



CHRISTIANITY VI. IN PERSIAN LITERATURE

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vi. In Persian Literature

References to Christianity can be found in Persian literature from the earliest period. Christian beliefs and institutions are frequently mentioned in various genres (lyric, epic, didactic, mystic), and many works contain allusions to legends of Christian saints, martyrs, and ascetics.

Some of the references and vocabulary, particularly those taken from the Qur'ān and related literature (e.g., commentaries on the Qur'ān) and from pre-Islamic Arabic poetry by Christian Arabs, reflect the Arab view of Christianity prevalent in Arabia, Yemen, Abyssinia, and Syria in the 6th and 7th centuries. Often they appear to have been connected with the apocryphal gospels, and sometimes they have a polemical tone, most notably when the Trinity and monotheism are involved. This material is among the legacies of Islam to the fund of Persian literature.

The Islamic heritage is not, however, the only source for the knowledge of Christian beliefs, institutions, behavior, and vocabulary mirrored in the Islamic literature of Persia. Christianity had a long history in pre-Islamic Persia, apparently beginning in the Parthian period (171 b.c.e.-224 c.e.; see [arsacids](#)). In the Sasanian period (224-650 c.e.), despite some intervals of harsh



persecution, Christian (mainly Nestorian) communities maintained church organizations with generally independent leadership in several regions of the empire (see i-iv, above). Memories of Christian activity in pre-Islamic Persia were an important factor shaping the understanding of Christian customs and institutions expressed in the Persian literature of the Islamic period. In addition, contacts with contemporary Christians living in Persia, Muslim propaganda and disputation with Christian theologians, and even indirect influences from gnostic and Manichean sources during the last two centuries of the Sasanian empire and the early centuries of Islam all had an impact. For example, in works like the *Dēnkard* and the *Škand-gumānīg wizār* reflections of the conflict between Christianity and the official Mazdean religion in Sasanian times throw light on how some terms were transmitted from pre-Islamic Persia.

Persian attitudes toward Christians and Christianity. Anti-Christian polemics can also be recognized in certain works written in the Islamic period, for example, Abu'l-Ma'ālī's *Bayān al-adyān* (comp. 475/1082-83) and Rāzī's *Tabšerat al-'awāmm* (first half of the 7th/13th century), but it seems that there was little hostility or fanatical opposition to the *ahl-e demma* (non-Muslims under Muslim protection) in Persia between the rise of the Samanids (204-395/819-1005) in Khorasan and Transoxania and the conquest of Persia by the Saljuqs in 429-47/1038-55. (On Christians in Persia in the first four centuries of the Islamic period, see Spuler, *Iran*, pp. 209-15).

Although Persia never faced any direct danger from the Crusades (488-690/1095-1291), the conquest of the holy land by European Christians in 492/1099 was deeply resented. This resentment was voiced in an Arabic *qaṣīda* by the contemporary poet Abu'l-Moẓaffar Abīvardī (quoted in Ebn al-Aṭīr, X, pp. 284-86), and the loss of Jerusalem was mentioned with sorrow in *Toḥfat al-molūk*, which has been attributed to Ġazālī (450-505/1058-1111; Forūzānfar, pp. 330-31). Neẓāmī (535-605/1140-1209) wrote scornfully of the "Franks in Palestine" (1316 Š./1937, p. 525), and Sa'dī (ca. 606-690/1208-91) expressed similar contempt and disgust in the story of his supposed capture by the Franks in the desert of Jerusalem (*Golestān*, chap. 2, anecdote 31). These expressions attest the impact of the Crusades in changing the relatively tolerant attitude of Muslims toward Christians that had prevailed in the early Islamic centuries.

The Il-khanid rulers of Persia (654-736/1256-1336) before Ġāzān Khan (694-703/1295-1304) were not Muslims; they and their officials established



links with both oriental and occidental Christians, and Christian rulers in Asia Minor and western Europe cherished hopes of an alliance with them against Islam (see Spuler, *Mongolen*³, pp. 198-235). Few traces of animosity against Christians can be found in the Persian literature of the period. In fact, it was in the reign of the Il-khanid Gaykātū (690-94/1291-95) that the *Diatessaron*, a harmony of the Gospels, was translated into Persian from Syriac by Īwannīs ‘Ezz-al-Dīn Moḥammad b. Moḏaffar of Tabrīz (see [bible vii. persian translations of the bible](#); on the dissemination of the *Diatessaron* and the Persian manuscript, see Messina). The fact that such a work could be undertaken at all suggests that the traditional tolerance of Christians still persisted in Persia in the Il-khanid period. The published text contains indications that there were large numbers of “baptized people” (*emādadārān*, i.e., Nestorians, Armenians, etc.), and Christian monasteries were to be found in several regions of Persia, from Māzandarān to Nišāpūr, Ṭūs, and Herat. It is possible that the Il-khanid policy of general toleration and the efforts of Christians (and Jews) to collaborate with Mongol rulers and governors against Islam inhibited expression of anti-Christian feelings in Persia under the early Il-khanids.

In the later Safavid period, after ‘Abbās I (r. 996-1038/1588-1629), and in post-Safavid times there appears to have been a relative decline in tolerance. One symptom was the appearance of polemical books refuting Christian teachings. ‘Abbās I favored his Armenian and Georgian subjects, granted licenses to foreign missionaries, and even discussed religion with them; he allowed almost continuous traffic of European merchants and travelers to and from Persia and exchanged diplomatic missions with royal courts of Europe, in the hope of forming alliances with them against the Ottoman empire. The Englishman Sir Anthony Sherley was included in one of the shah’s European missions in 1007/1598; another member of the same mission, Orūj Bīg Bayāt, defected to Spain in 1011/1602 and converted to Christianity, taking the name Don Juan. His memoirs were published in Spanish in 1013/1604 (tr. G. Le Strange, *Don Juan of Persia*, London, 1926; tr. M. Rajabnīā, *Don Žovān-e Īrānī*, Tehran, 1338 Š./1959; for ‘Abbās I’s dealings with his Christian subjects, Roman Catholic monks, and European states, see Falsafī, pp. 7-97). The freedom of activity granted by ‘Abbās I to such missionary orders as the [Carmelites](#), the [Capuchins](#), and the Augustinians aroused the sensitivities of the Islamic ‘*olamā*’ (religious scholars), who became apprehensive about the activities of Christians in general and European missionaries in particular (see viii, below).



Some of them wrote refutations of works in Persian by foreign missionaries, for example, *Ā'īna-ye ḥaqqnomā* (ca. 1018/1609) by Jerome Xavier (d. 1617). One of the most prominent polemicists was Sayyed Aḥmad 'Alawī (d. 1069/1658-59), a pupil of the Eṣfahānī philosopher Mīr(-e) Dāmād who wrote *Meṣqal-e ṣafā*. Works of this kind were both numerous and influential under the Safavids and remained so until late in the Qajar period. In the 13th/19th century several Protestant missionaries wrote works in Persian (see [conversions iii. to christianity \(protestant\)](#)): The Englishman Henry Martyn wrote *Mīzān al-ḥaqq*, (Shiraz, 1226/1811), the Swiss C. G. Pfander wrote a work also entitled *Mīzān al-ḥaqq* (2nd ed., London, 1862), and W. St. Clair-Tisdall, also an Englishman, wrote *Yanābī' al-Eslām* (Punjab, 1317/1899). Mollā Aḥmad Narāqī (d. 1244/1828-29), a prominent *mojtahed* (religious leader) of the early Qajar period wrote *Resāla-ye sayf al-omma* (lith. ed., Tehran, 1267/1850-51) in response to Martyn; Shaikh Ḥosayn b. 'Abd-al-'Alī Tūtūnčī Tabrīzī wrote *Ezālat al-wasāwes* (Tabrīz, 1351/1932-33) in reply to Pfander; and Shaikh Aḥmad Šāhrūdī wrote *Ezālat al-awhām fī jawāb Yanābī' al-Eslām* (1344/1925-26) in refutation of St. Clair-Tisdall (see Āryān, 1335 Š./1956).

Christian elements in classical Persian literature. Contentious matter seldom entered into Persian poetry and belles lettres in the era of relative tolerance before the late Safavid period. Many verse and prose works provide evidence of a long familiarity with Christianity in its oriental, mainly Nestorian, forms. They contain stories and references to Jesus (Īsā) that appear to have been derived from the Gospels; the authors must have learned of them from written or oral sources connected with Christian circles. Noteworthy examples are Jesus's words to a murdered man lying on the road in a *qeṭ'a* ascribed to Rūdakī of Samarkand (d. 329/941; p. 20, *qeṭ'a* 10), which recall his sayings in Matthew 26:52 and Luke 6:31; Sa'dī's story of Jesus's coming to a hermit's cell and God's pardoning a sinner and punishing the self-righteous hermit (*Būstān*, chapter 4, anecdote 4), which recalls the parable of the Pharisee and the tax gatherer in Luke 18:10-14; and the verse in which Ḥāfeẓ (ca. 726-92/1326-90; *Dīvān*, ed. Qazvīnī, *ḡazal* 142, v. 9) wrote that, "if the grace of the Holy Spirit comes to our help again, others will do as the Messiah did," probably echoes John 14:12. These and other references to Jesus in the *Dīvān* of the Isma'īli poet Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow (d. 470/1077), the *Ḥadīqat al-ḥaqīqa* of Sanā'ī (d. ca. 526/1131), the *Maṭnawī* of Jalāl-al-Dīn Rūmī (604-72/1207-73), the *Būstān* of Sa'dī, and elsewhere suggest that the poets or their informants had direct knowledge of Christianity.



It is certain that some of the classical poets, like Rūdakī and Kesā'ī of Marv (d. 391/1001), had lived in proximity to Christian communities in their native cities (on Samarkand, see [Ebn Ḥawqal](#), p. 372; on Marv, see [Bīrūnī](#), *Āṭār* p. 389). Their ready references to Jesus and Christian monks can thus be easily explained. As a native of Ṭūs, Ferdowsī (ca. 329-411/940-1020) must also have been in touch with the Christian community, which in his time had a street of its own (*kūy-e tarsāyān*) in the town (Meyhanī, I, p. 59); nevertheless, his Christian references in the *Šāh-nāma* generally echoed statements and sentiments that he found in his sources. For example, in one passage he derided Jesus's teaching of nonresistance (Moscow ed., IX pp. 95-96, vv. 460-64), and in another he called Jesus the deceiving (*farībānda*) Messiah and wrote disparagingly of his execution by the Jews (Moscow ed., VIII, p. 105, vv. 894-96, cf. IX, p. 96, vv. 1474-75). On the other hand, in some contexts he expressed a more broad-minded view, for instance, in the story of Alexander and Keyd the Indian (Moscow ed., VII, pp. 16-17 vv. 180-84).

Nāṣer-e Kōsrow, who was born at Qobādīān near Marv and made a long journey to Syria and Egypt, was keenly interested in theological and philosophical questions and must have acquired a relatively profound knowledge of Christian doctrines. He mentioned Christianity in many passages in his *Dīvān* and his *Rowšanā'ī-nāma*. Another poet of the same period, Mo'ezzī (440-542/1049-1148), also showed a special interest in Christianity and Christians, perhaps partly because of his familiarity with Christian communities in Nīšāpūr and Marv, the towns where he spent most of his life; in addition, first his father, Borhānī, and then he himself served as poet laureate (*amīr al-šo'arā'*) at the court of the Saljuq sultans [Alp Arslān](#) (455-65/1063-72) and Malekšāh (465-85/1072-92), who were frequently at war with the Byzantines. Alp Arslān's great victory and capture of the emperor Romanus Diogenes (r. 1067-71) at the battle of Manzikert (Malāzgerd) in 463/1071 was described by the Saljuq court poets as a glorious achievement; Mo'ezzī showed great interest in Christian customs and monarchies, but his comments are more anti-Byzantine than anti-Christian in tone.

Nezāmī of Ganja recounted a story about Jesus's encounter with a dead dog lying on the road (*Maḳzan al-asrār*, p. 129), which became so well known that it passed into European literature (as in Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan*). The story was based on one of Jesus's sayings in the Gospel of Matthew (7:3-5), which suggests that Nezāmī's knowledge of Christianity was not limited to the information given in the Qur'ān and related literature; but his references to



Christianity in *Šīrīn o Kōsrow* and his *Eskandar-nāma* do not provide much additional information about his sources. His reticence may have been owing to religious strife in the region of Ganja, which he mentioned in some of his works. Even so, his relative silence on the subject of Christianity seems surprising in a poet who, as his *Eskandar-nāma* shows, was well acquainted with the Greco-Roman cultural legacy in the form in which it had been inherited by the Muslims (Bausani, pp. 688 ff.).

In marked contrast, the poet Kāqānī Šervānī (ca. 520-95/1126-99), Neẓāmī's contemporary, showed exceptional readiness to disclose his knowledge of Christianity. His mother was a Nestorian convert to Islam, and he himself, it seems from his *Dīvān*, was interested in theological questions and well informed about the rituals and customs of contemporary oriental Christianity (Rypka, *Hist. Iran. Lit.*, pp. 202-03). Scattered references to such issues can be found in most of his poems. The famous *qaṣīda* entitled *Ḥabsīya* or *Tarsā'īya*, which he addressed to "the grandee of Rūm" (*'aẓīm al-Rūm*), a Byzantine prince (probably Andronicus Comnenus) who had recently arrived in Šervān, is so full of Christian words and phrases and references to Christian beliefs and ceremonies that it cannot be understood without knowledge of these matters (Minorsky).

The attitude of Sufis, as of other Muslims, toward Christianity was rooted in antitrinitarian conviction but generally characterized by tolerance. In most of the Persian Sufi literature a tendency to favor peaceful coexistence among different religions can be observed. One curious feature is the number of stories about love for a beautiful Christian, a love that can drive even a Muslim shaikh to become or pretend to become a Christian (Forūzānfar, pp. 322-26). The best example is the story of Shaikh Ṣaṇ'ān and the Christian girl in *Manteq al-ṭayr* by 'Aṭṭār (ca. 540-618/1145-1221). The number of similar anecdotes in Persian verse and prose works is by no means small (cf. Forūzānfar, pp. 387-88). Persian Sufi authors often showed exceptional interest in Christian beliefs and institutions. Sanā'ī (pp. 80, 185, 381-94, 417) revered Jesus, whom he called the *rūḥ* (spirit), and in several passages he expressed respect for Christians, whom he placed together with Zoroastrians among the travelers on the right path and seekers of the one truth (p. 92). 'Aṭṭār also considered Christians capable of attaining salvation, even though in the story of Shaikh Ṣaṇ'ān he called them idolaters, perhaps meaning simply worshipers of icons, and derided their belief in God's having had a son (*Elāhī-nāma*, discourse 3; *Kollīyāt*, III). In one *qaṣīda* (*Dīvān*, pp. 278-79) he even went



so far as to describe monks as knowers of the mysteries of the love for God, which breaks the bonds of worldly attachment. His refutations and criticisms of Christian belief have none of the asperity to be found in the writings of doctrinaire theologians and *faqīhs*. Jalāl-al-Dīn Rūmī told many edifying stories about Jesus, some of which were taken from the Gospels (1925, index, s.v. ʿĪsā, bk. 21, v. 4). Stories found in the work of Aflākī (ca. 690-761/1291-1360) suggest that Rūmī maintained generally friendly relations with the Christians at Konya and elsewhere in Asia Minor (e.g., pp. 591-93, 610-11; but cf. Rūmī, 1951, p. 124). On the whole Rūmī took a more favorable view of Christianity than of Judaism. Shaikh Maḥmūd Šabestarī (d. 720/1320), on the other hand, showed particular interest in Christianity and a sympathetic attitude toward Christians. In his explanation of the symbolic imagery of Sufism he cited a number of Christian examples and sayings as capable of interpretation or application in a Sufi sense.

In Persian lyric poetry, which was strongly influenced by Sufism, Christians and Christianity were connected with the themes of love and wine. As Christians (and also Zoroastrians and Jews) living in the Dār al-Eslām were allowed to make and sell wine for their own use, monasteries and the behavior of Christian young people were viewed by Muslims as typifying hedonism and profligacy. In the symbolic vocabulary of the Sufis the monastery (*dayr*) became a metaphor for the hospice (*kānqāh*) of the Sufis, the Christian (*tarsā*) for a person unconstrained by Islamic law, the young Christian (*tarsā-bačča*) for a shaikh or spiritual guide (*moršed*) who enchants the desiring disciple (*morīd*) and frees him from worldly bonds. Such lyric symbolism imparts a perplexing ambiguity to the *ġazals* of poets like Sanāʿī, ʿAṭṭār, ʿErāqī (d. 688/1289), Rūmī, Saʿdī, and Ḥāfez.

Perhaps the last use of Christian terminology in classical Persian poetry is in the well-known *Tarjīʿ-band* of Sayyed Aḥmad Hātef of Isfahan (d. 1198/1783-84), one of the poets who rejected the Indian style popular in his time and reverted to classical Persian models. In the second stanza Hātef not only implied that different religions can be equally true but also used words like “Christian,” “Trinity,” “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” in support of belief in the unity of existence, which he reiterated in the refrain throughout the poem. His expression of such pantheism and use of such words were not considered objectionable in contemporary Shīʿite circles.

As already mentioned, the terminology referring to Christianity in Persian prose and belles lettres falls into two categories: words and phrases that



entered Persian from Arabic sources, mainly the Qur'ān, religious literature, and pre-Islamic Christian Arab poetry, and those that appear to have entered as a result of contacts with Christian communities in Persia. Noteworthy examples of the first category are *ebn Allāh* (son of God), Rūḥ-Allāh, *tālet talāta* (third of the three), *rūḥ al-qods* or *qodos* (holy spirit), *oqnūm* (person of the Trinity), *enjīl* (Gospel), *ḥawārī* (disciple), *rāheb* (monk) and *rohbān* (monks), *qessīs* (priest), *šammās* (deacon), *osqof* (bishop), *baṭrīq* (patriarch), *jāṭalīq* (catholicos), *ṣalīb* (cross), *zonnār* (girdle), *ṭaylasān* (pallium), *dayr* (monastery), *ṣawma'a* (cell), *nāqūs* (church bell), *qandīl* (lamp), *Fesh* (Easter), and *ta'mīd* or *ma'mūdiya* (baptism). Some of these terms are loanwords that entered Arabic as a result of contacts with Christianity in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times. Persian or persianized forms in the second category are fewer, for example, *Angeliūn* (Gospel), *čalīpā* (cross), *sokūbā* (bishop), *kašīš* (priest), *kelīsa* (church), *yaldā* (winter solstice, i.e., Christmas). Some are of Syriac (or ultimately Greek) origin and must have entered Persian directly, rather than through Arabic.

Also noteworthy is the large number of Persian literary expressions and compounds built on the names 'Īsā (Jesus), Masīḥ (Messiah), Maryam (Mary), and *tarsā*, for example, *dam-e 'Īsā* (breath of Jesus), *noṭq-e 'Īsā* (words of Jesus), *morḡ-e 'Īsā* (bird of Jesus, i.e., the bat), *kom-e 'Īsā* (wine jar of Jesus), *kar-e 'Īsā* (ass of Jesus), *sūzan-e 'Īsā* (needle of Jesus), *Masīḥā-nafas* (having breath like that of the Messiah), *rešta-ye Maryam* (Mary's thread), *rūza-ye Maryam* (Mary's fasting, i.e., silence), *jāma-ye tarsā* (garment of the Christians), *dayr-e tarsā* (monastery of the Christians), *kaṭṭ-e tarsā* (Greek writing). These expressions are generally noted in Persian dictionaries (cf. Āryān, 1960).

Another sign of the lasting impact of Christianity on the culture and literature of Persia is the abundance of idioms and proverbs reflecting the experience of living beside Christians and the opinions of Muslim Persians about them. Some refer to the *dam-e 'Īsā*, *kom-e 'Īsā*, *kar-e 'Īsā*, *morḡ-e 'Īsā*, *noṭq-e 'Īsā*, or the *rūḥ al-qods*. At least sixty have been noted by 'A. A. Dehḡodā (s.vv.), and even more are in vernacular use.



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