should first distinguish millennial movements in which merely one's beliefs (and actions *in response* to those beliefs) are at stake – i.e. a more classical, Festingerian example of millennial dissonance. This contrasts with movements in which one's actions are believed to play a causal role in effecting an eschatological result – i.e. a more Zoroastrian case. Furthermore, I outline specific distinctions pertaining to how unconscious perceptions of the self not only guided later millennial beliefs, but also how such an unconscious process may mediate some of the initial allure of Zarathustra's teachings on less millennial and more theological and social grounds.

Overview of Cognitive Dissonance Theory and a Proposed Model

I first begin with a general overview of cognitive dissonance theory, its application to millennial movements, developments in the theory, and a few qualifications and distinctions I think would refine the theory in studying religious phenomena. Cognitive dissonance theory debuted with the book, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956; 2009). This book details the entertaining psychological fieldwork of Leon Festinger and his colleagues on an apocalyptic cult in the 1950s, which emerged just in time for Festinger to surreptitiously test his novel theory.

In religious studies on millennial people, scholars expect religious beliefs to change when they impinge on a contradicting reality. But Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance was unique because it specified some processes that are not as intuitive as one may expect. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that if I strongly

hold a belief that is then disconfirmed by some new brush of reality, my tendency to cling to my belief will result in discomfort. This discomfort, cognitive dissonance, arises from holding two contradictory views (or cognitions) in mind. I can reduce my dissonance by changing my beliefs, say, by supporting my conviction over reality which suggests otherwise. To do so, I may seek out information that supports the belief and avoid information that goes against it. Not only that, I may try to surround myself with other people who share my faulty belief. In a religious context, this implies that I may start to proselytize to surround myself with more people that can relieve my dissonance.

Surprisingly, this theory states that people are less likely to proselytize when their beliefs are not threatened, and more likely to do so when their beliefs are disconfirmed! Festinger suggests this was likely the case with the Millerites, a Christian group in antebellum America, who predicted the end of the world specifically in 1843. When this date passed and the world did not end, they did not give up. They reformulated another end date a little later, and suddenly started massively proselytizing and warning people of the end of the world. Only after a series of failed predictions associated with surges in proselytizing did believers finally discard their beliefs. Interestingly, some actually revised the end of the world to have happened and claimed we just did not see it, infusing a protective unfalsifiability into the belief system. Festinger tested out his theory with a small cult in the 1950s that thought the world was going to end on December 21, 1954. The cult believed this date would bring forth an apocalyptic flood from which they

could be saved through their leader's channeling instructions from extra-terrestrial beings. Like the Millerites, they massively increased their efforts in proselytizing and warning the world of disaster *after* a series of disconfirmations.

The process of modifying disconfirmed beliefs is central to the ability to reduce cognitive dissonance. The Millerites, for instance, had to be able to adapt the specifics of their end date to set up a new end of the world. But the core essence of the belief persists (e.g. the world will end soon), remaining as a sort of powerful anchor that resists change. The associated specifics tethered to that anchoring core-belief are subject to alteration at the whims and winds of disconfirmation and dissonance. When ardent believers face impinging disconfirmation of their entire belief system, they marshal their resources and seek all the help they can get from others in consolidating the central anchor of their belief system, even if the elaborations and details change. In addition, they may seek to create the conditions in their lives and surrounding community that supports and, if possible, confirms their belief system.

A later qualification of cognitive dissonance theory was the chief importance of the self in generating dissonance (Aronson, 1968, 1969; Aronson, Chase, Helmreich, & Ruhnke, 1974, as cited in Aronson, 1997). Elliot Aronson, a student of Festinger, proposed that inconsistent cognitions only lead to dissonance when one's sense of self is at stake. Festinger's original paper (1957) suggested that if you saw rain falling and you had no protective covering yet you did not feel any rain, you would experience dissonance because of the contradiction. But Aronson pointed

out that this would not generate dissonance because it does not activate the self-concept. Specifically, I want to be consistent, competent, and morally good, but when this is challenged I undergo dissonance. Aronson (1997) says, "in short hand terms, what leads me to perform dissonance-reducing behavior is my having done something which either astonishes me, makes me feel stupid, or makes me feel guilty."

I would like to emphasize the importance of the self-concept in the examples of millennial dissonance. In Festinger's examples of the Millerites and the 1950s cult, people had a lot at stake largely because of how they acted upon their faulty beliefs. Many Millerites sold off their possessions, spent all their savings, and left their fields fallow, as some literally believed they could live like there was no tomorrow. With the 1950s UFO cult, believers responded similarly, putting their education, jobs, children's lives, relationships, and reputations on the line, with even a doctor quitting his job. The importance of the self-concept in this process is illustrated by the least fervent of the group. These individuals who did not make significant lifestyle changes (likely because they were not so sure of the prophecies) were the first to leave the group when the first prophecies failed, attesting to their relative ease to discard the belief. But those with more substantial commitments, who therefore experienced more dissonance, stayed till the end – that doctor took up being an itinerant proselytizer, who along with his wife, took their daughter touring around the country long after the cult's diaspora.

A key feature of these classically Festingerian, failed millennial beliefs remains that one prepares his life *for* the manifestation of the millennial prophecy. Actions that later cause dissonance are *responses to* the millennial belief. One could imagine that if these believers continued about ordinary life as usual while only privately believing otherwise, they would experience far less dissonance (and far less trouble). In short, the believers are receivers of the prophecy. They do not create its manifestation. Because of this lack of agency, I refer to dissonance resulting from this kind of prophecy's failure as "non-agentic dissonance."

Yet this need not be the case. The alternate I outline here is a case for "agentic dissonance," illustrated by Zoroastrian millennial beliefs. With this kind of prophecy, individuals believe that their actions contribute, or even significantly co-create, the prophecy's manifestation. Self-fulfilling features may be more directly at work if such a prophecy comes true. But even potentially self-fulfilling prophecies may have the potential to fail, especially given the scale of the prophecy. I argue that when such a prophecy is perceived as failing, dissonance may directly and more strongly result from the individual's perceived lack of self-agency and one's religious community's collective-agency. Specifically, I find that Aronson's closest term for "competence" (nor its unfitting colloquial term for "not feeling stupid") does not correctly capture this religious context of dissonance. Rather, agentic dissonance is better captured by a perceived lack of self-efficacy and collective-efficacy, terms utilized from Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977; 1986) – for a more interesting and narrowed discussion of these topics see Bandura

(1998 and 2008). In short, the dimension of the self as agent plays an essential role in prophecy-related dissonance.

In addition to agentic and non-agentic shades to dissonance, I propose one more distinction that I believe can prove fruitful in fine-tuning a dissonance model for study of religious phenomena. This distinction focuses on delineating dissonance that results from an impinging ontologically objective versus ontologically subjective reality. These are fancy terms. They come from the philosopher of mind, John Searle, in his theory of consciousness. Though I have not read his work in full yet, I have read Lisa Feldman Barrett's psychological work on emotion, particularly the human experience of emotion, which draws on Searle's theory. Things that are ontologically objective deal with scientific categories like those in physics (e.g. gravity, atoms, molecules) because "they are real in the natural sense and can be discovered by humans" (Barrett, 2009). But ontologically subjective categories "exist only by virtue of collective intentionality," "which is a fancy way of saying that they are real by virtue of the fact that everybody largely agrees on their content" (Barrett, 2009). Examples of ontologically subjective categories include money, marriage, and nationality. What provides their realness, their value, the essence of their nature, depends on what we choose to make of them.

The value of such a distinction in relation to dissonance can best be illustrated at first by example. The Catholic Church's doctrinal beliefs during the time of Galileo would have produced dissonance from an impinging objective reality

of a heliocentric solar system. In contrast, Mormonism's previous condoning of polygamy brushed up against a subjective reality of a society at large that opposed any non-monogamous marriage. Both kinds of reality and their resulting dissonance are experienced as real. Nonetheless, there are important differences.

There exists a sense of rigidness and even inevitability with objective reality. Give someone a long enough lever and a strong enough fulcrum to hold up dissonance and he just may be able to leverage a geocentric universe up on his shoulders. But if Atlas saw how leisurely and simply the world can support its own without shoulders or lever, he, like most people, would probably eventually rest in simplicity. Ontologically subjective reality, in contrast, though it may be exceedingly difficult to change, by its nature it is not inherently immutable or inevitable. Take money for example. It would be a lot easier to get people to stop using paper (or credit) money than it would be to change the atomic basis of the material world or alter the laws of physics. It is hard to change, no doubt. Try starting your own money currency, and see how well you succeed. Nonetheless, it is not impossible.

The importance of the ontologically subjective distinction can prove valuable in studying the early formations of religion, Zoroastrianism being a prime example. I suggest that some formations (or reformations) of religion may build themselves on propitious conditions that support the lure of opposing the dominant collective or subjective reality in some way. This can be the lure that may come from changing, say, an approach to ritual, a theological or cosmological belief, or a

metaphysical assumption underlying a belief system. I call this kind of suggested change an "oppositional cultural belief."

One may find this assertion strange given that we just discussed how people want to retain their core beliefs. But I suggest this may be so for two reasons. The first is that a little bit of counter-intuition can be attention grabbing and even appeal to us. I suggest that a smaller scale analog to an "oppositional cultural belief" is what Justin Barrett (2004) describes a "minimally counter-intuitive belief" in his book, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* Examples of minimally counter-intuitive beliefs are belief in ghosts or spirits because they go against our normal intuitive assumptions about the world. They violate often one or at most a few basic assumptions, such as visibility or a material form, which makes them interesting. However, if a belief is overloaded with too many counter-intuitive violations (e.g. the caricatured flying spaghetti monster), then this concept does not have much appeal or lure.

Though Justin Barrett does not use these terms, we can think of a "psychological sweet-spot" that that balances with normal assumptions about the physical world and counter-intuitions. I suggest a similar "sweet-spot" exists for an "oppositional cultural belief" but on a larger scale, a psychological but also socio-cultural and historical sweet-spot. The lure and appeal of a given belief will depend on the historical time and circumstance of a given culture. This need not deny the significance of a prophet's teachings. As William James (1902; 1990) said, the significance of revelation and spiritual teachings comes via "our empiricist

criterion: By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots" (Lecture 1: Religion and Neurology, 26). But we should still recognize the importance of time, place, and human conditions that support its emergence.

But I suggest that the reason for this lure, this desire to adopt radically new beliefs, is once again the special role of the self. If one's self-concept is not too strongly committed to a pre-existing ontologically subjective belief system, one may feel an alluring, even exciting sense of personal power, of self-efficacy, in opposing a subjective belief system. And, in some cases, if one judges that the conditions may be right for a cultural change, one may feel an allure or even thrill from potentially steering, or at the very least riding, a wave of societal change, of a shifting of collective-efficacy. In the more specific application to prophecy, this can be viewed in some regards as the "flip side" to the agentic dissonance that ensues if prophecy fails. In this proposed model, prophecy lures because one can see the role of the self in partly contributing to the manifestation of the prophecy *prior* to its fulfillment, while failed prophecy discomforts because one feels the failure of the self attempting to co-create the manifestation of the prophecy ideal.

Some Zoroastrian Basics and Psychological Allure

Core Cosmological and Eschatological Beliefs, Myth, and Dissonance

We can start by outlining the essentials of Zoroastrian eschatology that eventually solidified into the Zoroastrian myth we have in later Middle Persian (Pahlavi) books. This Zoroastrian cosmology directly responds to the existential

problem of evil, which stands central to the creation story. Zoroastrian mythology divides the creation of the world and its progress into various stages. When Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom, first created the world, it was said to have been perfect and good. However, Ahura Mazda also knew that in creating the world, it would be vulnerable to attack by the evil or destructive spirit, Angra Mainyu. Yet in his omniscience he saw also that evil could eventually be defeated with the world returning to its original, perfect state, only this time invulnerable to evil. Because of this belief, some view Ahura Mazda's creation as a "trap" he set to render evil powerless, so that all good could prevail.

Firstly, such a story has all the quintessential features of myth that have been said to appeal to humans across history. Andrew Newberg (2001), in his book, *Why God Won't Go Away*, describes the simple structure that myths around the world share: (1) the myth-maker confronts a crucial existential question, such as the existence of evil or how the world was created; (2) this myth-maker then casts this problem in terms of polar opposites; and (3) the myth serves to resolve the existential question and its resulting anxiety. All these features are at work in the Zoroastrian myth and worldview described above.

Secondly, this cosmology seems to more directly resolve the highly dissonant question of why evil exits if God is fully beneficent. Ahura Mazda is the supreme Lord of Wisdom,[1] who, unlike the Abrahamic God, does not possess absolute

[1] People may often hear that Zoroastrianism was the first monotheistic religion or at least emerged somewhat synchronically with Judaism. While true in a broader sense of emphasizing worship of one God, Zoroastrianism (like early Judaism) is technically henotheistic because it also believes in divine beings working with Ahura Mazda.

omnipotence in creating the world, only omniscience. Instead, Ahura Mazda's "omnipotence" eventually emerges with the development of humanity: Ahura Mazda's omnipotence manifests at the end of time, when humans share his wisdom to properly choose and act righteously in rendering evil powerless (according to some interpretations). Such a cosmology offers a far less dissonant explanation and even potential resolution to the existence of evil. Additionally, we can see that as co-creators of the resolution of evil, and through a co-dependency with Ahura Mazda, individuals may feel an appealing sense of self- and collective-agency in contributing to this resolution.

Historical circumstance

A historical understanding of Zarathustra's environment helps elucidate the conditions supporting his worldview and his rebellious nature in opposing the religious culture of the time. His emphasis of a struggle with evil did not come from nowhere. In Zarathustra's time, realities of cattle raiders and hostile nomads often threatened the lives and livelihood of Zarathustra's people. Raiders seized the model of Indra, a god of brute strength, a dragon slayer, who affirmed that "might was right" (Armstrong, 2006). The *Gathas* repeatedly describe difficulty at the hands of evil and condemn the corrupt priests or "mumblers" who support their aggressive and unjust gods. Zarathustra longed for worship of "the peaceful gods, the *ahuras*, who stood for justice, truth, and respect for life and property" (Armstrong, 2006).

He ultimately concluded that Mazda, the *ahura* of Wisdom, and one of the guardians of order, was indeed the Supreme God, which he called Mazda Ahura.[2] Zarathutra's verses plea not only for Ahura Mazda's support for the poor and righteous cattle herder, but also for the just repudiation of the perpetrators of evil who steal from the poor, honest man. The person who is righteous with his good thought, word, and deed – an *ashavan* who supports the divine order or truth – receives access to truth that becomes its own self-supporting reward. This reward ultimately includes passage to the House of Best Existence, (in some translations, the House of Song) or the House of Good Thinking, equivalent to heaven. The evil doers, described as "followers of Deceit" or "followers of the Lie", cannot receive access to truth and find themselves condemned to the House of Deceit or the House of Worst Existence.

A Rebellious Lure

Zarathustra's vision was ultimately born out a deep suffering of his people and a longing for justice. Legends and the *Gathas* suggest that he had considerable difficulty initially finding support for his teachings. Nonetheless, his religious teachings would have certainly been attention-grabbing during the early growth of the religion. Everyone could play a role in the cosmic struggle of good over evil, and women and servants could make contributions to the daily practice of religion (Armstrong, 2006). In addition to these and the resolutions his teachings may have

[2] There's a tendency to use Ahura Mazda today among Zoroastrians. In Zarathustra's time the reverse would be more common, i.e. Mazda Ahura, or Wise Lord.

provided for the righteous at the hands of evil, I focus on two central attention-grabbing devices: his condemnation of ritual without good thinking and his proposed objects of worship.

One of Zarathustra's most fervent critiques of religion at the time was the focus on priestly ritual that excluded individual and good thinking. In the *Gathas*, he condemns the Kavis and Karpans as "mumbling" priests, alluding to thoughtlessness in these priests who support the *daevas*. The *Gathas* are less songs of lawgiving as they are prophecy. Throughout the hymns, Zarathutra constantly invokes *Vohu Manah*, Good Thought (sometimes translated "Good Purpose"), who acts a chief guide toward other divine helpers or qualities of Ahura Mazda, not just for Zarathustra, but for each individual (Boyce 1979; 2001). In effect, an Indo-Aryan focus on priestly ritual was supplanted with an emphasis on individual good thinking.

Additionally, Zarathustra reversed the objects of worship of the Indo-Aryan religion. The *Ahuras* (or *Asuras*) were usually associated with those gods less worthy of worship than the *Daevas*, who were emphasized as deserving reverence in the classical Indo-Aryan religious culture, as expressed in the *Rig Veda*. Such a novel reformulation of belief would meet strong opposition from the collective forces of pre-existing culture. A suggestion like this may have appealed to those who were not so committed to the existing religious practice. Both examples of individual good thinking over ritual and reversal of object of worship would give

these believers a sense of agentic power in rebelling against the religious establishment.

Dissonance and Change in Eschatological Beliefs Over Time

Applying a dissonance model to Zoroastrians and eschatological belief can prove fruitful, but it also raises important considerations for dissonance theory. Most notably, unlike the Millerites and other religious sects, Zoroastrians have had little history of proselytizing or converting, not only in times of persecution but even in more prosperous times. A host of factors probably contributes to this. One such important factor may be a reverence for truth and the belief that there is no exclusivity involving truth (Rose; Luhrmann; personal correspondence). This aversion toward proselytizing raises important implications. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that dissonance can be reduced through different means, but two especially: (1) the specifics of beliefs can be altered, while attempting to maintain the essential core beliefs, and (2) surrounding yourself with like-minded believers would help. Zoroastrians throughout history did not have much of the second option available as a result of either persecution or a belief in not proselytizing to begin with, or both. This would suggest that the dissonance reducing efforts would all be funneled into altering beliefs.

One can view the changes in eschatological belief in Zoroastrianism by looking at changes in the use of the eschatological term *saoshiiant* (sometimes spelled *saoshyant*). *Saoshiiant* has a broader, more inclusive meaning in the *Gathas*

than in the Younger Avesta, and especially in contrast to the Pahlavi of the Sasanian period in which the *Saoshiiant* (*Soshans*) refers specifically to "the final Saviour who will bring about *frashagird*" (Hintze, 1995, pg. 77). In the *Gathas*, the singular form of *saoshiiant* could be used to generically describe anyone who works toward salvation and the renovation of the world. At times this could describe Zarathustra, but he certainly was not the only one to whom this term referred. In its use of the plural of the term, the *Gathas* invoke of the "Saoshiiants of the countries" (Y 48.12), with countries being the largest unit of population in contrast to the singular head of a family (Hintze, 1995, pg. 83). As Hintze describes, "It seems that even as there can be Saoshiiants in every land, so every head of a family can be and should be a Saoshiiant – that it is within the grasp of virtually everyone to be a Saoshiiant" (pg. 84). We have no mention of a single Savior or brotherly trio, but a broad use of the term for anyone supporting salvation and the triumph of good.

Yet in having this term apply to any righteous person, the reward associated with these righteous ones also may lay the groundwork for dissonance. This can especially be seen with the descriptions of a Saoshiiant's *daena*, one's inner eye, or mental disposition at the center of one's spiritual being. Firstly, the *Gathas* speak of a reward linked to the path of a saoshiiant. Hintze (1995) states, "The *daena*- of a Saoshiiant is described as one that walks on the prepared path of good thinking, and as one that walks towards a reward apportioned by Ahura Mazda to those who give generously (Y 34.13)" (pg. 9). This "well-deserved reward" (*misda-ashi*) already

sets a stage for dissonance if righteous individuals meet extreme hardship and lose sight of hope.

In addition, the descriptions of the *daena* of the Saoshiiant set the stage for an ideal where the work of the saoshiiants contributes to the collective well-being by strengthening social bonds. Hintze (1995) describes:

> The *daena*- of a Saoshiiant is characterized as *spenta*- 'beneficent': it is through the beneficent *daena* – of the Saoshiiant, of the house lord, that people are united with each other, so that one might become to the other a companion, a brother or a father' (Y 45.11). Thus the *daena*- of the Saoshiiant strengthens the social bonds between individual people. (85)

Saoshiiants stand in part as agents in bringing together their people and building comradery. This responsibility in increasing social connectedness falls right in line with the saoshiiants' contribution toward the renovation of the world. The saoshiiant's religiously supported self-efficacy manifests toward better conditions socially and cosmically in this eschatological belief system. This belief system speaks of these ideals and a well-deserved reward. If these expectations are not met, but one finds oppression and social difficulties these conditions lay the groundwork for dissonance. Ultimately, externalizing self-efficacy with belief in a Savior figure may reduce this dissonant lack of religious self-efficacy.

The exact chronology of the development of the term *saoshiiant* and the Savior figure remains uncertain, though it takes on a wide range of uses in the Younger Avesta. In the Younger Avesta, *saoshiiant* can refer to priests who revere the Holy Immortals (*Amsha Spentas*) (Y 14.1), future people who properly worship Haoma (Y 9.2), and the army of people who fight against enemies of the Mazdean

religion (Yt 13.38) (Hintze, 1995, pp. 89-91). In addition, "the 'truthful' in good thoughts, words, and deeds" are said to "want to be Saoshiiants and victorious" (Y 70.4) (Hintze, pg. 91).

Yet in the singular form, *Saoshiiant* in the Younger Avesta refers to the World Savior. Boyce (1984), who dates Zarathustra's life to c. 1400 B.C.E. says that the belief in the in a World Savior who is born miraculously of a virgin at the end of time emerged c. 1200 B.C.E. (pg. 75). This World Savior is called by the name Astvatereta (Yt 13.129) in the Younger Avesta. There existed a period in Zoroastrian belief in which only one World Savior, Astvatereta, was described. Yasht 19, which has its relevant verses estimated as being older than the Achaemenian era by several centuries (Boyce, pg. 58), only refers to Astvatereta and no others. But eventually Zoroastrians expanded the eschatology to three brotherly sons of Zarathustra, two of whom preceded Astvatereta.

We can see how a belief in a collective, self-inclusive salvation being funneled into a belief in a saving Saoshiiant would relieve dissonance. As a caveat, the specific development of eschatological beliefs from a belief in one Savior figure to three remains unclear. As a result one should be careful in drawing too many conclusions. We do have, however, the *Zand i Vahman Yasht*, which is a Middle Persian (Pahlavi) translation and commentary on a late Avestan text. Mary Boyce (1984) suggests that this text was a result of people revising their beliefs to cope with hard times, which well-fits the mold for a dissonance-relieving interpretation:

> The Macedonian conquest, it has been cogently argued, must have given a powerful new impulse to the cultivation of Zoroastrian apocalyptic, with the Iranians suffering invasion and alien misrule, looking with longing for the

> coming of a Saviour who would re-establish the faith in purity and power, and with it Iranian sovereignty; and very probably one of the products of this epoch was a late Avestan text, the *Vahman Yasht*."
>
> (68)

We have here a prime model for dissonance. The Macedonian conquest challenges the Iranians sense of individual and collective efficacy. The "army" of saoshiiants struggles, now powerless and defeated, rather than victorious. Those who once saw themselves as the saoshiiants who would receive their "well-deserved reward" only see themselves loosing their own rule at the hands of enemies. Mere dissonance from disconfirmed religious belief does not act alone. In addition, a failed sense of religious self-efficacy in contributing to personal and cosmic salvation impinges dissonantly. A dissonance reducing way out becomes to not only change one's beliefs, but to also distance the self from its causal role in the process.

In addition to the murkiness surrounding apocalyptic belief giving rise to the *Vahman Yasht*, we can see more clear evidence of dissonant belief modification in later texts. By the time of the formation of the *Zand i Vahman Yasht* during the Middle Persian period, priests had to reconcile older apocalyptic visions of Astvatereta arriving as savior, with the fall of the Macedonian and then the Parthian empire and all the centuries that had past. Likewise, the Sasanian empire at the time faced similar threats from abroad, and the Zoroastrians were among a diverse collection of peoples across the empire.

Boyce suggests that, as a result, the *Zand*'s commentary and additions on the original apocalyptic Yasht "bring the 'prophecies' in it up to date." This was done by inserting descriptions of the first of three brothers, Ukhshyatereta, followed by the

second brother, Ukhshyatnemah, who are to come before the originally prophesized Astvatereta. As Boyce (1984) states, belief reconciliation steers this process:

> The priestly poets then had the problem of how to fill out prophecies concerning the coming of Ukhshyatarata, who himself naturally lacked the enrichment of any ancient traditions: and, being epigonical, they inevitably adapted old materials, one of their chief measures being to detach Pishyotan from among the comrades of Astvatarata, and from the other Immortals, and to make him the chief comrade and helper of the first Saoshyant.
>
> (69)

On this specific passage, Boyce makes clear the evident revisions in millennial belief:

> The echoes here of Yasht 19 are striking, and there is no reason to doubt that these prophecies referred originally to the coming of Astvatereta rather than to that of Ukhshyatereta, to whose time they have been transferred; indeed there is positive proof of this when Ohrmazd declares that he will summon to Pishyotan's aid all the divine beings, who will grapple each with his predestined foe – for this encounter, the last great battle between good and evil, belongs properly to Frashegird, i.e. to the end of the twelfth, not the tenth, millennium.
>
> (69)

We see a revised belief based on a disconfirmed prediction of the renovation of the world. It appears that, like the Millerites, the Zoroastrian priests wanted to hold on to their anchoring core-belief of a predicted renovation of the world. As a result, they tethered their beliefs around this core, while revising the specifics. "Astvatereta did not fail to arrive; he just hasn't come yet. The previous beliefs were actually not referring to Astvatereta but his brothers." This seems to be a prime example of dissonant belief modification. Note, this is *not* an externalization, or self-distancing, because that has already largely been achieved with an existent Savior figure. Rather, it attempts to hold on to that pre-existing externalization.

Another example that illustrates dissonant belief revision occurs in later Zoroastrian apocalyptic with the drawing out of descriptions of the millennium following Zarathustra. As Boyce (1984) says:

> Another element which apparently belongs only to the later stage of Zoroastrian apocalyptic (for there is no trace of it in the oldest literature) is the dividing up of the millennium of Zoroaster (i.e. 9,000-10,000 of the world year) into four or seven metallic ages. The basic purpose of the Zoroastrian version of the metal ages is to illustrate the vastness of the decline from the time of the prophet (the age of gold) to a wretched present, when his followers are ruled over by infidel foreigners who harass and cruelly oppress them; and it seems very possible that the concept was adopted in western Iranian apocalyptic towards the end of the fourth century B.C., i.e. during the harsh period of the Successors' Wars.
>
> (70)

Once again we have revision meant to reconcile dissonant history with belief. Astvatereta was expected to come soon after Zarathustra. Yet many centuries passed and no Savior came. Zoroastrians found themselves under harsh times of war, and would have felt dissonance compelling them to explain such a gap in time. So Zoroastrians modified their beliefs to elaborate on this gap.

This same argument for belief modification can be used to describe priests' responses to difficulties during a post-Sasanian, Arab rule. Many have argued this, but I quote Yuhan Vevaina's (2010) paper on the "hermeneutics, historiography, and cultural poesis of the 'Four Ages' in Zoroastrianism." He describes "the Sūdgar Nask of Dēnkard Book 9, which clearly acknowledges a period of social challenges faced by the Zoroastrian tradition:"

> This period of difficulty appears to me to primarily reflect the social challenges of the early Islamic era, and the "memories of much hardship" appear to acknowledge the changing socio-economic conditions facing the Zoroastrian communities of Iran. The "decline of character and wisdom from the towns of Iran" in the Dēnkard 9 passage may also be an oblique reference

> to the non-Iranian character of post-Sasanian rule. The Pahlavi translation of Yasna 31.1 makes it quite clear that the correct view is a belief in the "Good Religion"—Zoroastrianism—but it also acknowledges that there are those who do not, or perhaps, no longer, conform to the tenets of Zoroastrianism. *It seems to me that the entire narrative of the four ages was mobilized by the Zoroastrian priests to explain the contemporary challenges they faced in a new era dominated by non-Iranian—Arab—elites and an ever-increasing number of apostates.*
>
> (emphasis added; 11)

Even under foreign rule, and social and economic powerlessness, Zoroastrians strived to hold on to the core affirmation of their religion, "the Good Religion." Yet such an affirmation could only be made less dissonant by explaining contemporary challenges.

The resulting modification of belief stands as particularly interesting because we see at work the process of the ideals lost in hard times being externalized in a Savior. Most especially, Persian ideals for a strong intimacy between religion and kingship were transferred to the Savior who would restore these ideals. Vevaina (2010) first writes on this desired ideal, "It is worth noting that the intimate relationship between religion and politics in Sasanian Iran was precisely the variable that changed so dramatically in the early Islamic period. Much has been written regarding church and state under the Sasanians" (pg. 20). He goes on to explain the hardship running against this ideal:

> The loss of state sponsorship was probably the most important change for the Zoroastrian priesthood and Zoroastrian communities who were experiencing significant socio-economic difficulties due to the seizure of their ecclesiastical land holdings and being forced to pay the onerous poll tax (jizya). This religious crisis is ultimately reflected in Pahlavi scriptural exegesis like Dēnkard Book 9 and in apocalyptic narratives as found in the Zand ī Wahman Yasn and a number of other Pahlavi texts that address these challenging times.
>
> (20)

While one may argue that the relationship for a bond between religion and kingship has been quintessential to Persian history, its incorporation into later descriptions of the saviors, including Astvatereta, also exhibit the profile of externalization. In his paper on comparative analysis between Judaic and Zoroastrian apocalypticism, "Kingly and Priestly Messiahs," Carlo Cereti (2008) points to the importance of both a savior with kingly and priestly charisma, and a savior who is accompanied by the support of a kingly figure. Firstly, he describes the importance the Pahlavi books place on the Soshans (the final, victorious Saoshiiant) embodying the unification of *xwarrah* (right rule) of kings and priests in highest perfection. He quotes the 3rd book of the *Denkard*:

> Thus, that against which the Evil Spirit (struggles) most virulently is one (thing): the coming together in one person, with the utmost strength, of the *xwarrah* of royalty and that of the Good Religion, because he would be destroyed by that union … With the perfect meeting of these two *xwarrahs* in one man, the complete destruction of the Assault from which derives the redemption of the purity of the creation and Renovation will all take place. That will take place with the Soshans, in whom these two *xwarrahs* shall come together and the revelation of the Good Religion, which derives from it.
> (ellipses added for brevity; 44)

We can see that belief in a collectively created sense of salvation implicit in the originally broad use of *saoshiiant* has been completely externalized to the belief in a Savior who will ultimately destroy evil. Additionally, the priestly desire for a unified church and state remains transferred to this Soshans who unites the two in utmost perfection.

While different texts may focus on the later Soshans or earlier Ushedar (Pahlavi of Ukhshyatereta), they all retain this feature of externalization of the kingly and priestly desire. As Cereti summarizes:

> In short, the tradition found in the *Denkard* preserves the memory of a kingly character, Kay Husraw, who aids the Soshans in the final days, while the tradition belonging to the to the *Bundahishn* and to the *Zand i Wahman Yasn*, in this respect close to that of the *Pahlavi Rivayat*, lays a greater weight on the *kingly* figure of Pishotan, who will aid the first of the future saviors, Ushedar. The *Bundahishn* and the *Zand i Waham Yasn* further preserve the memory of another roayal character, *Wahram i Warzawand*, who shall arrive from the country of *Hindugan* to aid *Ushedar*.
>
> (italics in original; 48)

All these apocalyptic descriptions seem to externalize the classical Persian wish for a harmonious collaboration between kingship and religion. Yet, when the desires for a harmonious church and state brush up against a harsh reality, the externalized wish for a Savior figure can provide an appealing resolution. It is hard not to see dissonance luring part of the way.

Limitations

Post facto analysis

It should be stressed, I do not make the claim that I have presented any sort of conclusive evidence for the theory outlined here. Any psychological model of history is at best a *post facto* analysis and should be recognized as such. This was one of the main concerns of Festinger applying a dissonance model to early Christianity and the Millerites. Yet despite the lack of conclusive evidence, I think the model offered here explains and fits the facts well.

Applicability of a Modern Model Applied to Ancient Times

It can be argued that during ancient times, some of the distinctions, particularly between objective and subjective ontology, did not exist among most ancient people. Karen Armstrong (2005) nicely and eloquently describes in her book *A Short History of Myth*, how for a large part of history, especially during early formations of religion, people did not distinguish between myth and the observed world:

> Mythology was not about theology, in the modern sense, but about human experience. People thought that gods, humans, animals and nature were inextricably bound up together, subject to the same laws, and composed of the same divine substance. There was initially no ontological gulf between the world of the gods and world of men and women. When people spoke of the divine they were usually talking about an aspect of the mundane. (5-6)

I think this is an especially important point that should inform religious studies and popular views of religion. I would like to think that the model proposed in this paper is not necessarily incompatible with Armstrong's observation. While Armstrong's observation provides an important understanding for conscious experience of humans in the past and even to the present with certain peoples, the model proposed here is meant to develop an understanding into mostly *unconscious* processes of certain believers over time. By utilizing a model that makes these distinctions, we may better see the work of universal psychological processes.

Implications for Religious Belief

Finally, I would like to address the significance of such a model for religious belief, which may be of concern to some people. William James (1902; 1990), in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, eloquently dealt with this matter. Some felt that his model of medical materialism, that religious experiences can be understood as resulting from abnormal psychical and neural sources, somehow inherently robs us of the significance we derive from religious revelations or experiences. However, James emphasizes this should not be case, as we should judge religious phenomena by "our empiricist criterion: By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots" (Lecture 1: Religion and Neurology, 26).

I believe James view is correct, but that it should be qualified. Honesty toward the understanding of the complex sources behind a belief can offer important insight that may not be available from a strictly religious (significance) approach, and may cause one to rethink or build upon one's belief. Properly understanding the sources of one's belief can be difficult, or even discomforting, at times, but belief built on such a process seems closest toward ascertainment of truth of oneself and the world. I illustrate this with an example from personal experience. I have always found the Buddhist notion of "no-self," the belief that there is not a real existence of a self or real agency, fascinating ever since first formally being exposed to it my freshman year of college. This perspective has always intrigued me with a sentiment along the lines of "Oh cool. You mean the self does not really exist?" There is a certain sense of excitement to realizing that the very conventional notions of yourself, notions shared by most of humanity, can actually be, in a sense,

wrong. And I have noticed this among others, including my close circle of Buddhist friends. My roommate, Josh, and I sometimes joke about being so deluded we think we are agents, playing on our fascination with *The Matrix*, but also our affinity for Buddhist thought.

Recognition of my personal attraction toward a belief for reasons other than careful consideration and contemplation do not inherently invalidate the belief. Yet, at the same time, I should also recognize how my personal qualities sway me in believing one thing over another. I cannot help but bringing up my discussions this summer with my other close friend, Trent, when we read William James together. We would often discuss our beliefs about nature, experiences with meditation or Buddhism, or other thoughts provoked from reading James. I often would discuss how I felt some certain thought or perspective resonated with me. Trent always gently reminded me of the influence of our West Coast, California upbringings. "Yeah, and I totally *feel* you, Neekaan. It resonates all the way down to my California roots," he would gently joke. I believe that recognizing this process only adds toward the understanding of belief: properly informing it and developing it. In way, it is a personal attempt at a science of the first person. There will always be an element of subjectivity in scientific approaches toward human belief and human understanding. Yet coming to terms with our subjectivity seems just as integral to phenomena we seek to understand, especially when we seek to understand ourselves. [3]

[3] Trent made this point in one of our discussions and brought up Allan Wallace's book where he quotes William James.

This process may be difficult. Individuals may come to realize that their beliefs or religion may not be rooted as they would wish. In fact, the religion they practice today may significantly result from being uprooted by time and circumstance. Their faith may in part be derived from forces and winds beyond their control. Indeed, faith may remain a place in which the troubled can seek comfort.[4]

Yet if we are to derive something of significance from the Zoroastrian worldview, perhaps it is a devotion to truth. If we have the courage to seek truth and break from the realms of comfort, we just may see reality as it is, much like a scientist does. The more we study this, the more we may learn that the truth may be uncomfortable, and may make the process of seeking truth difficult. But perhaps here too we can take from the fruit that the Zoroastrian vision offers: the faith that this devotion to truth, despite its challenges, proves wonderful in the end.

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[4] Adapted from Luhrmann (2002), which also provided the inspiration for the title of this paper.

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