

# ZOROASTRIANISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Dr. Kersey Antia, Mar 6, 2019; updated Apr 30, 2019

Alan V. Williams (“Zoroastrianism and Christianity,” *Zoroastrian Tapestry*, ed. P.J. Godrej and F.P. Mistree, Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, India, 2002, pp. 211-225) also observes that the Christian sources, especially the Syriac texts, have darkened and distorted ancient textual resources which are aggressively hostile towards Zoroastrianism. He therefore sees the need “to consider how the synodical documents of that Church and the Syriac martyrdom texts have painted a bleak and inaccurate picture of the Sasanian Zoroastrians.” Their stereotypical nature convinces him that their main objective is “to defend (their) religious and social values and to reaffirm theological principles.”

Williams’ views are also published under the title, “Zoroastrians and Christians in Ancient Iran,” in *The Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, Vol. 78, No. 3, 1997, pp. 37-53. Williams attributes the tense and at times hostile relations between Iranian Christians and Zoroastrians to long periods of wars between Iran and Christian Rome, which in turn also led to tense relations between the followers of these two religions, in Iran itself, often leading to persecution of the Christians, for which the texts blame Zoroastrians, though it was often initiated by hostile actions by Christians such as destroying Zoroastrian fire-temples. Williams regards this as “an unfair charge, as it is only a partial reading of history. As Jacob Neusner has said, even though Shabur (309-379 CE) established the Mazdean faith as the state religion, he persecuted the Christians for political reasons rather than for religious ones.”

Neusner points out that the persecutions began with the campaigns against Rome and were probably brought on by the Persian concerns about Christians sympathizing with Rome. The evidence of such persecutions comes only from the Christian texts and as no comparable Zoroastrian records exist, Williams warns historians to be wary of interpreting such biased sources.

Even though the Sasanian dynasty (224-651 A.D.) established Zoroastrianism as the State religion, Williams notes that the Zoroastrian church itself suffered the loss of thousands of its believers, from all ranks of society who converted to Christianity, the religion of Iran's Roman enemy. “Moreover, the episcopates of Iran were essentially Iranian in culture and many of the bishops retained their Zoroastrian names as borne out by their signature for the Synod of Mar Aba in 544 CE.” As they had Zoroastrian ancestry, they were familiar

with the Zoroastrian religion from within. Their attacks on their old religion could be all the more vehement, then, as they could distort and caricature what they knew of Zoroastrianism, in order to mock it. "Christians tended to despise Zoroastrians the most among the "pagans". "They were never referred to by their own name "Mazda (God) Worshipers." In many other ways, some gross, some subtle, the knowledge which the Christian clerics had of their opponents was put to devastating use in their polemics. Their religion was detested as pagan worship of the natural elements. Secondly, their purity rules were ridiculed. Moreover, the Zoroastrian clergy was despised for allegedly being the strong arm of the Sasanian state.

However, relations between the king and the Zoroastrian clergy "were by no means stable, the Christian minority, some of whom rose to high office in the civil and military services, acted as a powerful agency of destabilization. Except for three periods of persecution, Christians were generally tolerated in Sasanian Iran, and even treated with leniency."

Williams observes that as victims, Christians chose as a polemical strategy "its most central genre of mythologized sacred history, the martyrdom modeled upon the crucifixion of Jesus," and described the martyrdoms in a language resembling the terms and structures of the Gospel narratives of the Passion of Jesus in the New Testament, with "a particularly bitter hatred for the Zoroastrian priests." Williams considers another set of documents which attack the Zoroastrian religion with less emotion, namely the documents of the Christian synods and councils.

Williams points out, as other historians also have, that the Sasanian kings were quite tolerant of Christians and indeed Yazdegird I (399-421 A.D.) authorized the Synod himself and recognized the heads of the Eastern church and their authority to appoint bishops. Both religions tried to survive by keeping mostly to themselves and avoiding contact with the other.

Williams, rightly or wrongly, sees a recurrent pattern of periods of relative freedom for Christians under strong monarchs who did not need the support of the clergy, the converse being true also. Williams states that two factors worked against the interests of Christians in Iran, namely, war with Rome and a weak king, and it got worse when the two coincided as it cast aspersions on the Christians' loyalty to the crown and the war effort. He quotes W.A. Wigham who in spite of his sympathy for Christians in Iran, concedes: "Those in Persia undoubtedly gave cause for suspicion; they were restless under Magian rule when they saw Christianity triumphant in the West; and looked to the Roman Emperor as their deliverer, as naturally as, for instance the Armenians under Turkish rule looked, at one time, to Russia." As many

other writers express this opinion, it would hold true as much under a strong monarch as under a weak one at least to some degree.

Williams, however, finds religious rather than political reasons for restraining Christian activities and freedoms, most offensive being the act of apostasy: “the hagiographical dramas of the martyrdoms are focused on the staunch refusal of the Christians in the face of whatever threats and torments were put upon them to return to the Zoroastrian religion.”

As the martyrs were converts from Zoroastrianism “in their new found zeal,” they denounced Ahura Mazda” (whom Zoroastrians worshiped as God) and defiled the most sacred Zoroastrian element, fire, in the most abominable way, (such as hurling her menstruation pad right in the sacred fire, nothing being so heinous to a Zoroastrian). They also “defamed the Mazdian clergy whom they would have revered before their apostasy, and poured scorn upon the old religion as being idolatry, devil-worship, sorcery and superstition. Some Christian zealots violated or completely destroyed Zoroastrian fire temples and built churches in their place. It is arguable, therefore, that at least in some cases Christians gave the authorities very good reason for their being brought before the law.” Williams quotes Mary Boyce also as commenting that “the martyrs are always credited with the best of exchanges” and for “making a shrewd thrust at the King's Zurvanite beliefs.” He also quotes Asmussen, a noted authority on the subject, as opining: “It is merely a malicious attempt (by the martyrs) to mock Ahura Mazda.”

Williams maintains that the Christians knew little and cared less about Zoroastrian beliefs and quotes S.P. Brock: “Since the compilers of the martyr acts are unlikely to have been well informed on any developments or changes within Zoroastrianism, it is inherently probable that they will have retrospected into the past the situation of their own day, and so the testimony of this type of Syriac literature can be taken as valid only for the time of the compilers.”

To construe the martyr's criticism as proof of a period of Zurvanite heresy within Zoroastrianism, contends Williams, is “surely to read too much into the text and as Brock says, “the compilers were not even well informed.” The Iranist Pere Jean de Menasce long ago showed the misrepresentation of Zoroastrianism in seventh century Syriac text which is of relevance here because of its bold assertion of Zurvanite beliefs in Zoroastrianism.

A Magian is never placed in a position to refer to Zurvan but it is the martyr who does it “with the intention of ridiculing the religion of their antagonist, even though it was not factual.” The story of martyrdom is primarily a re-enactment of the victory of Jesus over death and its

factual basis outside of Christianity is generally a secondary consideration particularly when the religion it is dealing with is that of the persecutor. “The mythological structure of the narrative is plain to see, as the events of the inquisitions and executions are arranged so as to re-enact, or at least to resemble, the gospel Passion of Jesus. Elements of this *imitatio Christi* include the Judas traitor, the Friday martyrdom, the crucifixion at precisely the ninth hour, the cataclysmic reaction of nature – darkness, hailstorm – and the corpse of the martyr taken away in secret. There is an avowed longing for death -by-martyrdom in the texts, termed “coronation.” These all impressively display the doctrinal essence of narrative terms about persecution by the oppressor in Christianity: the Passion of Jesus and the triumph over evil, a pious indication of the truth of Christianity and a condemnation of the pagan religions.

Such Syriac martyrdom texts are primarily hagiographical and intra-religious and therefore Williams doubts how much we can rely on them as they inform solely about how Christians perceived themselves and their adversaries.

Williams sees an emotional need for the promotion of such texts as well as a theological justification for upholding martyrdom as a test of faith by God. He cites passages from a typical martyrdom text to show that God allowed a persecution to come over the believers.

Williams provides four cases of martyrdom to drive his point home and to vindicate how the hagiographical and theological nature of the martyrdom narratives coalesce. Space however does not allow me to include them here.

“In all likelihood” observes Williams, “the Mobadan Mobad would have been a match for any learned Christian, able to combat scriptural learning and proficiency in disputation with an equal and opposite response to such a gross misrepresentation of Zoroastrian theology. In this narrative, however, his part is written by the Christian hagiographical imagination, and he is capable only of physical destruction of his adversary.”

It does not follow, however, that what they say about the Zoroastrian religion can be taken at face value. Since there is hardly any extant Sasanian textual material Williams advises against adopting “the very pejorative and condemnatory attitude towards the Iranian state religion which runs through the Christian documents.” Some Zoroastrians lived in the Roman Empire, but there are no records of any martyrdoms. It is even theologically implausible for a Zoroastrian to glorify death as a victory over evil. Even though Zoroastrians in the ninth century had to assiduously defend their dualistic faith against the absolute monotheism of their alien conquerors, such works were reflective and

theological, and by then Zoroastrianism and Christianity were not even such a threat to one another. Williams concludes that such Christian references to Zoroastrianism were primarily concerned with Christian self-defense and self-preservation, and there are similarities in them with Zoroastrian texts of a later age responding to problems in a Muslim milieu. The martyrdom texts are seductive and “have captured the attention of modern scholars.” Therefore, Williams advises to interpret them judiciously.

Although he recognizes the historically significant facts present in the texts, he sees the need to interpret them in the light of the dominant intention and style of the genre. “The anti-Zoroastrian polemic, so strong in these texts, has greatly coloured the impression which modern readers have of the religion of the Sasanians Yet it is only a secondary feature of a religious genre whose primary motive was the affirmation of the truths of Christianity, from which it follows that they asserted the falsehood of all other beliefs and religious practices. Historians are obliged to look beyond the distortions of religious propaganda.” One could not conclude more objectively.



I see the need to quote here the views on Zoroastrianism and Christianity by Professor Alan V. Williams, (University of Manchester, England) expressed at a Zoroastrian congress as they represent views I have not addressed here in depth and so fill this lacuna and because they are of such a critical importance for the growing numbers of Zoroastrians settling in the West nowadays.

In terms of religious doctrine, both religions preach goodness and humanity. Both teach that there is salvation from this troubled world in a next world, with God. Both have taught that wickedness is rewarded by the pains of hell. Both have a complex ritual life. Both have priests to carry out these rituals. Prayers, scriptures, sacred languages, theology, ethics – in so many ways these two religions might at first sight seem similar. To some extent they are, and there are good human, psychological and historical reasons for this. In human, psychological terms, maybe mankind everywhere seeks resolution of strife, and finds it in wisdom and love. Historically Zoroastrianism, the much more ancient faith, had influenced Christianity profoundly and in a number of ways, and I mention some of these influences in a little while. Yet the true character of these two religions comes out of two different situations and different human aspirations.

Christianity claims to have hundreds of millions of followers, while Zoroastrianism has been reduced to one or two hundred thousand souls scattered around the world. Yet Christian theology may have something essential to learn from its older relative, Zoroastrianism. And conversely

Zoroastrians may be able to benefit from the problems and trials of the modern world which have beset every corner of Christianity.

For both religions the scriptures are of central importance. There is a great difference in how those scriptures have been preserved, however. For thousands of years the Avesta was handed down in faithful oral transmission, more faithful than spoken language itself. For spoken language changes quite quickly – even a century ago my great grandfather would not have spoken English in the way that I do -- and we know how much English has changed over the last thousand years. Similarly Iranian languages changed a great deal over the millennia, but the scriptures were inscribed on the memories of priests and were preserved with remarkable accuracy. The Christians, on the other hand, following the scribal traditions of the Jews and Romans, wrote down their religious teachings in books, closed the canon of scripture and fixed the creed into a written formula within a few centuries of the death of Christ. The attitude to scripture is thus traditionally different. The Gathas are absolutely sacred words, as all Zoroastrians know, and other prayers of the religion, and they must be pronounced exactly, in Avestan or Pahlavi, for their sacred power to be effected. They are living words. (Since many esteemed scholars have noted problems with the oral tradition of Zoroastrianism as elsewhere pointed out by me, these scholarly remarks of Williams may serve as their rebuttal.)

For Christians the Bible is supremely authoritative but, above all, for them the person of Christ is the living word, the *logos* as it is known in Greek, and all the contents of the Gospels are a witness to and an account of that living word. Traditionally, however, the Gospels are not the *only* witness to an account of that living word, and indeed for the Catholic Churches the Gospels have not in practice been the only focus of the religion. Scripture is said to be the foundational revelation but it is not the only form in which revelation comes to mankind. It has only been with the Protestant churches, since the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, that the Gospels have become once and for all the exclusively important source of religious revelation.

In the life of the Holy Catholic Church, the liturgical, institutional, moral and cultural dimensions have claimed, equally with written scripture, the attention of Catholics, and the focus has been put on the two thousand years of development and growth of the Church and the tradition as the complete, living embodiment of the Word. For Protestants the Person of Christ has been sought in the New Testament scriptures and in personal commitment in relation to that Person of Christ. There has been something of a corresponding change in Zoroastrian attitudes towards scripture in the last century, and this must in part be attributed to contact with the predominately Protestant Christian influence which they met in India. “Rather than seeing

scripture in the context of the wider life of the Church and all its living aspects, Protestant attitudes towards scripture seem to have been absorbed by Zoroastrians so that nowadays many Zoroastrians look solely to the Gathas for their definitions of their religion.” (One wishes this was true but those who look to the Gathas and understand the essence are in my humble estimation far fewer than those who make any attempt whatever to understand even the basic tenets of Zoroastrianism and the few devout ones try to cling to the old traditions at best, seeing in it total fulfilment of their duty as Zoroastrians.)

Catholics are not just members of a religion, they feel that they belong to a great holy family, a people with a common ancestry.

For many centuries Zoroastrians experienced such a common life, in which they were keenly aware of their status as a people, and a community who shared a common ancestry and common traditions which were quite different from those of other peoples they lived among. There is still a sense of the great family of Zoroastrians, whether they are Parsi or Irani. However, an equal and opposite force has had a profound effect upon the Zoroastrians in recent times: the modern ideology of individualism. But the individualism of the modern world is the individualism of private opportunity in spite of the well being of the community in which one lives. Get ahead! Make your mark! Follow your own heart! And if the authority of the family, the community and society from which you come conflicts with that, then so much the worse for family, community and society.

The Protestant work ethic, for all its glories, has had its negative side, in that it has divided loyalties between the individual and the family from which he or she comes. The religion which the Protestants have shared with the rest of the world has therefore brought with it a powerful new ethic: look not to the past of the society from which you come, but rather look back and rediscover yourself in the seed which you may find, through faith, in the most original Gospel of Jesus Christ. The effect of this ethos upon Zoroastrians has been quite destructive. They have found themselves educated out of thinking in terms of the great family of their religion. The things that the family did together, the rituals, the ceremonies, and the celebrations which praised Ahura Mazda, etc., started to lose their meaning. (While this could be true for a rather small group of highly Westernized Zoroastrians, the rest of them may not even be aware of the difference between Catholic and Protestant teachings and ethics. Nevertheless, what Professor Williams describes is quite true, except that it is more due to Westernization than any Protestant influence except that both arrived simultaneously for at least the Parsis in India and both interacted in unison in many ways though Westernization touched every layer and every facet of Zoroastrian society unlike Christianity.) (I may add that such

individualism has led to a remarkable curtailment in the Parsi charities for their kith and kin among other things.)

The Protestants perhaps never consciously intended to have this effect upon other societies, but the values of individualism it teaches, have had this effect upon other societies not just Zoroastrians.

For Christians the purpose of human life is to come to the love of God through Jesus Christ. This is not an emotional love, but what is called a salvific love, that is, a love which saves mankind from the sin into which he was born. This as you can hear, is a language which is private to Christians, for Zoroastrians do not believe that they were born in sin. Sins there may be, when one is old enough to get around to committing them, but it is not the Zoroastrian's intrinsic nature to be born in sin, spotted by sin.

(Since the Eastern Orthodox church has not developed the Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin, Williams posits Zoroastrians may find more affinity with its understanding of human nature. I also feel what the Book of James says echos Zoroastrian emphasis on good deeds.) The freedom the Zoroastrian possesses is to fight with a clear conscience against the powers of evil in his mind, his society, his world, because he knows that they are not part of his nature, but external to it. This fact alone has given the Zoroastrian a tremendous self-confidence and personal resilience which Christians may find hard to understand.

A Zoroastrian does not fear God, for God is wise and, above all, just and fair. God is the friend of the righteous human being. They work together, through action, speech and thought, to destroy all evil and to make the world perfectly free from harm.

The Christian God is understood in many different ways by different churches, and it is difficult to the sum up the concept in a few generalisations.

In Christianity God becomes fully human in the person of Christ, and Christ is the Perfect Man, the embodiment of God's love. In Zoroastrianism every man is the embodiment of God's love and wisdom, so much that we could say that in principle each Zoroastrian soul has a Christ-like nature. In fact Christians believe this also, that we all share in the nature of Christ; but the emphasis is different, for in Christianity the focus is put upon the historical and theological event of Christ's own death and resurrection. It is thus a once-and-for-all symbol of salvation.

The Zoroastrian process of salvation is different. Each man and woman acts directly in relation to God. There is no mediator except one's own conscience and knowledge of God. One's actions, words and thoughts are one's own rewarder and punisher, and although the

religion speaks of the three judges at the Bridge of the Separator, the judgment is made precisely according to what one has stored in one's spiritual account. Zoroastrians therefore must know exactly where they stand with God. The ultimate nature of Ahura Mazda and the divine world is a sublime mystery, but Zoroastrians do not feel that it is an *inscrutable* mystery, before which one must cower and deny one's human nature. Zoroastrians stand before God in prayer and at the Judgment: they do not abase themselves in kneeling and prostration. They love Ahura Mazda as a father and brother, friend and ally. Man helps to recreate the world which has been attacked by evil. Just as Christians re-enact the saving event of the death and resurrection of Christ, so Zoroastrians re-consecrate the world in the Yasna and other sacred rituals. For Zoroastrians *Goodness is the Saviour*. (Saoshyant 'the one who brings benefit'): however small an action, every act of goodness helps to save the soul and the world.

Christians share in the death of Christ. Zoroastrians abhor death. The central event of Christianity is the death and resurrection of the God-Man, and so the Christian understanding of death is complex and, to the outsider, seemingly self-contradictory. Christ suffered on the cross and therefore it has been part of Christian teaching that the way to salvation is *through suffering*. Zoroastrianism, like Judaism and Islam, has little time for what it seems as morose, self-indulgence in the contemplation of the death of the body. The soul is the form of the body (for the Christian) and is not to be seen as an entity separate from it. For Zoroastrians the body is a wholesome and necessary garment which the soul wears in life in the physical world. When it is worn out, it perishes; there is no question but that the essence of life, the soul and the spirit, carries on in a spiritual world which is just as real as the physical world. Without Christ the Christian fears oblivion and utter destruction of the light of consciousness, and his or her only refuge is the life that is to be found in Christ. The Zoroastrian is assured that in every act of goodness he is alive in the spiritual world, accompanied by a vast universe of other good beings who fight alongside him for life, light and wisdom. The Zoroastrian does not, therefore feel alone in the arena of existence. He or she belongs to a great family of righteous beings. Though he must face responsibility alone, he knows that he acts with God, not apart from God. Although absolutely just, God is not a neutral, distant judge, to whom the outcome of a human life does not matter: he *wishes* the soul to choose right. Life is not a *test before God*, it is a *contest against evil*, and men and women stand alongside one another against the common enemy: Evil. In fact the Christian God is for Christians just such a loving, compassionate God who wishes the soul to be united with him.

At a deeper level many of the differences between Zoroastrianism

and Christianity begin to disappear. For in both concepts of the Christian God and Ahura Mazda there is the overriding characteristic of the loving Creator. For Christians Christ is the manifestation of that love, but Christian theology has had such a long and controversial, disputatious history that the main theme of the Christian revelation has often been drowned out by other secondary themes: punishment, fear, popular superstition, political alignment and corruption, and also in modern times doubt and philosophical agnosticism. Zoroastrianism has experienced similar overshadowing by deviant trends within its development, and one should beware of painting a rosy picture of the past. But it is true to say that generally the Zoroastrian revelation has had a more confined passage through time, and in the later period, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the oppressed and exiled conditions in which it has found itself have, ironically, strengthened the focus of its message and its practice, so that Zoroastrian self-understanding has been less ambiguous and more sharply defined than the Christian.

Some of the most striking features of Zoroastrian thought are present in Christianity, and the reason is historical influence via Greek, Neoplatonic writers and also Jewish thought of the pre-Christian and early Christian period. As Prof. Russell has said, Judaism inherited ideas of dualism in its texts in the middle Parthian period, and when Christianity was born the ideas of heaven and hell, cosmic messianism and the power of Satan came to be important in Christianity, in fact in a much more central way that they were in the context of mainstream Judaism. Christians believe that God is the maker of heaven and earth; so do Zoroastrians. He made all things visible and invisible, Zoroastrian *getig* and *menog*. Christians believe in the resurrection of the dead and the judgment of all mankind; so do Zoroastrians. They believe the Kingdom will have no end; so after the *Frashokereti* of the universe, Zoroastrians believe, Ahura Mazda and the spiritual beings will live with mankind and the physical creations in an eternity of perfection which is neither spiritual nor physical, but a new state which is both and more. It will be perfect as the spiritual world always was, but it shall also be infinitely variegated, as the physical world tends to variegation and multiplicity, though imperfect in its present state. There are thus many points where Christians and Zoroastrians can understand each other and share in the common pursuit of their religious vision without conflict.

There are also major differences between the two religions in their present state. First size: this is not just a question of numbers, but also of critical mass. Christians do not fear extinction of their religion, but they have been no less troubled by heresy, schism and sectarianism. For Zoroastrians, division within the ranks is profoundly threatening. Christianity is a missionary religion by definition. (Zoroastrianism too

was a missionary religion originally as I have detailed in my book, *Acceptance in Zoroastrianism*, 2011, Createspace.com, though its mission may not be the same as that of Christianity in particular.) They must spread the Good News, the Evangelion. Zoroastrians, on the other hand have to spread the word of their prophet, except *by example to others* through their justice and fair dealings with other people in the activity of life.

Orthodox, Catholics, and to a lesser extent Protestants and other churches in Christianity, each have their own central seats of authority. Zoroastrians were once formally a people, under a monarch, a High Priest, leaders of the great family of Zoroastrians. With the loss of empires, and with the dispersal of Zoroastrian cultures, and the influence of other cultures upon them (I would add mostly Indian and Western) the symbols of authority, the king, the priest, the leader have been lost.

In Europe at least, perhaps also in the USA, the Protestant Church is divided and failing theologically; failing also to win the hearts and minds of modern people. The break up of the community and the overriding force of individualism and alienation are to blame, breaking up the Protestant family. The Catholic Church also is having to face modern problems after centuries of authoritarian patronage of Catholic minds and souls. It has different problems, of maintaining the meaning of the Church and the revelation it is charged with communicating in an age which is deeply suspicious of authority. The way the Catholic church is doing this is to maintain the values of the life of the family and the ethics of personal life at the small scale, in order that Catholics as a whole will appreciate the need for the Great Family at the macro level.

Zoroastrians need not copy anybody. But they can see that neither selfish individualism, puffed up by sceptical philosophy, nor outdated and doctrinaire authoritarianism work for Christianity today. As a well known computer company puts it: *the strongest principle of growth is human choice*. (Which I can add echoes Zarathushtra well.) The question remains, is that choice to be the choice of alienated individuals who have lost their own greater identity? Or of an authoritarian tradition clinging to the past? Or can there be a third possibility, where *the human choice is made in and for the greater family to which Zoroastrians belong*? (But that family I should say, is the whole universe humans and even non-humans. As rank individualism is the very result of modern-day Westernization, more than of Protestant ideals at least in the case of Iranian Zoroastrians who were not exposed to Christianity, it will be hard to do much about it except taking steps to firmly engrave the principles of the religion in the minds of the younger generation, but this requires trained personnel, priests and enough resources for a tiny community of not more than 120,000 or so thinly

spread over five continents. Even though a sincere attempt is often being made in this direction by many concerned individuals, Westernization and constant but individual migrations to the Western world have so uprooted the Zoroastrians that their very survival seems to be at stake at present.)