

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.