

Zoroastrians in the Early Islamic Period

by

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Eng. Trans. of Richard N. Frye,
"Zoroastrier in der frühislamischer Zeit,"
Der Islam, 40 (1965): 198-99*

In an article, "The Persian Renaissance around 1000" in the journal *Der Islam*, v. 35, I presented a few hypotheses on the religion of the Persians during their transition period from the last Sasanids to Islam. Here, I wish to further develop and clarify this thesis.

To summarize: I believe that, both, Mazdaism (i.e. Dualism) and Zurvanism (what one may perhaps call "higher gods") in the pre-Islamic as well as the *early*, post-Islamic period were deemed "orthodox" although they conflicted on several points. Both these sects, if one is permitted to refer to them as such, were largely and, in the main, similar in their rites but did not share the same doctrines -- therefore, orthopraxy and not orthodoxy -- whereas other sects such as Mazdakism of the Sasanid era and the *Khurramiyya* and *Bihāfrīdiyya* during the Islamic period were deemed "heterodox" precisely because they reacted against orthopraxy. As a parallel to the Islamic era, I cross-refer to the *Mu'tazilites* who had been orthopraxic although they were heterodox while the orthodox *Karramites* like the *Mazdakites* were politically persecuted because of their heteropraxy¹. Baghdādī notes that Muslim jurists recognized the *Zurvanites* and *Maskhiyya* (an Arabic eponym roughly translatable as "Transformationists" but, however, unclear) as protected under the head-tax *jizya*². The other sects were (theologically) deemed "non-canonical" (thus heteropraxy?).

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Under the Sasanids, Mazdeism and Zurvanism were active just as were other religions and sects. It seems that Zurvanism was popular at the royal court and amongst the aristocracy, as has been aptly brought forth in the writings of Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin and Mary Boyce³. Christian authors, in their polemics against the Persians, chiefly describe Zurvanite elements especially the myth of the twins; however, we also find typically dualistic features among Christian writers e.g., how a *mobadānmobed* explains that Ahura Mazda alone created the earth and heaven⁴. The Christian writers, I believe, give evidence for the predominance of both Mazdeism (Dualism) and Zurvanism.

After the Islamic conquest, the Zoroastrians like other sects became gradually ghettoized. They had a *pēšōpāy-i hūdēnān* similar to the *reš galuta* of the Jews. Zurvanism was weakened when the aristocracy (*dihqāns*) converted to Islam in order to preserve their social prominence and status amongst the conquerors. Now orthopraxy and orthodoxy were highly important for the protection of the municipalities and heretics were vigorously stamped out. They had to either support orthodox rites and beliefs or to leave the municipalities. We know that Muslim authorities strove to help Zoroastrian "orthodox" municipalities to suppress the heretics. Even a Muslim rebel as Abū Muslim, on the demand of the orthodox Zoroastrian *mōbeds*, captured, tried, and executed the heretic Bihāfrīd⁵. The teaching of Zurvanism was gradually abandoned as the clergy attempted to foster a uniform code of beliefs, i.e., to produce a belief in Ohrmazd which was as pure as possible. I suspect that this occurred under the 'Abbāsids shortly before A.D.800. This orthodox Mazdeism was the same faith (naturally with developments) which in the late Sasanid era was predominant amongst the masses (apart from magic or folk beliefs). The problem of varieties in "religions" under the Sasanids and later for the Islamic era, in the case of Zoroastrians is, in my opinion, solved in this way.

It is generally accepted that what was written about the number of Zoroastrians in Iran in the early Islamic period can now be corrected. We learn from the *Epistle of Mānūšcīhar*⁶ that several Zoroastrians during the time of the Tāhirids resided in Nišāpur. Not until the tenth century

did many of the Zoroastrians who lived there converted to Islam.⁷ In the provinces of Fars and Isfahan, among others, the Zoroastrians at that time constituted a considerable component of the population. In Kāzarōn and other cities of Fars, the Zoroastrians were even in a majority.⁸ That the number (and perhaps also the significance) of Zoroastrians in Iran until the eleventh century was larger than has been previously assumed is today taken as certain. Moreover, most of the Zoroastrians at that time were brought into line with dualistic orthodoxy. This, then, is the result of my research.

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NOTES

1. I use "Orthodox" here (in inverted commas) in the original sense.
2. Baghdādī, *al-farq bain al-farq*, Eng. Trans. A. Halkin (Tel Aviv, 1935, 221).
3. R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan* (Oxford, 1955), 35-52; Duchesne-Guillemain in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 15 (1956), 108-12; Mary Boyce in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 19 (1957), 305-8.
4. P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum*, 2 (Paris, 1891), 576. It must be emphasised that, in my opinion, H. H. Schaeder and convincingly proved (ZDMG, 95, [1941], 291) that the Zurvan myth (the twins) evolved during the 4th or beginning of the 5th century C.E.
5. See E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 1, (London, 1902), 309.
6. B. N. Dhabhar, *The Epistles of Mānūścīhar I*, 2 (Bombay, 1912), 53. This work was probably written in 881 C.E.
7. *Ta'rikh-i Nišāpur*, Mss. Bursa fol. 40a (see my forthcoming edition by Mouton). See also Frye in *Festschrift for A. Zeki Velidi Togan* (Istanbul, 1955), 407.
8. *Firdōs al-muršiddiya* of Shaykh Kazarōnī (d. 426/1034), ed. F. Meier (Lepizig, 1948), 29-30, 115-16.

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