

CONVERSIONS TO ISLAM AFTER THE ARAB CONQUEST

Dr. Kersey Antia, Mar 6, 2020

Some writers claim Iranians converted to Islam because Mazdaism failed to meet the religious yearnings and Gherardo Gnoli's remarks are often quoted in support, though he obviously refers to the third-century man:

“Sasanian Mazdaism was certainly not an effective interpreter of the anxieties of third-century man ... the ... codified Mazdaism ... was unable or unwilling to give – and in fact it did not give – a convincing answer to those anxieties ... as can be seen by the numerous conversions to Manichaeism and Christianity.”¹ I have extensively reviewed how force was strongly used in various forms for conversions to Islam, and since Mazdaism remained a predominant religion in Iran until the Arab invasion and since Mazdaism still survives despite persecution and inhuman treatment over almost 1400 years that far surpasses the brutalities of the Nazis, I am surprised by the opinion of Gnoli whom I have come to admire greatly for his unique contributions to Zoroastrianism.

Moreover, as Shaul Shaked comments on Gnoli's remarks, there are no statistics about conversions to other faiths before the Arab invasion nor do we have any reports of danger to the Mazdean church then. On the basis of postcolonial research on Christian-Sasanian relations in Sasanian Iran, I have noted in an yet unpublished paper that despite the one-sided information given by hagiographers, the condition of Christians was not any worse than that of the followers of other faiths as long as they recognized the supremacy of the King and respected the State religion. As Shaked further observes, “There was much more to Sasanian Zoroastrianism than the ritual, myth, and doctrine of which we get to read in the Pahlavi books is quite evident.” He contends: “There is reason to believe that there was an aspect of the religion that reflected deep-felt spiritual, perhaps mystical, attitudes. – Indeed, it may be suggested that some of the mystical fervor of Islam was derived from Zoroastrianism, although it is not easy to show this in any detail.”²

1 Gherardo Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran: An Essay on its Origin*. Rome: Istituto italiano per il medio ed estremo Oriente, 1989, p. 158.

2 *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran*, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1994, pp. 2-3.