

CONVERSION OF ZOROASTRIANS TO ISLAM AFTER THE ARAB CONQUEST OF IRAN

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According to the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Volume VI, 1993, pp. 229-232), Iranians converted to Islam in significant numbers “as soon as the Arab armies reached and overran the Persian plateau,” but they did so under duress, etc., as already mentioned by me. Despite some resistance from elements of Zoroastrian clergy and other ancient religions,” 98 percent of ethnic Iranians today are at least nominally Muslim. And yet it “has received remarkably little scholarly attention.” Although potentially useful data does exist in abundance, they are scattered among many diverse and isolated sources which are all listed in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. It sees the need to resolve several theoretical problems such as the extent of conversions in early periods as a formal or ritual act and the method of their verification in the absence of a clergy and church. Many individuals “must have made nominal conversions to Islam without full acceptance of understanding of the ritual and doctrinal obligations involved.” As many syncretistic sects existed in early Islamic Iran, “neither heresiographers nor tax collectors were certain whether they should be regarded as Muslims or not.” For example, “the Korramdiniya used mosques and the Koran but did not adhere to all ritual or legal requirements. One Kurdish sect, Kurdenaye, even combined aspects of Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam.” Even the word “Iranian” here raises the issue as to who was Iranian and whether Hephthalites (Hayatela) were Iranian or not. Therefore, it regards any observations about the conversion of Iranians to Islam as “tentative and in part speculative.” According to Richard Bulliet (which we have already reviewed), there was limited conversions until the Ablaisid revolution and by the time of regional dynasties – 950 A.D., 80 percent (or more) of Iranians had converted to Islam. But these numbers are not always reliable as Shiraz had a significant number of non-Muslims in 985 A.D. It adds: “Some of these converts accepted Islam half-heartedly “as a refuge”, others in order to gain entry into the Muslim armies to keep existing property, or to become eligible for permission to settle on conquered lands.” (As we have already noted, even the early Arab conquerors could not recite a stanza or two from the Koran). The Dehgans converted fairly quickly in order to preserve their estates, leading others to join them.

It also refers to a very systematic and widespread proselytization effort in Transoxania (706-12 A.D.) for enforced and vigorous conversions “by destroying local religious monuments building

mosques” (where previously there were fire-temples), etc., as already noted. It admits “sporadic use of force, not so much to compel conversion as to weaken the hold of Zoroastrianism over the population,” which however, seems rather confusing, if not contradicting, as it adds: “For example, both Muslim and non-Muslim authors alluded to the execution of Zoroastrian priests, the destruction of fire temples and the burning of Zoroastrian texts in Khvarazm.” It adds that Sistan was ordered to follow suit but it apparently did not carry them out, which it does not explain why, but, as we have already noted, it was considered as highly against the dictates of Koran by the Sistanis, most likely by the neophyte, first or second, generation of Muslims who were converted from Zoroastrianism. It posits that even moderate Muslim attacks on the clergy and temples *MAY* (italics mine) have helped to create a religious vacuum, which Islam gradually filled,” which however raises many questions especially as it is predicated not on sure evidence but on a conjecture indicated by the use of the word *MAY*. Indeed, it supports the thesis that it was not a “religious vacuum” which led to the conversion of Iranians to Islam, but an overriding sense of terror reminiscent of the Nazis, although it may have ultimately demoralized Iranians and their ancient clergy. Even so, the clergy rose up to the rank as in the ninth and tenth centuries, and even survived in large numbers in Yazd and Kerman until the Afghan invasion, if not until today, and of course those that migrated to India actually thrived there in absence of any persecution. Such contrasting consequences speak for themselves. Indeed, it supports this thesis when it immediately adds in the very next sentence: “It is also likely that many of the men, women and children taken captive during the war of conquest converted under a certain amount of duress or at least an implied threat of force; the best example is the story of the Persian commander Hormozan (*Tabari*, I, p. 2560).” But again the very next sentence reads: “In any case social and economic considerations were much more important than coercion in producing significant number of conversions.” It is but inevitable that under the overwhelming threat of losing their social status, precious family estates, etc., and avoiding humiliation of losing their age old status and above, all, of being a Dhimmi with all the abuses tied with it, some aristocrats and Dehgans preferred to convert to Islam, which of course only reveals various acts of coercion employed to convert Iranians. And yet many Dehgans preferred not to convert and even paid hyped up taxes owned by Zoroastrians. The very next sentence, indeed, supports such a reasoning and also reveals the sheer complexity of this issue, requiring further research: “Although the whole town of Qazrin supposedly converted rather than pay the poll tax (*Bahadori*, *Fotuh*, p. 321), the idea that commoners converted simply to evade taxation is controversial” since it also imposed Zakaat (alms tax) and “some converts continued to be

held responsible for the old taxes, or new taxes were introduced in their place (see Dennett, *passim*),” which as we have already reviewed was often rescinded when protested.

The next sentence again contradicts this observation “However, there may have occasionally been economic incentives to convert, for example, Qutayba’s offer of cash payments to those who showed up for the ritual prayers. Subtle social pressures were probably more effective than financial inducements in bringing about conversions.” All this evidence, however, does not reflect the hard fact that such inducements, as already reviewed at length, utterly failed to convert the Iranians not once but thrice until very brutal measures were adopted. Even so, more repressive and ominous hitherto quite unknown steps in the religious history of mankind were resorted to arduously and oppressively extinguish their age-old fealty to their ancient faith, such as the ones mentioned by the *Encyclopaedia* itself, such as prohibition against employing non-Muslims, (observed to this day), marrying them (though they could be kept as slaves or concubines), or visiting them when ill, inheriting any ancestral or family properties in case a sibling converts to Islam, etc., including many more impositions demanded of them, any failure to pay them including raising their taxes too high, requiring a death sentence as reviewed earlier, thereby making it impossible for Zoroastrians to have any degree of feasible existence much less self-esteem, giving them no choice but to convert to Islam but more often than not they continued to practice their faith at the risk of death if found out and some indeed are on record for preferring to die or commit suicide rather than adopting Islam. Even the later Rivayats testify to this sad state of affairs. How they survived at all till this day, even in regrettably decimated numbers, speaks volumes for their unstinting allegiance to their religion. Despite contradictory statements at times, the *Encyclopaedia* concludes: “As the spread of Islam placed greater and greater barriers to full anticipation by non-Muslims in the political, economic and social arenas of life, the pressure of conversion would naturally increase. As suggested above, deliberate proselytization was also important. Such efforts might typically be combined with a political agenda, as in the 'Abbasid and Isma'ili Da'was.” In the end is a brutal coercive program along with social and financial measures resorted to for conversion any better than physical coercion or oppression?”