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# Intersection and Dependency of Christianity as a Minority Religion with and on Zoroastrian Dominance in the Sasanian Empire

MANFRED HUTTER

Summary – The Sasanian Empire, quite from the beginning, developed a strong interrelation between the politics and religion. From the last quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onwards, politics and religion grew into a ‘siblings status’. Zoroastrian priests gained a dominant role in political decision making. Thus, scopes of actions of religious minorities – Christians and others – were gradually limited their influence on norms and ethics in society declined.

For the paper, some questions of research should be investigated and (hopefully) answered: How dependent were Christians of norms and ethics of the Zoroastrian priests conflicting with their own religion norms? This question can be focused on a macro-, meso- and micro-level. (1) Conflicting norms and their impact on social action will be investigated on the macro-level: From the point of view of the dominating Zoroastrian policy, Christian norms and ethics were closely related to the East Roman Church and Empire. Opposite to this, Christians in the Sasanian Empire perceived themselves as part of the Empire. (2) On the meso-level, the situation grows even more complex. Scopes of agency of the Christian minorities that differed in local and temporal perspectives will be in the focus on this level. (3) Since the 5<sup>th</sup> century, individuals from Christian background were able to launch careers at the Sasanian court, while those Christians having converted from Zoroastrianism sometimes were severely persecuted. Thus intersections, contacts and dependency varied on a sliding scale.

## (1) CHRISTIANS IN IRAN: THE GENERAL BACKGROUND

The Sasanian Empire, quite from the beginning, developed a strong interrelation between politics and religion. From the last quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onwards, politics and religion grew into a “siblings’ status”. Zoroastrian priests gained a dominant role in political decision making. Though the literary form is from a later – Islamic – period, the contents of the so-called “Letter of Tansar” clearly refer to this. In this letter, Tansar, the chief

*hērbēd* of the Sasanian king Ardaxšīr (226–241), replies to a former vassal king of the Parthians who complained that the Sasanians destroyed the former religious traditions of the Parthians as follows:<sup>1</sup>

Do not marvel at my zeal and ardour for promoting order in the world, that the foundations of the laws of the faith may be firm. For Church and State are born of one womb, joined together and never to be sundered.

Therefore, the religious reforms of Zoroastrianism undertaken by the priest on behalf of Ardaxšīr, are not only a religious restoration of religion, but also an action for propagating and stabilising the newly emerging Sasanian Empire. So Zoroastrians – that is mainly their priests – started to play an important role within the state. During the reign of Šābuhr I the number of Christians, who had lived in Syria and Mesopotamia since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and within the borders of the Sasanian Empire, increased due to Šābuhr’s political and military encounters with the Romans and the on-going deportation of many Christians to the Sasanian Empire.<sup>2</sup> Towards the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Zoroastrian priest Kerđīr not only presents an overview of the religious pluralism of Iran, but also clearly notices his own restrictive view about non-Zoroastrian religions. In his inscription at the famous Ka’ba-ye Zardošt in Naqš-e Rostam he tells about his zeal for his religion and his persecution of other religions as follows:<sup>3</sup>

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 creed of Ahreman and the deus was driven out of the land and deprived of credence. And Jews and Buddhists and Brahmans and Aramaic and Greek-speaking Christians and Baptisers and Manicheans 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Boyce (1984: 109). On the relationship between politics and religion see also Hutter (2019: 206f.) with further bibliographical references.

<sup>2</sup> On the spread of Christianity in Iran cf. Chaumont (1988); also Frenschkowski (2015: 464–469). For the deportation of Greek speaking Christians to Iranian areas in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century see Jullien (2006: 110–113).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Boyce (1984: 112). The translation “Aramaic and Greek-speaking Christians” refers to the deported Christians from the Roman Empire and the “local” Syriac Christians of the western parts of the Sasanian Empire, cf. with further literature Hutter (2018: 102); Brock (2008: 65f.).

We have no direct sources if or how Kerdīr's stance against religious pluralism resulted in active and real persecutions of Christians, but this propagandistic text makes it obvious that the scope of actions of religious minorities – Christians and others – was gradually limited and their influence on norms and ethics in Sasanian society became or was weak. One passage of the Dēnkard mentions that both Šābuhr II (4<sup>th</sup> century) and Khosrow I (6<sup>th</sup> century) were actively fostering their religion.<sup>4</sup> Šābuhr is eager to stop the propagation of the bad religion (*agdēn*): After having been informed about this religion, he judges – most probably due to the interference of the priest Ādurbād – that wrong religions cannot be tolerated anymore. In a similar way, Khosrow also fosters the “good religion” and supports the *mobedān*'s fight against heresies.

Despite this limited situation the available sources show some dynamics of religious contacts.<sup>5</sup> Zoroastrian texts in Middle Persian and Christian sources in Syriac and Greek present the point of view of various agents – Zoroastrian priests, Christian clergy-men – and reports by Romans about Christianity in the “foreign land of the Persians” of course have different positions in presenting Christianity in the Sasanian Empire. Looking at these different sources, we clearly not only find multiple contacts between the “Zoroastrian State” and the “Christian Church” – thus also posing a problem to Tansar's idea that the state and the religion are siblings – but we also see a plurality within Iranian Christianity and the necessity to look at social differences. “Iranian” Christianity in the Sasanian Empire was a mixture of people of different backgrounds: the most important group were the Syriac Christians as part of the autochthonic population in the western parts of the empire – that is, a group with its own identity differentiating itself from the Greek Church in the Eastern Roman realm. But due to the military campaigns against the Roman Empire Greek speaking Christians also came to Iran – with a Greek cultural background and focussing on theological differences against the “Syriac” Christianity – at the latest starting with the various Christian synods in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> In later centuries, maybe with seizable numbers only starting in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, converts from Zoroastrianism to Christianity also added to the plurality of Christianity in Iran – partly upholding traditions from

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<sup>4</sup> See DkM 413.7ff. with the translation of Zaehner (1955: 7–9); see also Asmussen (1962: 10); Frenschkowski (2015: 472).

<sup>5</sup> See the articles in Herman (2014) and the collection of papers by Gignoux (2014). For the spreading of Christianity in the Sasanian history see the information provided by Frenschkowski (2015: 457–475).

<sup>6</sup> See Jullien (2006: 129–136) for some differences between “Iranian” and “Greek” Christianity.

their original Zoroastrian milieu which might have brought slight tensions with Syriac Christians on the one side, and with cultural interactions and integration of Christianity to Iranian traditions on the other side.

Thus one has to ask how large was the Iranian impact on Christians in Iran. Though only poorly preserved we must not underestimate the importance of the translation of the Bible into Middle Persian. In his “Homily to the Gospel of John” (PG 59.32) John Chrysostom mentions that the doctrines of Christ had been translated into the language of the Persians. Several decades later, Theodoret of Cyrus wrote that the teachings of the Apostles and the Prophets had been translated for all the languages under the sun, also into the language spoken by the Persians (PG 83.1945).<sup>7</sup> But the only extant portion of the Middle Persian Bible are the sections of the so-called Pahlavi Psalter, found in the ruins of a Christian monastery in Bulayīq in Eastern Turkestan (now in the northwest of the People’s Republic of China) which might have already been translated in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century – or in case Bishop Ma’na is the translator, as suggested by K. Thomas, the translation can only be done in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> The available manuscript of this Psalm-book also includes some canones of Mār Abā (died 552), so we can assume that this book was also used for studying the psalms and Christianity including Church law, maybe also as a first study tool for converts from Zoroastrianism. That the Bible was known in Middle Persian, also becomes obvious from quotations of and allusions to Biblical texts in the Zoroastrian treatise *Škand Gumānīg Wīzār*, especially in Mardān-Farrox’s refutation of the Jews (chapters 13–14) and Christians (chapter 15).<sup>9</sup> For the anti-Jewish section Mardān-Farrox relied most probably on a Jewish translation which originated

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<sup>7</sup> These references of course refer to Christian translations of the Bible. But there might also have been Middle Persian translations of the (Hebrew) Bible by Jews in the Sasanian time. Many centuries later the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides still remembers that Persian was one of the languages into which the Torah had been translated already before the coming of Muhammad; see Thomas (2015: 16); Panaino (2007: 74).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas (2015: 37–41); see further Baumstark (1922: 105) and Durkin-Meisterernst (2006). Only Psalms 94–99, 118 and 121–136, based on the Syriac Pešitta, are preserved. – Besides this Middle Persian translation of the Psalms, there are also some (younger) Sogdian and Early New Persian translations of the Bible available; see Sims-Williams (2014: 10f.); Barbatī (2016: 15f.), both with references. But these translations originated in Eastern Iran – and probably only after the collapse of the Sasanian Empire.

<sup>9</sup> Shapira (2001); Panaino (2007); Gignoux (2008); Thrope (2012) and Cereti (2014) focussed on several passages in recent studies.

still in the Sasanian period, and for the use of quotations from the New Testament, it is obvious that Mardān-Farrox's quotations originate from more than one Middle Persian source. While generally it seems quite reasonable to assume that the main source text for the New Testament might have been the Pešitta, some passages in the Middle Persian text are closer to the Vetus Syra or to the Diatessaron.<sup>10</sup>

Bishop Ma<sup>c</sup>na of Shirāz – like several other Syriac bishops – is also credited with the translation of Syriac Christian and liturgical texts. The catholicos Aqaq (died 495/96) has also translated texts about Christian doctrines on behalf of the Sasanian ruler Kawād I. (cf. PO 7.117f.). Another – at least indirect – evidence for Middle Persian texts (or quotations) of the Bible are the Law Books of the metropolitan bishops Šem<sup>c</sup>ōn of Rew-Ardašīr (7<sup>th</sup> century) and Īšō<sup>c</sup>bōxt (end of 8<sup>th</sup> century). Both texts are only available in Syriac as the original Middle Persian books had been translated and are lost nowadays.<sup>11</sup> While both Christian authors are deeply involved into Sasanian law, they always support the arguments with Biblical references – which were also written in Middle Persian in the original text. Such references make it obvious that Christianity in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Iran interacted with Iranian culture and language, even if the Syriac language and culture were the dominant milieu of Christianity there. This short overview of the relevant source materials shows that we cannot take Christianity of Iran as a unified tradition but when we ask for interaction and dependencies, we should have in mind that various traditions of Christianity – that is of Greek, Syriac or Iranian backgrounds – also resulted in different ways of interaction. And regarding the “siblings’ theory” this also leads to different forms of dependency as Christians have to define their position of dependence or independence from the “state” and “religion” – which is Zoroastrian religion.

## (2) CONFLICTING NORMS AND THEIR SOCIAL IMPACT

For Christians, norms are first of all taken from the Bible, and these Biblical laws and norms are also the base of some Christian Law Books, which were mentioned above. Sometimes one can observe that some of the laws show

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<sup>10</sup> On the quotation of the “Our Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:9ff.; Luke 11:2ff.), see Panaino (2007: 74).

<sup>11</sup> Harrak (2019); see also Sachau (1914). – See on some connections between Christian law books and Middle Persian law (and Early Islamic law) the recent studies of Scheunchen (2019) and Payne (2015).

intersections with Zoroastrian laws, so at least some Christians have not seen unsurmountable conflicts between their own Christian norms and the Zoroastrian or Iranian norms in some situations. This might have been the case both among Syriac Christians living in contact with Iranian culture since the late Parthian period, but also with those Christians who had converted to Christianity from Zoroastrianism. But from the point of view of the dominating Zoroastrian policy, Christian norms and ethics were closely related to the Eastern Roman Church and Empire – and maybe Greek Christians also saw a rising conflict between their own laws (based on “Greek” Christianity) and the “foreign” Iranian norms. So one has to avoid to simplify or generalise the possible different levels of “conflicting” norms.

That such different norms lead to conflicts between Christians and Zoroastrians, can be seen from several accounts about Christian martyrs in the Sasanian Empire. Referring to the acts of bishop ʿAqqebšmāc (died in 379), Peter Bruns summarised these conflicting topics mentioned in the acts which Zoroastrians oppose against Christians a few years ago as follows:<sup>12</sup> The Christians venerate only one god; they do not pray to the Sun and the Fire; they pollute water; the ascetic lifestyle of monks and priests and the avoidance of military service disturb social peace; they ignore dietary rules; the interment of the dead pollutes the purity of earth; they believe that also noxious creatures have been created by god; they say that the Zoroastrians’ sacred scriptures are used for magical spells.

From the Syriac description of the life<sup>13</sup> of Mār Abā who was the catholicos of the Church of the East from 540–552, we learn other arguments which the *mowbedān mowbed*, Dād-Ohrmizd, raises against the catholicos: Mār Abā destroys the religion of the magians which has been created by the god Ohrmazd and which is the main foundation of the Sasanian Empire. Further he converts a growing number of Persians to Christianity and does not honour

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<sup>12</sup> Bruns (2014: 52) writes as follows: “Die Verehrung des einen Gottes, die Weigerung, Sonne und Feuer anzubeten, die Verunreinigung des Wassers, die Askese der christlichen Bundessöhne und Kleriker, die Kriegsdienstverweigerung, die Verwerfung der Speisegebote, die Erdbestattung der Toten, die Vorstellung, die ahrimanischen Kreaturen wie die Kriechtiere etc. gingen auf den einen (guten) Schöpfer zurück, sowie schließlich der von den heiligen Schriften ausgehende ‘Schadenszauber’.” – A German translation of these acts was done by Braun (1915: 116–138).

<sup>13</sup> German translation by Braun (1915: 188–220). New edition and French translation by Jullien, F. (2015). On Mār Abā’s contacts with (and critique of) Zoroastrianism see Hutter (2003).

the Zoroastrian priests and officials at the court anymore. Mār Abā therefore must be a friend of the Byzantine Empire, but he also becomes a threat for Sasanian society and politics when he interferes in juridical matters and settles lawsuits concerning Christians, which also clashes with the (financial) interests of the *mowbed*. As a consequence, in 542/43, the Zoroastrian priests forced the catholicos to an interrogation. Here again he is accused of converting Zoroastrians to Christianity by two high officials.<sup>14</sup> Another topic of dispute is the Zoroastrian *xwēdōdah*, the next-of-kin-marriage which Mār Abā – using his authority as catholicos – forbids for Christians who had converted from their Zoroastrian religion but still stick to this practice.<sup>15</sup> In the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century the catholicos applies to King Khosrow.<sup>16</sup> Noteworthy are two charges which the king raises against Mār Abā: He prohibits Christians from practising next-of-kin-marriage and he holds juridical authority over the Christian community and disregards the magians' authority. These charges also make obvious that conflicting norms have a social impact as they lead to disagreement among the members of a society. And taking the idea seriously that “state” and “religion” are siblings, then the catholicos' authority in matters of law cannot be accepted by the Zoroastrian priesthood. – We could easily go on in mentioning further points of criticism against Christianity raised by Zoroastrians; a few more were added by Marco Frenschkowski:<sup>17</sup> He correctly notices that dualism is no central topic in the polemics and disputes, but Christians strongly oppose the divine nature of the king, contradicting the dogma of god's transcendence.

Even if aspects of Zoroastrian law were partly similar to Christian laws as the law books of Šem<sup>o</sup>n and Īšō<sup>c</sup>bōxt show some differences cannot be reconciled, and they remain disputed points throughout Sasanian times. One of the main points which could not be accepted by Christian law was the Zoroastrian institution of the *stūrīh*, the “substitute successorship”<sup>18</sup> and even more the next-of-kin-marriage (*xwēdōdah*). Mār Abā's encounter with

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<sup>14</sup> Adorpareh bears the title *šahr dādwar*, the (highest) “judge of the country”, see Gignoux (1983: 255). The other official is called “*rād* of (the province) Persia”; his religio-administrative function seems to be important, but is far from being clear, see Gignoux (2014: 532f.).

<sup>15</sup> Braun (1915: 200–202 § 17); see Braun (1900: 131f.).

<sup>16</sup> Braun (1915: 210f. §§ 27–38).

<sup>17</sup> Frenschkowski (2015: 462–466); see also Rezanian (2015).

<sup>18</sup> On *stūrīh* see Scheunichen (2019: 51–53).



Zoroastrianism concentrates on marriage which was dealt with by the catholicos at the synod, but there also exists a law book written by the catholicos with paragraphs concerning marriage. It is worth mentioning that Mār Abā is regarded as the starting point of Syriac literature on law.<sup>19</sup> Besides the general importance of marriage in Christianity following Biblical law, our sources related to Mār Abā have again their special background in Zoroastrian society. In the description of his life, the catholicos is accused not only of prohibiting Christians from practising next-of-kin-marriage as is done by Zoroastrians, but also of being eager to oblige his bishops to let nobody remain within the church whose marriage is not accepted. Obviously this refers to a kind of “Zoroastrianised Christianity” – and in his dispute with Mār Abā<sup>20</sup> the high-ranking *mowbedān mowbed* suggests to the catholicos that he should leave those Christians unharmed who already practised – as Zoroastrians – next-of-kin-marriage and did not want to abandon their custom and divorce after becoming Christians. But the catholicos only answers in this dispute that he cannot change divine law; nobody practising this Zoroastrian custom can therefore remain a member of the church. For Mār Abā it was necessary to refute that practice because the Zoroastrians founded next-of-kin-marriage on their mythological tradition and the creation of the world.<sup>21</sup> In his treatise on laws concerning marriage and sexual intercourse,<sup>22</sup> Mār Abā quotes a Zoroastrian tradition that creation came into existence according to the sexual intercourse of Ohrmazd with close female relatives; therefore all people who like Ohrmazd also marry close female relatives, are slaves of the devil and cannot share the community of the true god. Whoever leads such a conjugal life and has sexual intercourse must be divorced within a maximum time-span of one year – otherwise he and his wife will be banned from all contacts with the Christian community.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, Mār Abā was not the only Christian author who opposed this practice fiercely. Already Theodoret of Cyrus in the 4<sup>th</sup> century had handled

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<sup>19</sup> See Sachau (1914: xxii–xxvii); Scheunchen (2019: 37f.).

<sup>20</sup> Braun (1915: 202 § 17).

<sup>21</sup> On *xwēdōdah* in general see the study by Macuch (1991); further Scheunchen (2019: 54f.). On the cosmological foundation of such a marriage see also Panaino (2008: 77–83).

<sup>22</sup> See Sachau (1914: 265); the translation has been reproduced by Zaehner (1955: 437f.); see further Braun (1900: 143f. n. 2).

<sup>23</sup> That this was a central topic for the catholicos is further visible in one of his letters, see Braun (1915: 131f.), and in two canones prohibiting such a marriage, see Braun (1915: 140, 143); see further Panaino (2008: 74f.); Scheunchen (2019: 68f.).

this topic:<sup>24</sup> But contrary to Mār Abā who relates this custom to cosmology, Theodoret does not see these connections, but simply refers to it as an example of lust of the Persians who are worse than other heathens who – in case they have desire to copulate with their sister, mother or daughter – can resist such a perverted practice (affect. III 96f). He and contemporary Christians often refer to this Zoroastrian practice as a topic in separating their own values from those of Zoroastrians. But Theodoret appreciates those Iranians who have left the “Law of Zoroaster” after accepting the gospel and then live in chastity according to Christian norms (affect. IX 33).

That Christians do not venerate the fire is mentioned several times in the acts of Persian martyrs. As we know from some sources this is not only a theological point of discussion but it also leads to social unrest, especially when Christians – basing themselves on their own norms – destroy Zoroastrian places of worship. One such account – also the reason for a persecution of Christians at the end of the reign of Yazdgird I (r. 399–420)<sup>25</sup> – is documented by Theodoret in his “History of the Church”.<sup>26</sup> A certain bishop, Mār °Abdā, destroyed a Zoroastrian fire temple (πυρεῖον). When the magians accused him at the royal court, the Sasanian king imposed the death penalty on the bishop who refused to rebuild the fire temple as compensation. Some other Christians were also sentenced to death then. Theodoret’s reaction to this is interesting: On the one hand he does not accept Mār °Abdā’s action, because also the apostle Paul did not destroy the temples in Athens when he was there (h.e. V 39,3f). But Theodoret appreciates the bishop’s refusal to rebuild the temple – because it was a place where the Zoroastrians venerated the fire as divine<sup>27</sup> – and this is idolatry incompatible with the veneration of the one and only god. Also in the Acts of Narsai, another martyr during the reign of Yazdgird I, the discussion about the destruction of a fire-temple plays an important role.<sup>28</sup> Earlier this temple had been a church, which was built by the former Zoroastrian Ādur-Farro who had converted to Christianity; but after his return to the faith of his birth, he also took the church and changed it

<sup>24</sup> Hutter (2002: 289).

<sup>25</sup> See Colpe (1983: 939f.); Herman (2016: xx).

<sup>26</sup> See Hutter (2002: 288). On the episode see Theodoret, *historia ecclesiastica*, V 39 and the Acts of Mār Abda, translated by Braun (1915: 139–141); see also Bruns (2014: 57f.).

<sup>27</sup> In the Acts of Mār °Abdā the magians impeach him and his fellow Christians, because they blaspheme against the Zoroastrian gods and they ridicule the fire and the water; see Braun (1915: 139).

<sup>28</sup> For edition and translation see Herman (2016: 2–27) and the German translation of Braun (1915: 142–149). – For a short discussion see Herman (2016: xvii–xxv).

to a Zoroastrian temple. When Narsai saw this, he extinguished the fire and destroyed the cultic paraphernalia of the Zoroastrians. Narsai then is arrested by Yazdgird's authorities, and when he refused to substitute the temple, he was sentenced to death. – Mār ʿAbdā's and Narsai's stories are close to each other and in both cases one can see the conflicting dispute about venerating "foreign" or "false" gods (the fire) – based on Biblical traditions and polemics against "false gods", also as a response to the Zoroastrian criticism of Christians who do not venerate the fire.

Further conflicting values can be seen in the disputes about the interment of the dead – thereby polluting the purity of earth as Zoroastrians say.<sup>29</sup> Theodoret opposes this Zoroastrian custom saying that they expose their dead to dogs and birds of prey; here the Christian author uses already long-known arguments from Greek literature against the Zoroastrian practices of the disposal of their dead. But he also adds a theological note to his arguments (affect. IX 33): Zoroastrians who have converted to Christianity now bury their dead in the graveyard and they are no longer scared for polluting the earth. Because not the act of burial and the contact with the dead is a reason of pollution or a reason to be afraid of death, but burying the dead ones is an act of piety – fear is only suitable towards the judgement of Christ, but not towards dead matter. So Theodoret counteracts the Zoroastrian idea of purity and discards it by referring to Christian ethics instead of keeping purity regulations.<sup>30</sup> But it is also visible that Theodoret refers to Christian values – contrary to Zoroastrian values – to share these values with the Zoroastrians in order to make them accept the gifts which Christ has bestowed on his followers (*Historia ecclesiastica*, V 39,19f.).

### (3) SELF-PERCEPTION OF A MINORITY IN OPPOSITION TO THE STATE-CHURCH-RELATIONSHIP

The conflicts just mentioned may not only show some "internal" differentiation of Christian agents – with pro and contra arguments of taking Iranian traditions into account as a Christian – but they also show the differences between kinds of self-perception(s) of the Christian minority vs. the perception of the Zoroastrian priests. Against the background of the Sasanian "state-religion relationship" conflicting interest in norms could occur. As some of these conflicts were already mentioned above, here I only want to

<sup>29</sup> Hutter (2002: 289).

<sup>30</sup> On Zoroastrian purity laws see Hutter (2019: 62–64).

refer to some theological topics as a matter of dispute arising from a Christian self-perception contrary to Zoroastrian perceptions. I restrict myself to three short examples.

In Dēnkard 5.23, Bōxt-Mārē asks the following question:<sup>31</sup>

Why did god proclaim this religion in unknown and hidden utterances, known as Avesta?  
Why did he not consider (to bring) a complete written text, but ordered to memorise it (only) orally.

The answer given by Ādur-Farrobag to Bōxt-Mārē (Dk 5.24) mentions the higher value of the oral text compared to the written text, and also the high importance of the Zand compared to the Avesta.<sup>32</sup> But on a level of self-perception we can say that this is a clash of the Christian understanding of the importance of the Bible as the basis of values and norms, being understandable to everybody, while the Avesta is “unknown and hidden” to the general audience. From the Christian point of view this results in superiority over Zoroastrian priests – despite their claim of the truth of the Avesta. Another criticism of questioning the value of the Avesta – and thus the relevance of Zoroastrian values – is expressed by Christians who oppose the magians who only “murmur” (*tamtem*) their scriptures, as mentioned several times in Syriac texts.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, Zoroastrian criticism of some Christian doctrines also indirectly helps to understand the Christian self-representation better. The anti-Christian section in the Škand Gumānīg Wīzār – although written only in the Islamic period – sheds some light on it: One of the topics discussed there is the virgin birth (ŠGW 15.5ff.) questioned by the Zoroastrian author who has taken it most probably from Jewish anti-Christian polemics.<sup>34</sup> Taking into account the generally good contacts between the Jewish community and the Zoroastrian authorities during the Sasanian era, one can assume that the motif presented by Mardān-Farrox in the ŠGW against the credibility of Christians and Jesus’ origins gives a hint to Christian superiority: The miraculous birth of Jesus is a proof of their superior religion compared to Zoroastrians. Jesus, born in a wondrous way from a human mother, does not pollute god’s purity

<sup>31</sup> Amouzgar – Tafazzoli (2000: 72f.); see Bailey (1943: 162); Gignoux (2014: 429f.).

<sup>32</sup> Bailey (1943: 164).

<sup>33</sup> See Gignoux (2014: 584f.). – On the way of learning the Avesta by heart and the Christians’ claim of superiority of learning and studying the (written) Bible see further Dillely (2014: xxif.).

<sup>34</sup> See Hutter (2018: 99f.).

or reduce god's divinity, as the Zoroastrians suppose according to Mardān-Farrox's words. He argues against this Christian doctrine – from his strictly dichotomic viewpoint of contrasting purity and pollution – that god would never leave his heavenly throne to descend to a dark and impure womb of a human being (ŠGW 15.31ff.). Further, Mardān-Farrox's discussion – and rejection – of Jesus' divinity is connected with such an argument. If Jesus indeed is divine, he would never have died, as everyone being born like Jesus also must die. But god cannot die and therefore Jesus cannot be god's offspring (ŠGW 15.29f.). – As there is no Christian response to Mardān-Farrox's arguments, we can only hypothetically suppose that the presentation of their own doctrine by Christians dealt with Jesus as the “true” son of god – contrasting Zoroastrian doctrine that Ohrmazd also had sons, e.g. the Fire. The central theme that Jesus is god's son is referred to in several Zoroastrian passages, again combined with the discussion that god – contrary to the death of the Messiah – cannot die. Manuščihr (9<sup>th</sup> century) focusses in his treatise “Dadestān ī dēnīg” (36.76–79) on this issue,<sup>35</sup> but says that Christians contradict each other. As god can never die, those Christians who say that Jesus as son of god was crucified and died on the cross are liars, and other Christians say the opposite. These discrepancies among Christians are for Manuščihr a suitable proof of the truth and superiority of the Mazdayasnian religion over Christianity.<sup>36</sup>

Such examples clearly show the conflicts of Zoroastrian vs. Christian self-representation of their respective doctrines which can hardly be reconciled with each other. From these different doctrines both religions deduced their norms and values which set them apart from each other in the social field with the minority in a weak and dependent position against the Zoroastrian “religion of the state”.

#### (4) CRITICISM OF CHRISTIANITY BY ZOROASTRIANS AS A FORM OF DOMINANCE AND SUPERIORITY

The Zoroastrians' self-representation as adherents of an “Iranian” religion led themselves to the separation from non-Iranian traditions which often resulted in the efforts of the priesthood to prohibit their co-religionists of apostasy and

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<sup>35</sup> See the edition and translation of Jaafari-Dehaghi (1998: 138–141).

<sup>36</sup> See further Dk 3.40, translated by de Menasce (1973: 53); see also Hutter (2018: 101).

contacts with un-believers. Dēnkard 3.140 describes this situation as follows.<sup>37</sup>

An exposition of the good religion about the union and the separation—that is, there are many forms of union and separation. One (example) of them (is that) among mankind, there is union in Iran because of (their) Iranian character, (and) the separation from non-Iranians because of (their) non-Iranian character. Another (example is that) in Iran, there is union among the followers of the Good Religion because of the law of the Good Religion, (and) there is separation from the infidels because of (their) law of evil religion. Another (example) among the followers of the Good Religion (is) the union among good people because of (their) benefactions and worship, (and) the separation from bad people because of (their) lack of benefactions and worship. Another (example) surpassing these three (is) the union with the gods by dint of worship which is also benefactions, (and) the separation from the demons by dint of the lack of worship which is also a lack of benefactions.

It is noteworthy to observe the different grades of union and separation: between Iranians and Non-Iranians; between people of the good religion (*hudēn*) and those of bad religion (*agdēn*); between people of the good religion and evil-doers or heretics in it. The author thus makes a difference along ethnic lines as well as inter-religious or intra-religious lines and arguments – giving a hierarchy: Iran and Non-Iran are separated and within Iran the separation lies first of all between Zoroastrianism and other religions which are subordinated as “bad religion(s)” to the good religion – which is a stronger case of Zoroastrians’ superiority and dominance over “un-believers” (which means adherents of other religions) than the inferiority of heretics within the own Zoroastrian fold. This form of dominance is – in my point of view – the result of the “siblings’ theory” that the Iranian state and the Iranian religion must be on a par like twins – leaving no way for Non-Iranian ethnic groups (say e.g. “Syriacs” or “Romans”) and no way for Non-Iranian religions (say e.g. “Christians”<sup>38</sup>). This parallelism of ethnicity and religion is also reflected in Dēnkard 3.29, where the religion of the Messiah is connected with “Rome” (i.e. the Byzantine Empire).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Quoted from Mokhtarian (2015: 112); see also the translation by de Menasce (1973: 145).

<sup>38</sup> The same – of course – can be said of other religions, e.g. Hindus, Buddhists or Jews as can be seen from Kerdīr’s inscription mentioned above or also – in later times – of Arabs (*tāzīg*), see Mokhtarian (2015: 100f.). – The case of Manicheans in Iran is more complex, as they can – generally speaking – also be taken as Non-Iranians (cf. Dk. 3.29 when Mani’s religion is geographically linked to Turkestan) but more often they are close to the third category of “intra-religious deviation” as they are “heretics” (*zandīg*) for the reason of presenting their own deviant interpretation (*zand*) of the (“good” – Iranian/Zoroastrian) religion.

<sup>39</sup> Translated by de Menasce (1973: 46f.); see further Frenschkowski (2015: 472f.).

Taking Christianity as a “foreign” – and thus inferior – religion, conversions of Christians to Zoroastrianism are not really welcome by the priesthood. Of course there were single cases that a Christian joined the Zoroastrian faith, but such a person remained a “Zoroastrian of second rank”. Scepticism against such converts are reflected in some texts as can be seen in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Hērbedestān* which discusses some aspects of the conversion of an “infidel” (*agdēn*) who had come to the “good religion” (*wehdēnīh*).<sup>40</sup> One of the questions deals with the problem if the son of a convert is allowed to pursue his study of the Zoroastrian religion. Another question relates to the topic if the wife of such a convert is to be divorced and if her husband is further responsible to care for her.<sup>41</sup>

And his wife is not dismissed from wifehood, for proper care of her is endorsed by (religious) judgements which are not less valid (than any contrary judgements); but he may not have intercourse with her, for that is sinful. ... And he is obliged to provide sustenance for her, and he may not leave this to the Christians; thus her sustenance is our responsibility.

For the relation between Zoroastrianism and Christianity this passage tells three aspects: The provision of sustenance for the wife from the side of the Zoroastrian community seems to show that one wants to avoid that this wife remains in close connection to her old religion(ists). But one can also deduce from the passage that there is no wish for the conversion of the wife to Zoroastrianism. And at last, one also is eager to care for the sustenance to avoid that Christians do this and thus could claim their moral superiority over Zoroastrianism. This short passage makes the dominance and the position of subalterns in Iran obvious again.

#### (5) CONVERSION, INTERACTION AND EXCHANGE: LIBERALISATION OF DEPENDENCY

A visible change of the subaltern situation of Christians started in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, when individuals from Christian backgrounds were able to launch careers at the Sasanian court. From the analysis of seals and seal impressions<sup>42</sup> we can learn that Christianity at that time started to become an important

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<sup>40</sup> See Mokhtarian (2015: 106f.).

<sup>41</sup> Quoted from Kotwal – Kreyenbroek (1992: 63 § 12.3).

<sup>42</sup> See Lerner (1977); Gyselen (2006: 17–78). – On the growth of Christianity see also Frenschkowski (2015: 465).

factor of religious and cultural pluralism in the Sasanian Empire,<sup>43</sup> a situation which lasted until the early Islamic period of Iran. But at the same time Christians who had left their original Zoroastrian faith for the “new” religion were sometimes persecuted severely. Thus intersections, contacts and dependency varied on a sliding scale. These interactions – and the growing pluralism of religions – also lead to new developments within Zoroastrianism by sharpening the differentiation between the “right” and the “wrong” teachings and doctrine and by creating some kind of uniformness of the “good religion”. This again resulted in tensions between Zoroastrian authorities and converts to Christianity and the persecution of some high-ranking Christian converts in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, because an apostate from Zoroastrianism was considered a sinner who had to be punished or – at least – theologically rejected.<sup>44</sup>

The conversion to Christianity in these two centuries started to challenge the Zoroastrians’ claim of superiority and exclusiveness, especially in cases when high-ranking *mowbedān* and well educated lay-persons left the religion of their forefathers to join the “bad religion” from the point of view of Zoroastrian authorities. The separation of the good religion from the bad religion and the function of the good (Iranian and Zoroastrian) religion to stabilise the society and uphold Iranian identity became shattered by such conversions. As a result, the disputes of Zoroastrians with Christianity also reached a legal level when apostasy became considered a crime and sin leading to death (*margarzān*) – not only in a theological sense that after death such a person will go to hell, but also by death penalty. This kind of punishment – as can be easily seen from the Acts of Syriac martyrs – was in several cases executed. But it is noteworthy that obviously many Zoroastrian priests and judges were not deeply interested in creating martyrdom, but in keeping the superior “Iranianness” alive – that means to struggle more for re-conversion of former Zoroastrians than of executing them. So many of these Syriac texts show attempts of the Iranian authorities to reconcile the apostate

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<sup>43</sup> Also Judaism was part of this pluralism – at least in the core areas of Iran; on the Jewish situation see e.g. the overview by Neusner (1983: 909–923); see also the detailed study of Jewish-Iranian interactions of Secunda (2014). – The situation of the Manicheans differs as they heavily lost ground since the 5<sup>th</sup> century in the Iranian core lands; see in general Hutter (2015: 479f.).

<sup>44</sup> See Mokhtarian (2015: 113f.) who also mentions that this theological judgement about apostates also lived on until the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when the rising number of converts to Islam (instead of Christianity) became a severe challenge for the religion.



again with the “good religion” – often through promises of worldly benefits (which of course also were rejected by the martyrs-to-be) and through the delay of the execution, because the martyr-to-be is often brought back to jail after an interrogation.<sup>45</sup> Also later texts – like the *Dadestān ī dēnīg* (ch. 40.5)<sup>46</sup> – discuss the possibility that a convert renounces the “bad religion” and re-converts to Zoroastrianism; but the acceptance of such a re-conversion can be combined either with some kind of atonement or with physical penance imposed on this “sinner” by the religious authorities. Even if this section of the *Dadestān ī dēnīg* refers to the Post-Sasanian era when – because of the political dominance of Islamic authorities – Zoroastrian priests could no longer execute the death penalty, it shows the ways how Zoroastrian priesthood was more interested in the re-conversion than in the execution of sinners. Only persons – after many efforts which had no success in re-conversion – did not renounce Christianity were finally considered as fiends of the religion belonging to the realm of Ahreman. One clearly symbolic (and for Zoroastrians impressive) example tells how the corpse of an executed Christian was fed to rats, because this Christian can be compared to rats – thus both being creatures of Ahreman.<sup>47</sup> But also for Christians such a symbolism made sense within the literary genre of the acts of martyrs: The martyr shows his firm and superior belief not only through his rejection of the allurements of material goods, but also the kind of cruelty by feeding the rats shows the moral inferiority of Zoroastrianism in the eyes of the Christian authors.

So we can conclude: The struggle between the two religions is always fostered by the ideal which religion is superior to the other. For Zoroastrians their superiority is combined with the idea of Iranness which by itself includes that the “Non-Iranness” or foreignness of Christianity is inferior. Besides this the siblings’ status of religion and state during the Sasanian period also presents the framework that everything outside this model is marginalised – in theory at least. In practice the situation was more complex as pluralism of religions and interactions of religions always challenge such theoretical concepts that a minority is exclusively dependent on the majority. To keep Christians in dependency surely was of interest for the political and religious

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<sup>45</sup> For the magians’ attempts to reconvert apostates see Rezaia (2015: 174, 177); Dilley (2014: xxif.).

<sup>46</sup> On the whole chapter 40 and the discussion of apostasy, renouncement and re-conversion, see Jaafari-Dehaghi (1998:168–171, 212–214).

<sup>47</sup> See Frenschkowski (2015: 471).

authorities in the Sasanian era – as long as they could take “Christians” as a Non-Iranian entity. This dependency became questioned when Christians – especially converts from Zoroastrian background – tried to keep some Iranian traditions also after their conversion – thus being Iranian and Christian, and therefore no longer accepting a subaltern status as Christians as an inferior “Non-Iranian” minority in the state.

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