

ZOROASTRIANS AND CHRISTIANS IN SASANIAN IRAN

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Introduction

The history of contact between the Zoroastrian and Christian religions is a bridge over a great divide, from times before Sasanian and Roman patronage until after the Victorian: the long, interrupted and unequal coexistence of these two faiths is a history of conflict of interests and incompatibility of world-views. The younger one is now the most populous faith of the modern world; the older is, in all senses, the most reduced of the great traditions which survive from Antiquity. However, in the period of imperial warring between Rome and the Sasanians of Iran in Late Antiquity, when we see relations between the two religions at their most overtly hostile,¹ at least the balance of power between them was still more or less equal.² The Sasanian era was the last period in which Zoroastrians were anywhere a majority: thereafter they suffered religious and cultural persecution and prejudice at the hands of Muslims and, much later, Europeans. The Sasanian persecution and victimization of Christians as documented in the extant (Christian) texts are therefore of great interest to the student of the history and comparison of religions.³ The matter for consideration in this paper is the way in which the conflict between the two religions in this early period is expressed; and consequently, by way of illustration, the forms of representation within the synodical documents of the

¹ For a general account of Zoroastrian-Christian relations in this period and bibliography see J.P. Asmussen, 'Christians in Iran', in *The Cambridge history of Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), vol. 3 (2), ch. 25, 924–48.

² On Sasanian Iran see especially A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, second edition (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1944), for, though old, Christensen's work is still an authoritative treatment of the whole Sasanian period, upon which much of the modern *Cambridge history of Iran*, vol. 3, is based. On Christians in ancient Iran see J. Labourt's study, *Le Christianisme dans l'Empire perse sous la dynastie des Sassanides*, second edition (Paris: Lecoffre, 1904), and also J.-M. Fiey, *Jalons pour une histoire de l'Église en Iraq* (CSCO 310 (Subsidia 36), 1970). See also F. Decret's long and informative article 'Les conséquences sur le christianisme en Perse de l'affrontement des empires romain et sassanide: de Shāpūr I^{er} à Yazdgard I^{er}', *Recherches Augustiniennes*, 14 (1979), 91–154.

³ At the outset we dispose of the term 'Nestorian', following S.P. Brock in the preferred appellation 'The Church of the East': equally we reject the misnomers 'magicians' and 'fire-worshippers' as terms of religious polemic.

Church of the East⁴ and the relevant hagiographical texts, the *Acta* of the ‘Persian’⁵ Martyrs in Syriac.⁶

Sasanian Treatment of Christians

Zoroastrianism in the Sasanian period (224–651) enjoyed the patronage of the *Šāhān-šāh* and an imperial regime which saw itself as direct inheritor of the glory of the Achaemenian kings, themselves defenders of the Mazdā-worshipping, Zoroastrian faith.⁷ It was an established church, with a state-sanctioned hierarchy: it goes without saying that Zoroastrianism was indeed promulgated for political purposes. Mary Boyce has asked the question: ‘What were the religious measures which, on [the High Priest] Tansar’s admission, [King] Ardeshir waded through blood to enforce?’ She answers:

First, in place of the former fraternity of regional communities, a single Zoroastrian church was created under the direct and authoritarian control of Persia; and together with this went the establishment of a single canon of Avestan texts, approved and authorized by Tansar himself.⁸

Tansar is described in the ninth-century Pahlavi *Dēnkard* as having prophesied that no peace will come to the lands of Iran

... until they give acceptance to him, Tansar the *herbad*, the spiritual leader, eloquent, truthful, just, and when they give acceptance to Tansar ... those lands, if they wish, will find healing, instead of divergence, from Zoroaster’s faith.⁹

⁴ Edited and translated by Jean Baptiste Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902).

⁵ It is acknowledged that the term ‘Iranian’ is strictly speaking preferable to ‘Persian’ here, but both in the Syriac texts and in the work of most European scholars they are referred to by the latter nomenclature (i.e. of Persia < Old Persian *parsa*, Greek *persis*, Middle and New Persian *pars* / *fars*, which refers properly to the south-western province of Iran).

⁶ The accounts of the martyrdoms of the Persian martyrs are mainly to be found in those texts collected (and published anonymously) by P. Bedjan, *Acta martyrum et sanctorum* (Leipzig: Drugulin, vol. ii, 1891), ‘Martyres Chaldæi et Persæ’ (some are contained in vol. iv, 1894). These are translated by G. Hoffman, *Auszüge aus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer*, *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, VII.3 (Leipzig, 1880, repr. 1966), and O. Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer* (Bibliothek der Kirchenväter 22, 1915); texts quoted in this paper are translated from German by the present writer. For an authoritative analysis of these texts see G. Wiessner, *Untersuchung zur syrischen Literaturgeschichte I: Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung aus der Christenverfolgung Schapurs II*, in *Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen*, Philologisch-historische Klasse, Dritte Folge, Nr. 67 (Göttingen, 1967); see also P. Devos, ‘Les martyrs persans à travers leur actes syriaques’, *Atti del Convegno sul tema: La Persia e il mondo Greco-Romano*, Accademia dei Lincei, Rome, quaderno 76, 1966, 213–25. For a general treatment of hagiographies and their types see R. Aigrain, *L’hagiographie, ses sources, ses méthodes, son histoire* (Poitiers: Bloud & Gay, 1953), esp. chs 5 and 6.

⁷ For a scholarly treatment of the Zoroastrianism of the Achaemenians see M. Boyce, *A history of Zoroastrianism*, vol. ii (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982).

⁸ *Zoroastrians, their religious beliefs and practices* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 103.

⁹ Quoted in Mary Boyce, *A history of Zoroastrianism*, vol. i, 103, citing the Pahlavi theological omnibus the *Dēnkard*, ed. D.M. Madan, *The complete text of the Pahlavi Dinkard* (Bombay: The Society for the Promotion of Researches into the Zoroastrian Religion, 1911), 652.9–17.

The second great Sasanian prelate of the Zoroastrian church, Kirder, who survived seven monarchs, boasted of his achievements in his well-known inscription on the Ka'ba-yi Zardušt:

And in every province and place of the whole empire the service of Ohrmazd and the *yazads* was exalted, and the Mazda-worshipping religion and its priests received much honour in the land. And the *yazads*, and water and fire and cattle were greatly contented, and Ahriman and the *devs* suffered great blows and harm. And the creed of Ahriman and the *devs* was driven out of the land and deprived of credence. And Jews and Buddhists and Brahmans and Aramaic and Greek-speaking Christians¹⁰ and Baptizers and Manichaeans were assailed in the land. And images were overthrown, and the dens of demons were (thus) destroyed, and the places and abodes of the *yazads* [i.e. fire-temples] were established ...¹¹

The Zoroastrian church, on the other hand, suffered the loss of thousands of its believers, from all ranks of society, who converted to Christianity, the religion of Iran's enemy, Rome and her Christian emperor.¹² Although there were some Christians from the West among them, the episcopates of Iran were Iranian in style and culture: many of the bishops who attended the synods retained their Iranian names; for example, Ādur-Hormizd, Dādāfrīd, Hormizd, Mihr-bōzīd, Mihr-Narsēh and Mihr-Hormizd were among those who signed the Synod of Mar Aba in 544.¹³ Yet, because of the familiarity of the Iranian Christian clerics with some of the more idiosyncratic features of the Zoroastrian religion, their attacks and polemics against the old Iranian religion were all the more vehement, resorting to caricature, distortion and exaggeration. Zoroastrians were most to be despised among the pagans (for thus they were usually known, only occasionally being referred to as 'magi', never 'Mazda-worshippers' or 'Zoroastrians'). For example, not only were they feared for their worldly destructive power, in their sacking of

¹⁰ H.W. Bailey has discussed the six terms for religious sects in an appended note to J. Duchesne-Guillemin's essay 'Zoroastrian religion under the Sasanians', in *The Cambridge history of Iran*, iii (2), 907–8. The Iranian words are *yhwdy*, *šmny*, *blmny*, *n'sl'y*, *klystd'n*, *mktky*, *zndyky*, As Bailey says, *yahūd* 'Jew', *šaman* 'Buddhist', *braman* 'Brahman' and *kristiyān* 'Christian' are well known, but the other three present some difficulty. Bailey explains: 'the Mandaean called (and call) themselves *Nasorāy* (<*nasar* "to observe rules") but the name tends to be similar to the Christian name Nazarene (as in Christian Sogdian *n'čr'yq* **nāsariqā* in the George Passion)'. This latter interpretation is now generally preferred; see further J.P. Asmussen, 'Christians in Iran', in *The Cambridge history of Iran*, iii (2), 929–30.

¹¹ Quoted from Mary Boyce, *Textual sources for the study of Zoroastrianism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 112, translating from M. Back, *Die sassanidischen Staatsinschriften* (Acta Iranica, 18, 1978), 384ff.

¹² See A. Christensen, *L'Iran*, ch. vi, 'Les chrétiens de l'Iran'; M.-L. Chaumont, 'Les Sassanides et la christianisation de l'empire iranien au III^e s', *RHR*, 165:2 (1964), 165–202, and *idem*, *La christianisation de l'empire iranien des origines aux grandes persécutions du IV^e siècle* (CSCO 499, Subsidia 80, 1988). See also F. Decret 'Les conséquences sur le christianisme en Perse de l'affrontement des empires romain et sassanide, de Shapur I à Jazdgard', *Recherches Augustiniennes*, 14 (1979), 91–154.

¹³ *Synodicon*, 79 (Syr.), 331 (trans.). On Mar Aba, who was himself born a Zoroastrian, see *Synodicon*, 318 n. 1.

churches, or their false religion of pagan worship of the elements, but also, and perhaps most notoriously, for their alleged moral degradation in their desecration of the sacred institution of marriage, in consanguineous unions with next of kin.¹⁴

The Sasanian regime was afflicted by political and religious tensions throughout the centuries of its dynasty. Relations between the royal court and the Zoroastrian church were far from stable, and the Christian minority, some of whom rose to high office in the civil and military services, acted as an element of further destabilization.¹⁵ Yet, except for three periods of persecution, Christians were generally tolerated, and even treated with leniency. The most notorious series of persecutions are portrayed in the accounts of twenty-nine martyrdoms from the regime of Šāpuhr II (309–79), who, with his Grand Mobad Ādurbād, hounded the Christians in a sustained and, according to the Syriac acts of the martyrs, ruthless attack in the last forty years of his reign. The beginning of the persecution came shortly after Constantine converted to Christianity and made it the religion of the Roman Empire. The second period of persecution was during the later years of Yazdegird I (399–421) and in the early years of his successor Bahram V (c. 421–39), because of the influence of the infamous Mihr-Narsēh, the prime minister, commander in chief (*wuzurg-framādār*) and scourge of the Christians. Thirdly, under Yazdegird II (439–57), there was a spate of anti-Christian fanaticism and persecution in 446–48, followed by the attempt, most unusual in the history of Zoroastrianism, forcibly to convert Christian Armenia to Zoroastrianism. The texts paint a vivid picture both of how Christianity regarded the other religion in conflict, and also of the weapons with which it, as victim, chose to engage in polemical strife; they show also how the religion represented itself to itself through the genre of mythologized sacred history: the martyrdom.¹⁶

¹⁴ See *Synodicon*, 82–3 (Syr.), 335 (trans.), from the Synod of Mar Aba, 544. On Zoroastrian *xwēdōdah*, ‘next-of-kin marriage’, in Syriac sources, see J. de Menasce, ‘Autour d’un texte syriaque inédit sur la religion des Mages’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, 9 (1938), 587–601. For a fuller treatment of *xwēdōdah* see A.V. Williams, *The Pahlavi Rivāyat accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 1990, 2 vols), ii. 126–37, 10–17.

¹⁵ See further S.P. Brock, ‘Christians in the Sasanian empire: a case of divided loyalties’, *Studies in Church History*, 18 (1982), 1–19.

¹⁶ Gk. *marturia*, meaning ‘testimony’, as T.W. Manson has said, ‘contains no suggestion whatever of suffering’ (‘Martyrs and martyrdom’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 39 (1957), 463). This ‘testimony’ is properly of the truth of Christ and Christianity and not primarily of the events of the history of this world, however traumatic they may have been to Christians. See Kallistos of Diokleia, ‘What is a martyr?’, *Sobornost*, 5:1 (1983), 8: ‘Christ the protomartyr went voluntarily to death and the martyr, as *alter Christus*, a second “Christ” is called to do the same. For suffering does not by itself make someone into a martyr. It is also required that even on our side we should voluntarily *accept* that suffering. Self-dedication is needed and it is this that changes the martyr from someone who suffers and dies into someone who *bears witness*’.

The persecutions, torture and martyrdoms are documented in the Syriac acts of the martyrs of the Iranian Christians. While one must agree with P. Bedjan that these texts, to which he devotes the second volume of his *Acta martyrum*,¹⁷ are ‘d’un style de toute beauté’,¹⁸ it must be said that the passion, wit and charm of the texts serve to heighten rather than merely embellish the descriptions of gruesome tortures at the hands of the Iranian authorities; one notes a specially bitter hatred reserved for the Zoroastrian prelates. With less emotion, but no less clarity, the uneven contours of the history of Christian-Zoroastrian relations may be seen in the documents of the Christian church synods as they reflect religious pressures from within and without. These are briefly considered now, for what they disclose of the interaction between the two faiths.

Christian Attitudes to Zoroastrians in the Documents of the Synods

The Sasanian kings were not always hostile to the Christian church. The report of the Synod of Isaac of 410 states that indeed the king (Yazdegird I) authorized the synod himself:

And in the month of Kanun on the holy feast of the Epiphany (6 January 410), they [the bishops of Persia] came to the capital city [Seleucia-Ctesiphon], capital of all the cities of the Orient. The King of Kings, victorious and illustrious, heard of their arrival; he commanded our honourable Father, Mar Isaac, bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Catholikos and Archbishop of all the East, and his brother the Bishop Mar Maruta, to bring them all together in the great church, prescribing that the letter sent by the bishops of the West be read out in their presence, and that they hear and observe all that was written therein.¹⁹

Also the Catholikos Mar Isaac, and Mar Maruta, conferred with the King of Kings, Yazdegird, who then issued an edict, declaring that the King of Kings had procured a great peace for the Christians, that he recognized Isaac and Maruta as heads of the Eastern Church and that he gave them the authority to appoint bishops.²⁰ In addition, he proclaimed, whoever might secede from these Christian authorities would be answerable to the King of Kings himself.²¹ Unfortunately, as it turned out, Yazdegird’s patronage and tolerance changed to bitter hostility, through the appointment of Mihr-Narseh as prime minister. Oppression of Christians was further provoked by incidents such as Bishop ‘Abda’s destruction of a fire-temple, and hostility continued under Bahram V and Yazdegird II.

The synods afford some understanding of how the Christians were instructed to deal with the problem of a hostile state religion

¹⁷ See note 7.

¹⁸ *Acta martyrum*, vol. ii, Avant-propos, V–VI.

¹⁹ Translated from *Synodicon*, 257.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 260–1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 266, 269–70; this is stated also in Canon XII, XVII of the same Synod of Isaac.

prevailing in their land. Strict rules are laid down to preserve the dignity and integrity of the clergy, for example. The following passage is reminiscent of, though not identical to, the care taken by Zoroastrian priests to avoid eating with the laity: for, as is well known, priests must eat ‘in *bāj*’, i.e. in a prayerful silence between initial and concluding prayer formulæ, and this is especially true during meals in honour of the dead.²² What is of interest in the following Christian passage (from the Synod of Isaac, of 410) is that concern is expressed for their own priests eating with the laity at funerary celebrations:

It is not permitted for clergy invited to feasts or wakes for the dead to ask for or to receive portions there; nor to eat in inns, nor to participate in communal banquets. The priests, deacons, sub-deacons should not go to wakes for the dead of the poor, there should be a special meal for the clergy; they may not partake of portions, for fear that they do not attract contempt or blame on the dignity of the church.²³

A later text (from the Synod of Išo’yahb, of 585) advises a more acute caution in the face of corruption from pagan rites:

We have learned that some Christians, either through ignorance or through imprudence, are going to see people of other religions and taking part in their feasts, that is to say, going to celebrate feasts with Jews, heretics or pagans, or even accepting something sent to them from the feasts of other religions. We thus prescribe, by heavenly authority, that a Christian must not go to the feasts of those who are not Christians, nor accept anything sent to Christians from those feasts, for it is part of the oblation made in their sacrifice.²⁴

Zoroastrian religious texts express the belief that food given auspiciously is a transmitter of blessings, and conversely that the food of sinners is a curse upon the recipient. Hence it was seen as a great danger, for example, to buy meat from non-Zoroastrians or to give anything to an infidel (*agdēn*, ‘one of evil religion’): ‘unless you think that otherwise he will die, you must not give anything at all to an infidel’.²⁵ Just as the Zoroastrian texts of the ninth century C.E. caution against crossing the boundaries of that religious community, or allowing infidels into the midst, actually or symbolically,²⁶ so, by the

²² See e.g. B.N. Dhabhar, *The Persian Rivāyats of Hormazyar Framarz* (Bombay: K.R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1922), 336.

²³ Canon VIII, *Synodicon*, 265; Chabot (loc. cit., n. 4) notes that the sense seems to be that the priests should never go to eat with the poor, and that with the rich they only partly partake. The differentiation between rich and poor laity is one which does not occur in Zoroastrian texts, since the priest/lay division is made solely in terms of status of ritual purity. The subject is taken up again in canon XXVIII of the Synod of Išo’yahb, 585 (*Synodicon*, 418).

²⁴ Canon XXV, *Synodicon*, 417–18.

²⁵ *Pahlavi Rivāyat*, ed. Williams, 1990, 14.7, vol. 2, 27.

²⁶ On the importance of maintenance of boundaries with regard to all aspects of purity, see A.V. Williams, ‘The body and the boundaries of Zoroastrian spirituality’, *Religion*, 19 (1989), 227–39.

end of the sixth century among Christians, the problem of boundary crossing, by clergy and laity alike, had become sufficiently serious to warrant the following statement (from the Synod of Ezekiel, of 576):

There are those who, having lost something, or having been robbed, go to see magicians or soothsayers in order that they make them some revelations or divinations on the subject of these things, or they even take them into their houses, or do strange things under the pretext of purification. They sprinkle water or other things, according to a diabolical rite, as those who serve the demons have taught them... On leaving the diabolical mysteries, they dare to come into church, and to reach out their hands to offer or to receive the propitiatory mysteries of the body and blood of Christ, which become their own damnation, the ruin of the person, and attract to them the violent wrath of God. On the subject of these and their ilk, the Synod has prescribed that: if men guilty of these things are found among those who have received ecclesiastical orders, they will be fallen from their order. If people who have done these things are found among the laity they will be excommunicated, in affliction and penitence, for a time and, when they have completed it, they will be received into the church.²⁷

Another synodical text (from the Synod of Joseph of 554) shows that the problem of maintaining the integrity of the community had gone much further than the above, and that it was of great concern to both Zoroastrian and Christian authorities:

It is said that some priests, deacons and clerics are going and taking pagan women, some of whom convert, and that they father children by them. After a time, when the Magians learn of this, the women are seized, enchained and they abandon Christianity; and some priests or deacons are dishonoured by their apostate children. This is why we have defined canonically that those who act thus will not be allowed to practise the priesthood.²⁸

Finally, a canon of the Synod of Išō'yahb of 585 addresses all the anxieties of the preceding quotations, affirming that the church is sanctioned by tradition to deal with such troubles:

It is worthy and fitting for those who have the truth to persevere in it purely in everything and to guard against the seduction of teachers of vain religions; one should not betroth one's sons or daughters to them, or at least one should be genuinely assured that they promise to abide by the truth. They must not deliver up the holy altars of Christ to the ministry of the heretics; nor should one receive blessings from them, which are in fact curses. If a Christian acts otherwise, he shall receive the chastisement which befits his contempt, and the canon of the Church which has been clearly stated by the synod of the ancient Fathers will be applied to him.²⁹

²⁷ Canon III, *Synodicon*, 375–6.

²⁸ Canon X, *Synodicon*, 359–60. Cf. a similar counsel, from a later synod, which is directed at women: 'Women who have a faith believing in Christ and who wish to live the Christian life must guard themselves with all their might against union with pagans, seeing that the union with them creates for them usages contrary to the fear of God and drags their will into laxity. So Christians should absolutely avoid living with pagans; and he who would dare to do so would be expelled from the church and from all Christian honour, by the word of Our Lord' (Synod of George I, 676, Canon XIV, *Synodicon*, 488).

²⁹ Canon XXVII, *Synodicon*, 418, which refers to Canons X and XI of the Synod of Mar Aba.

Zoroastrian texts in Avestan, Middle and New Persian, i.e. from ancient times down to the pre-modern period, with their strict insistence on endogamy, their comprehensive rules of purity and abhorrence of spiritual pollution by contamination with anything foreign to the body of the community, emphasize all aspects of restriction upon the true believer, especially the avoidance of magic, witchcraft and heresy. However, until the Zoroastrian community became, like the Church of the East in Iran, a minority community, in the period of Muslim domination, the details of rules of commensality, receiving 'sacrifices' at feasts of other faiths, intermarriage, and conversion did not feature explicitly in extant texts.³⁰ Until the end of the Sasanian dynasty the religious authorities seem to have continued to regard other religions as non-competitors for the souls of good Zoroastrians, as the *Šāyest nē-Šāyest* states categorically:

Of the pure law and of the good religion are we, and of the supreme teaching: and of the mixed law are the disciples belonging to Sēn; and of the worst law are the Manicheans and the Christians and the Jews and the others who are of this sort.³¹

Mutual Resentment

In Zoroastrian-Christian relations in the Sasanian period, a recurring pattern emerges:³² a strong Sasanian monarch had no need to curry favour with an obedient and subordinate Zoroastrian church, and thus Christians were allowed to live in relative freedom. Conversely, when the monarch was less secure and looked to the Zoroastrian church for support, or when a strong prelate, for example Kirdēr, gained influence over the king, Christians and other minorities became a political and religious scapegoat. Two factors repeatedly set back the Iranian Christians: the continuing war with Rome, and a weak personality on the throne confronted by a dominant Zoroastrian high priest (*Mobadān Mobad*). Both factors afforded the Zoroastrian authorities good reason to persecute those whom they saw as a fifth column in their midst: the Persian Christians were sapping the strength of 'the Good Religion' (*weh dēn*) at home; also, through their suspected allegiance to Rome, Christians were thought guilty of supporting the enemy and were feared as being dangerous to the war effort. W.A. Wigram, in spite of his sympathy for the plight of the Christian minority in Iran, concedes this point:

³⁰ See further B.N. Dhabhar (trans.), *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyar Framarz and others* (Bombay 1932).

³¹ *Šāyest nē-Šāyest* 6.7, ed. and trans. J.C. Tavadia (Hamburg: Friederichsen, De Gruyter, 1930), 97; Tavadia considers Sēn to refer to the heretical teacher mentioned in the *Dēnkard*, and not, as others have suggested, to 'Chinese' (Pahlavi *sēnīg*).

³² Following the general thesis of A. Christensen in *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*.

Suspicion of the Christians who were Persian subjects was thus inevitable; and the Mobeds, at least, if no one else was available, were always ready to fan that suspicion into persecution, even if Christians on both sides of the frontier were careful to avoid giving cause for offence. Unhappily this was not the case. 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.³³

When resentment against the *Šāhān-šāh* set in among the ranks of the nobles, for example when Bahram V came to the throne against their wishes in 420, it found expression through pressure put upon him by the *religious* magnate of the day, in Bahram's case Mihr-Narseh. Persecution of the Christians would strengthen the king's position, it was argued: for did not the Christians favour the enemy?³⁴ However, there were other, religious rather than political motivations for suppressing and extinguishing Christian activities and freedoms, enthusiastically urged by the Zoroastrian authorities. Most offensive to the Zoroastrian clergy was the act of apostasy from the Good Religion to the Evil Religion (*ag-dēn*). Consequently this became the matter of the bitterest emotions and most savage consequences: the hagiographical dramas of the martyrdoms are focused on the staunch refusal of the Christians, in the face of whatever threats and torments put upon them, to come back to the Zoroastrian religion.³⁵ Zoroastrians referred to themselves as *weh-dēnān* 'those of the good religion', and non-Zoroastrians as *jud-dēnān* or *ag-dēnān* "those of the other / evil religion', just as Christians spoke of themselves as 'those of the house', and infidels in general as 'those from outside'. It is significant that martyrs such as Aba and Giwargis were born and brought up as good, and indeed learned, Zoroastrians, before their conversion;³⁶ in their new-found zeal, Persian Christians denounced Ahura Mazdā and the Blessed Immortals, they defiled the sacred Zoroastrian element fire in an abominable way, defamed the Mazdean 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

³³ W.A. Wigram, *The Assyrian Church* (London: SPCK, 1910), 61.

³⁴ See e.g., the martyrdom of Mar Šim'un: Bedjan, *Acta martyrum*, ii. 136.

³⁵ *Passim* in the acts of the Persian martyrs; see examples in the quoted passages.

³⁶ The acts of these two martyrs are evidence for this. The acts of Aba state: 'Mar Aba was originally a pagan and exceeded most pagans in his zeal for paganism. He was also educated in Persian literature. As he was very learned in literature, important people of his region saw that he was learned and quick-witted and persuaded him to join up with them, so that they could make him distinguished in the service of the state and in worldly position... He was a hard bitter pagan; he scorned the Christians and despised the sons of the Covenant' (Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten*, §1, 188).

See further below in the section on Mar Giwargis.

churches in their place:³⁷ it is arguable, therefore, that at least in some cases Christians gave the authorities very good reason for their being brought before the law.

The Acts of the Martyrs

The Syriac acts of the Persian martyrs reveal as much about the way the community commemorates its saints and represents itself to itself as they do about the actual relations between the rival religions. The acts are partisan in the extreme and are embellished with legendary details;³⁸ since they are not counterbalanced by any parallel Zoroastrian accounts of the same events, the question arises as to how far they can be regarded as accurate historical information. Understandably, given the genre, the Christian texts portray the exchanges between Zoroastrian priests or the king himself and the Christians in the language of anti-Zoroastrian polemic. As an example of how this polemic might compromise the historical value of the acts, we may consider the martyrdom of Pusai. As Mary Boyce has written:³⁹

Since only Christian accounts of the interrogations survive, the martyrs are always credited with the best of the exchanges; and Pusai, one of those put to death by Shabuhr [II] is shown ... making a shrewd thrust at the King's Zurvanite beliefs: 'If your majesty says "Sun, moon and stars are the children of Ohrmazd", why, we Christians do not believe in the brother of Satan. According to what the magi say, Ohrmazd is the brother of Satan. If we do not pray to the brother of Satan, how should we then acknowledge this brother's children?'

Boyce concludes:

These words illustrate how radically the Zurvanites had betrayed Zoroaster's teachings by linking together, fraternally the good and evil which he had so clearly set apart.⁴⁰

However, perhaps one should be cautious in moving to such a conclusion prompted by the Syriac text. Although it is known from Manichean texts and from other evidence that the myth of Zurvan had some currency in Sasanian Iran, it does not necessarily follow that Zurvanism was the official orthodoxy of the Sasanian state religion. As Asmussen has said, referring to the same text of the martyrdom of Pusai:

³⁷ For example as reported in the martyrdom of Mar 'Abda, a Christian priest is said to have destroyed a fire-temple situated next to a Christian church in the city of Hormizd-Ardesir in Susiana (Hoffmann, *Auszüge*, 34; see further Labourt, *Christianisme*, 105–6, and Christensen, *L'Iran*, 272f.).

³⁸ See J.P. Asmussen, 'Christians in Iran', in *Cambridge history of Iran*, iii (2), 939.

³⁹ *Zoroastrians*, 119–20.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

... it is obvious even in the Syriac text that the argument is completely misplaced. It is merely a malicious attempt to mock (the verb *bazah*) Ahura Mazda. It misses the mark as none were conscious of Zurvan having such a dominating role. Had Zurvanism really been the state religion, such a staggering argument (the adoration of Satan's brother!) would have taken first place in even the most scanty form of Christian polemic.⁴¹

It seems likely that Pusai's 'shrewd thrust at the King's Zurvanite beliefs' is more likely merely a Christian caricature of Zoroastrian beliefs, about which they knew little and cared less. S.P. Brock has noted that:

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 retrojected 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.⁴²

Brock refers to the above episode of the exchange between Pusai and the king and takes the taunt as a case of retrojection of a later state of affairs to an earlier period by the compilers, stating: 'the king's angry reaction to this looks as if the compiler had in mind a period of "orthodoxy", which had but recently been preceded by one of Zurvanite "heterodoxy"'.⁴³ Again, to construe this as proof of a period of Zurvanite heresy is surely to read too much into the text, for as Brock says, 'the compilers are unlikely to have been well informed'. The Iranist Jean de Menasce long ago discussed this general subject of the misrepresentation of Zoroastrianism in his treatment of a seventh-century Syriac text by Yoḥannan bar Penkaye, which is of interest because of its striking assertion of Zurvanite beliefs in the Magian religion.⁴⁴

...alors que les chrétiens corsent leur satire du magisme de traits plus nettement zervanites, certaines indices donnent à penser que ce processus d'épuration était déjà amorcé à l'intérieur du mazdéisme. *Le nom de Zurvān, quand il se rencontre dans les Acta ou ailleurs; n'est jamais placé dans la bouche d'un Perse [sc. 'a Zoroastrian']; ce sont les confesseurs de la foi chrétienne qui l'évoquent dans le but de ridiculiser la religion de leurs persécuteurs. Les Mages, eux, se bornent à leur imposer le culte des luminaires et des éléments. Quand la discussion s'engage, elle porte sur le caractère sacré de l'autorité et de la personne royales ou sur la nature divine des éléments et du Soleil. Aux légendes ridicules amenées par leurs adversaires, les Mages*

⁴¹ *Cambridge history of Iran*, iii (2), 932.

⁴² Review of G. Wiessner, *Untersuchungen zur syrischen Literaturgeschichte*, in *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S. 19 (1968), 307.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁴⁴ J. de Menasce, 'Texte syriaque inédit'; part of de Menasce's translation is included in R.C. Zaehner, *Zurvan a Zoroastrian dilemma* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 421-9, who compares it with a similar account by Thodore bar Konai. Zaehner's thesis about Zurvanism as a thoroughgoing competitor with Zoroastrian Mazdaism has not won acceptance among scholars, though his book remains valuable for the large collection of texts which forms its second part.

n'opposent ni démenti ni justification. Argument a silentio, mais qui n'est pas sans valeur en regard des discussions serrées sur la divinité des corps célestes dans les Acta de Kardagh ou sur le culte du feu dans ceux de Giwargis, et qui reste pertinent en dépit du caractère artificiel de ces compositions.⁴⁵

The drama of martyrdom, as everywhere in the Christian world, is a re-enactment of the triumph of Jesus over death. The fact that these texts are such, however does not diminish their historical value as accounts of actual persecution, torture and execution of Christians by the Sasanian regime. The year, date, names and places of the martyrdoms are written down carefully and the geographical locations were very precise. However, the Syriac martyrdoms are primarily hagiographical and intra-religious texts: their correspondence to religious reality *outside* Christianity is a secondary consideration, all the more so when the religion in question is that of the state persecutor. The chiefest, nay, the only weapon against the tormentors is the witness of faith itself: the martyrs are cajoled and bullied by their torturers, all in vain, to worship the sun, fire and water, and to accept the hated 'magian' practices.⁴⁶ This is the viewpoint of the Christian text.

Four Examples of Syriac Christian Witness before Zoroastrians

The picture of the Zoroastrians we have from the Syriac martyrdoms is best given by looking very briefly at four examples: Mar Šim'un bar Sabba'e, Pusai, Mar Aba and Mar Giwargis.

1. Šim'un bar Sabba'e.

The persecution of Mar Šim'un bar Sabba'e, the head of the bishops and catholikos of the Church of the East, in *c.* 344, was caused, ostensibly, by his refusal to impose a double tax on Christians, demanded by the King of Kings because the Christians were not serving in the military forces. The Sasanian King of Kings, Šāpuhr, deduced that Šim'un wished to instigate an insurrection among the Christians and ally with the Roman Emperor. It is said in the text that the Jews lent their support to this view. In his wrath the King is said to have behaved like a raging lion who has tasted sweet human blood: he ground his teeth and gnashed them. Interestingly, Šim'un, in his fulmination against other religions, does not mention the Zoroastrians (§12). King Šāpuhr drops the insistence on the double tax, in his attempts to reason with the prospective martyr. In many of the martyrdoms, there seems to be a point where the king realizes that the original grounds for persecution are insufficient, and instead of demanding obedience begins to plead the Christian's acquiescence in *religious* terms. This is an indication to the reader

⁴⁵ 'Texte syriaque inédit', 592–3 (italics are the present author's).

⁴⁶ E.g. kin-marriage (Pahlavi *xwēdōdah*).

that the spiritual battle against the pagans has been won, for every believer knows that their martyr will never relinquish his faith for another. The king asks Šim'un to worship Sun and Fire. There follows a somewhat stereotyped debate on the true nature of sun and fire: Christians know them to be ephemeral and mortal, as compared with the nature of the saviour Christ who died, yet whose immortality and triumph over death is certain. The king's minister Guštāzād, a Christian, betrays Christ and then repents, but is ordered by the king to be beheaded; Šim'un is to be executed the next day, which is, it so happens, a Friday.

...then the command was given, that he and all his brethren should be dispatched by the sword. It was Friday and the sixth hour. At the same time as the Lord set off to his passion on the cross, those glorious ones also set off to die. And the Grand Mobad went out and once again asked all those who confessed who were with Šim'un: 'Worship the sun, the god, and do the will of Šāpuhr, the King of Kings and Lord of all Lords, and you shall live'. All replied aloud: 'Certainly we do the will of the king of kings and the lord of the whole earth, the king of eternity'. When the Grand Mobad heard that he was glad and said 'Worship the sun'. Then the blessed ones laughed out loud at him and said: 'Did you not say we should do the will of the king of the whole earth? We are doing that already and we will not worship the sun'. The Grand Mobad said: 'Who is the king of kings, the Lord of the whole earth, if Šāpuhr is not the king of kings?' The saints said: 'You have spoken an obvious untruth. The king of kings, the lord of the whole earth is God, the creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them. He is the king of kings eternally. Šāpuhr rules one little corner of the earth; today he is, and tomorrow he is not there any more'.⁴⁷

2. Pusai.

The martyrdom of Pusai follows next in the acts of the Persian martyrs. Pusai was not an indigenous Iranian, but came as a prisoner of war from the West, took a Persian wife, and was honoured by the king. He happened to be present at the martyrdom of Šim'un and he was moved to speak up at another, that of an old man. The text states that this was noticed by the Zoroastrian religious authorities, and the Grand Mobad reportedly ordered him to be put in chains. The king demanded that he must give up the false religion. Pusai thanked Šāpuhr for the gift of death, in a tone of triumphant irony.

If you, King of Kings, deem me worthy of death for God's religion, so my tongue is not enough to say thank you to your merciful majesty. For of all honours, gifts and graces which I received from your majesty there is none like this ... For God is your giver, and through you will he give it to me and my companions.⁴⁸

Even when he is condemned and sent off for execution, the feebleness of the oppressor's position is emphasized in a scene where the

⁴⁷ Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten*, §38, 47–8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, §10, 69.

king orders the Grand Mobad himself actually to run after them and try to cajole Pusai to save himself, crying: 'For he is one of the most useful men of my kingdom'.⁴⁹ A theological discussion is introduced in a conversation between Pusai and the Grand Mobad, who asks him to give way and worship the sun. Pusai replies:

All the visible world is not God, because it is created and finite. For just thereby our truth records and is our sound belief, that we worship the unattainable, the unlimited and infinite ... Man waits to receive the invisible that we see in faith. You see in the flesh only the visible, because you are of this world, we wait for the spiritual, the hidden.⁵⁰

In all likelihood, the Mobadān-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, but in this narrative, his part is written by the Christian hagiographical imagination, and he is capable only of physical destruction of his adversary. Such is the 'history' of a religion: Pusai was martyred exactly one day later than the time he spoke up to the old man, the Saturday, upon which follows the Sunday of the feast of the Resurrection. The execution was followed by hailstorm and darkness. The saint's body was taken away on the back of a donkey, to be anointed and buried by a holy woman.

3. Mar Aba.

What are purported to have scandalized the Zoroastrian authorities more than anything else, or at least to have excited the hagiographical mind to represent them as such, were cases of Christians who had apostatized from the Good Religion and turned upon it vehemently. Two of the most celebrated martyrs of the later period were such, Mar Aba and Mar Giwargis. Mar Aba was himself born into a Zoroastrian family, and was reportedly strongly attached to that doctrine in his youth; he had a successful administrative career and it is said that he exceeded most 'pagans' in his (zeal for) 'paganism'. The dramatic narrative of his conversion is reported in his martyrdom, with careful and specific allusion to the conversion of St Paul. He was reported to the state authorities by the Grand Mobad for having converted too many Zoroastrians to Christianity. Indeed, even in his persecution, in what may be reckoned a foolhardy, though laudably pious, endeavour, he tried to convert the Mobadān-Mobad to Christianity:

The catholicos will accept even you, Great Magician that you are, if you listen to his teaching and desire to be a Christian, and we Christians will not thrust you out

⁴⁹ Ibid., §11, 70.

⁵⁰ Ibid., §13, 71.

of the church. The Mobadān Mobad and the magicians grew very angry at this, but since that believer was a great man, they could do nothing to him. However, the Great Magician and his companions arose and came in a great fury to the king, shouting angrily about what had been said ...⁵¹

He ended badly, but with the best of martyrdoms.

4. Mar Giwargis.

Mar Giwargis, St George of the Persian Christians, was born Mihrām-Gušnasp, a Zoroastrian whose maternal grandfather had been a mobad. According to the text of the martyrdom of Mar Giwargis:

After their parents [*sc.* of Giwargis and his sister] had died in heathendom and left them behind as orphans, their grandfather brought them up. Mihrāngušnasp, the later martyr Giwargis, was from his youth thoroughly instructed in Persian literature and trained in the lore of the Magians, so that before he was even seven years old, according to the error of Magian practice, performed the sacrificial prayer and held the *barsom* twigs (*ibid.*, §9, 223).⁵²

He saw the foolishness of his ways, however, realizing

that the devilish magic was an error, that there was absolutely nothing which equated to truth, nothing on which the spirit could rely, that it dissolved itself and contradicted itself like a spider's web. Persistently he disputed with 'the magicians' about the gibberish to which they cling and which they call the Avesta, and they could not answer him anything except that it was the heritage of their forefathers.⁵³

He is reported to have been married to his sister in *xwēdōdah* marriage, but he soon rejected this⁵⁴ and was converted and baptized. His sister is given a great deal of attention in the martyrdom, as she is reported to have turned her back more gradually on her Zoroastrian ways, being of a lascivious nature, entangled in the amusements and entertainments of paganism and its ruinous aberrations.⁵⁵ As a woman she was considered naturally more prone to the concupiscence of which the Zoroastrian pagans stood accused by the Christians; and her new-found faith in Christianity was not believed by her companions until, after recovering from an illness and having taken a vow to reject paganism if she recovered, it is said,

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, §15, 199.

⁵² *Ibid.*, §9, 223.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, §10, 224.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, §12, 226.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, §13, 227.

she cheerfully and laughingly took the fire in her hand, the goddess of the magicians, threw it to the ground and stamped on it, while in menses. ...Then all were convinced that she was a Christian ...⁵⁶

In their persecution of her brother, the religious authorities are depicted as being anxious about whether Giwargis was originally a practising Zoroastrian and whether his conversion was voluntary or enforced. He boasts that indeed he quitted the Good Religion ('for with this false name the magicians denote magiciandom')⁵⁷ voluntarily. Towards the end of the martyrdom there is an exchange between Mar Giwargis and the Rad, chief of the inquisitors, which, in several respects, epitomizes the interaction with the opponent religion in these texts. Giwargis says:

'You worship the fire and sacrifice to it. How has it given you being since you give life to it with wood and other material which feeds it?' The Rad replied: 'We do not take fire to be God; but we worship God through the medium of the fire, as you worship God through the cross'. Holy Giwargis answered: 'When we worship the cross we do not say we adore you, cross, God, as you do: we adore you fire, God'. The magician replied: 'This is not so'. Then the martyr recited before the Rad a magical text and demonstrated to him: 'Thus you maintain in the Avesta, that it is a god'. Having become uncomfortable in this way the Rad forgot about his first words and said: 'We worship the fire because it is of the same nature as Ohrmazd'. The saint replied: 'Is everything that is the fire's also Ohrmazd's?' The Rad answered: 'Yes'. The saint remarked: 'We understand that fire consumes rubbish and filth wherever it is. So also does Ohrmazd, if he is of the same nature as fire'. With this the 'magician' became very embarrassed about the topic. And so on, until all present shouted out in unison: 'Never before have we seen a man who understood like this man to be able to refute magiciandom and to confirm Christianity'. Finally the Rad also was swept away by their praise and also confessed: 'Even I have never met a man like this one'. And all said: 'Woe upon us, since we trusted in the Rad, who knew the Avesta better than all the magicians, and he failed and did not know what he said. Henceforth our hope is cut short'.⁵⁸

There was, reportedly, a flurry of conversion.

The canonical statements of the synods of the Church of the East and the martyrdoms of the Persian Christian saints, tell us much about the condition of that church in Sasanian times. It does not follow, of course, that what they say about the Zoroastrian church can be taken at face value, even though it is enormously valuable to historians, who have, in comparison to the Christian sources in general, so little Zoroastrian textual material of that period. There are no equivalent Zoroastrian texts extant which deal with Christianity in a similar way. There were Zoroastrians who were subjects of the Roman Empire, but we have no records of any

⁵⁶ Ibid., §16, 230–1.

⁵⁷ Ibid., §55, 261.

⁵⁸ Ibid., §56, 262.

martyrdoms. By the ninth century, Zoroastrian scholar-priests had written works which defended the articles of that faith against Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Manichean attacks, notably the *Dēnkard*⁵⁹ and *Škand Gumānīg Wizār*,⁶⁰ but these are of an entirely different genre, being reflective, theological works. Moreover, and most importantly, by then Zoroastrianism and Christianity were no longer such a threat to one another. It has been suggested that the synodical statements quoted above suggest that both churches were aware of the dangers of boundary crossing going on in their respective congregations – indeed, otherwise the ‘Magians’ would not have even been mentioned in these documents. The evidence of the martyrdoms is more seductive, yet one must be judicious in handling these texts, as with all hagiographical writing. Though there are historically significant elements present in the texts, they have to be seen in the light of the dominant intention and style of the genre and interpreted accordingly.

⁵⁹ Especially the third book of the *Dēnkard*, translated by J. de Menasce, *Le troisième livre du Dēnkard* (Bibliothèque des oeuvres classiques persanes, Paris: Klincksieck, 1973).

⁶⁰ Translated by J. de Menasce, *Une apologetique mazdēenne du IX^e siècle: Škand-gumānīk vičār* (Fribourg-en-Suisse, 1945).

