



CONFESSIONS

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i. In the Zoroastrian faith.

ii. In the Manicheism.

i. In the Zoroastrian faith

Acknowledgment, repentance, and confession of sin appear to have been integral parts of the Zoroastrian profession of faith (*āstawānīh* or *dēn ī mazdēsnañ āstawānīh*). According to Mary Boyce (*Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 320-21, referring to Rodhe), the *Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa* and other Old Indian texts confirm that the practice of acknowledging sin probably goes back to Indo-Iranian times and the worship of the Old Indian *asuras* (deities like Varuṇa), but there is little evidence for it in early Iranian sources. The earliest example occurs in the Avestan profession of faith, *Fravarānē* (Y. 12), and its Pahlavi translation and commentary (esp. vv. 1, 3, 4, 8; Asmussen, 1965, pp. 40-49).

There is no further literary evidence for Zoroastrian confession from before the establishment of the Sasanian dynasty (mid-3rd century). The Pahlavi word for “confession” is *patīt* (pronounced *patēt* by modern Zoroastrians), derived either from a past participle **patīta-* (Av. *paitia-*) “(that which) has gone back” (< *pati-i-* “to go back”) or from a noun **patīti-* (Av. *paititi-*) “going back, compensating,” either of which could easily have developed the meaning



“penalty, compensation, expiation” (*AirWb.*, cols. 829-30). Armenian *bozpayit* or *bazpayit* has the same sense. It occurs only in the chronicle of Elišē, where it is defined as *melac’ k’awaran* “atonement for sins.” From the context it is clear that *bozpayit* must have been a set of religious prescriptions for the confession of various sins (Asmussen, p. 40).

The four extant *patīt* texts all belong to the late Sasanian or early Islamic period, as is especially clear from the fact that the originals were in Pāzand (a late form of Pahlavi, sometimes including New Persian forms, written in the Avestan alphabet). Their traditional Pāzand titles are *Patīt pašimānī* (two versions extant; Pahl. title *Patīt ī ādurbād*), *Patīt ī ravānī* (Pahl. title *Patīt ī widardagān*), *Patīt ī īrānī*, and *Patīt ī xud* (one version surviving, written in very correct Pahlavi but clearly based on a Pāzand original; on the texts in general, see *Grundriss* II, pp. 109-10; for the Pāzand versions, see Antia, pp. 118-52; for the Pahlavi versions of *Patīt pašimānī* and *Patīt ī xud*, see Dhabhar, pp. 61-84, 318-23 [cf. pp. 15-21 for other translation]; tr., pp. 100-56; for text and translation of *Patīt ī xud*, cf. Asmussen, pp. 90-98).

The Pahlavi expressions *pad patīt būdan*, *patītīg*, *patītīgih*, *patītīh* “being in a state of repentance” seem to refer to a ceremony in which confession, repentance, and expiation were performed in sequence (*Pand-nāmag*, ed. Kanga, p. 10: “Show repentance/do penance for the sin that you have committed”; and numerous examples in *Kār-nāmag*, *Dēnkard*, *Mēnōg ī xrad*, *Dādestān ī dēnīg*, *Andarz ī Ošnār ī dānāg*, *Ardā Wirāz-nāmag*, etc.; Asmussen, pp. 49-66). It was performed before a *rad* (master), *dastwar* (teacher), “the good,” or, “in (case of) fear,” before a menstruating woman (*ka andar bīm pēš zan-ē ī daštān*; *Šāyest nē šāyest* 8, 12b; Asmussen, pp. 51, 54, 57, 65, 67). It is possible that the practice described in these relatively late texts had been influenced by the Christian scheme of penitence (acknowledgment, contrition, confession, and expiation).

Confession of sins arose naturally from the Zoroastrian teachings that man is a creature of Ohrmazd and that good actions (*kirbag*) are indispensable for the reestablishment of the unpolluted original state of the world at the end of time, the renovation (*frašegird*). Committing a sin is therefore tantamount to destroying the integrity not only of the individual (whose good and bad actions are weighed after death) but also of the Mazdayasnian religion. Through confession of sins this integrity is restored. Such acts of purification thus became increasingly important in the lives of Zoroastrians, as they still are among the Parsis (Modi, *passim*).



The *patīt* ritual was also extended to confession on behalf of the dead, but this practice must belong to a later period, as it violates the fundamental teaching of Zoroaster that each man is responsible for the fate of his soul (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 321). As confession on behalf of the dead presupposes ritual texts and formulas, the term “should be recited” (*xwānišn*) in a marginal note in manuscript J of the *Pahlavi Rivayat* may thus refer to it (ed. Dhabhar, p. 164 n. 1): The text of *Rivayat* 53 is about confession on behalf of a living human being, but the accompanying note involves the *patīt* for the departing soul. In the Zoroastrian Persian literature (*Ṣad dar-e natr*, *Farzīyāt-nāma*, *Ḳolāṣa-ye dīn*, etc.; Asmussen, pp. 72-78) *patīt*, *patītī*, and the like refer exclusively to texts meant to be recited.

Patīt texts gradually attained a central position in the ritual and everyday religious lives of Zoroastrians, especially in the early Islamic period, when the dominant new religion was experienced as oppressive and no assistance could be obtained from the Zoroastrians in India. Massive Zoroastrian emigration to India in the 10th century must be understood against this background. In these conditions Zoroastrian priests composed texts that both served as guides to the believer in his daily life and provided a firm link with the ancestral faith. Ironically, in endeavoring to preserve the integrity of the Zoroastrian religion through elaboration of the confession ritual the priests were influenced by the Muslim notion of repentance (*tawba*; Asmussen, pp. 79-80): The Arabic word *tawba* occurs in a marginal note (*īn towba be-ḵvānad* “this is the penitence to be recited”) to the text of *Patīt i xud* (Dhabhar, p. 323).

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ii. In Manicheism

In common with other Gnostic religions or religious systems Manicheism offered man salvation through knowledge (*gnōsis*). The fundamental structure of all these systems was uniform, but there were great differences in the aim and means of acquiring *gnōsis*: Unbridled libertinism in some systems contrasted with an almost fearful view of sin and salvation in others. Manicheism belongs to the latter category. The rigorous Manichean conception of sin and its power even implied that some of the Light, which is also a part of God imprisoned in matter since the creation, might at the end of time be eternally damned along with the demonic powers (St. Augustine, *Epistula* 236.2; *Contra Felicem* 2.7; Asmussen, 1979, pp. 14, 20-21; see also [āsrēštārāz](#) cosmogony and cosmology, manichean). It is immediately comprehensible, then, that “a conscientious Manichean would be constantly haunted by fear that he might unintentionally and unknowingly have harmed the Light Cross [the imprisoned Light, symbolically crucified in the manner of Jesus Christ; cf. Puech, 1949, pp. 88, 185 n. 370]. The inevitable result was a scrupulous ethical system and concomitant meticulous practice of confession, which engendered casuistic pretended confessions in reaction” (Rose, p. 121).

The Manichean cosmological scheme was dominated by a strict dualism, according to which two principles, good and evil, coexisted from eternity but were separated by a border (Puech, 1949, p. 75); as a result of the attack by the powers of evil and the initial defeat of the powers of goodness, however, the



two principles became mixed (*gumēzišn*, Lat. *commixtio*). Man's innermost "soul" was originally a part of the good principle, which was devoured by the powers of evil and imprisoned in a body composed of evil matter created by them. To outsiders the Gnostic-Manichean confession of sins might therefore appear absurd. How can man sin if his "soul" is not responsible for sin? (for a discussion of free will in Manicheism, see Asmussen, 1965, pp. 17-18). "In other words, between the Manicheans' actual use of confession and the conception of sin that appears to result from their dualism there is, if not a contradiction, at least an inconsistency" (Puech, 1979, p. 290). Opponents of Manicheism found the inconsistency obvious and cited it in polemics: St. Augustine (*passim*), *Dēnkard* ("it would be terrible if the soul (*jān*) were to perform confession (*patīt*) for a sin (*wināh*) that it had not itself committed"; ed. Madan, pp. 286-87, esp. 287 ll. 4-6; ed. Dresden, III, p. 614 [218] ll. 16-17; tr. Menasce, p. 274), the Egyptian Jew Se'adiah (S^ead^eyāh) b. Joseph in his *al-Amānāt* (892-942; Ventura, pp. 128-29), the Mu'tazilite theologian Ebrāhīm b. Sayyār al-Naẓẓām (d. 220-30/835-45; cf. pp. 27-28), the Spanish Muslim 'Alī b. Aḥmad Ebn Ḥazm (384-456/994-1064; Asín Palacios, II, p. 139), and so on (Menasce, 1945, pp. 236 ff.; Puech, 1979, pp. 291-92). But, in the Manichean view, the coexistence of good and evil meant that even the greatest among the Elect could become sinners (for a thorough and detailed description of the Manichean conception of sin and its consequences, see Puech, 1979, pp. 293-99). To Mani the power of sin made confession a necessary part of the ritual life of his community.

Mani was well acquainted with the confession of sins as an institution. It was an integral part of the religious life in countries around the eastern Mediterranean and in the Near East during the centuries before and after the birth of Christ. It was not consciously formulated but rather emerged naturally from the shared religious ideas and homogeneous conception of sin current among most of the religious groups in those areas. In both early and late Judaism *wīdūy*, the confession of sins, contributed significantly to shaping the distinctive character of religious life. The first Christian congregations felt no hesitation in retaining it along with many other aspects of Jewish ritual. The practice of confession is documented in the New Testament (e.g., James 5:16) without justification or comment, and the same acceptance has prevailed throughout the history of the church in the East and around the Mediterranean (Asmussen, 1965, pp. 113ff.). The natural acceptance of confession of sins by Mani can be explained by his Christian connections alone (i.e., his life in a community of Jewish Christian baptists in southern Babylonia from 220 to 240; cf., e.g., Koenen and Römer, pp. 24-25).



Furthermore, as a natural consequence of the existence of the Manichean commandments (five for the Elect and ten for the Hearers; Asmussen, 1965, pp. 195, 216ff.; Puech, 1979, p. 318; Sims-Williams), confession became the test of observance and thus of the integrity of the religion, for sin would delay the definitive salvation of the Light.

Where Manichean confessions of sin took place is problematic. Among the communities in Chinese Turkestan and China confession was no doubt usually performed in monasteries (*mānistānān* Compendium the Hall of Adoration and Confession is mentioned (Schmidt-Glitzner, p. 74). In Egypt and North Africa, where Manicheism flourished throughout the 4th-5th centuries, there is no archeological evidence for the existence of Manichean monasteries, however. On the contrary, it appears from a seldom-quoted text by St. Augustine (*De Moribus Manichæorum* 20.74) that western Manicheans considered monasticism a foreign element (Asmussen, 1965, p. 260). It is not clear whether the conditions in Egypt with which he was familiar were different from those elsewhere, as many scholars believe (Koenen, p. 98; Stroumsa), but it is quite possible that private houses and meeting places were the common loci for confessions throughout western Manicheism (Asmussen, 1975, pp. 61-62).

Monday was the day for weekly confession, both for Hearers and the Elect; only the Elect could hear confession, however (Puech, 1949, pp. 184-85; idem, 1979, pp. 301ff.; Henning, 1937, p. 13; Asmussen, 1975, p. 61). There was a special liturgy, which included the singing of the so-called “Monday hymns,” a characteristic genre of Manichean religious poetry. In addition, the central ceremony of the Manichean cult, the *Bēma* feast (Henning, 1937, pp. 3-17), included collective confession before Mani, who was mystically and symbolically present on the throne of judgment (*bēma*). The seventh section of the *Xwāstwānīft* in a Sogdian text (Henning, 1937, p. 38; Puech, 1979, p. 302) probably consisted of confessional prayers. It must be assumed that members of the Elect recited the main points of Manichean dogmatics orally and that they were subsequently repeated by the Hearers. Nevertheless, formulaic texts for the confession of sins have been found in Central Asia, apparently following Buddhist models. The original language of the most important such text, the *Xwāstwānīft*, was Sogdian (Henning, 1940), which probably replaced Parthian as the missionary language of eastern Manicheism in the latter half of the 6th century (Henning, 1947, p. 49). Traces of earlier Parthian texts can, however, be identified, for example, in the formula *man āstār hirz/hirzah* “forgive my sin,” which is also found in letters (Zieme, 1972, p. 176). Still



another version is to be found in Uighur texts for the Elect: *yazdān āstār hirzāh* “forgive the sins of the gods” (i.e., the Elect; Zieme, 1975, pp. 28-30).

Only one fragment of a Middle Persian confessional text is known; it was found in Central Asia and was probably written after 1000, in a genre unknown in the earliest Manichean literature (Henning, 1937, p. 14; Asmussen, 1965, pp. 203, 241-42). Mani, who wrote all but one of his works (the Middle Persian *Šābuhragān*) in Aramaic, rendered Iranian *xwāstwānīft* simply as *mawdyānūtā* (as in Syriac Christian texts; cf. Heb. *wīdūy*) “confessing one’s sins” (cf. Arm. *xostovanuṭ’iwn*). The term thus referred to the practice of confession, rather than to the formula for the confessional. It must also be the practice that is referred to in the statement “the Mighty Father of Light [Mani] gave the congregation (the possibility of) confession of sins, redemption, and mercy on this blessed day [Monday]” in an unpublished Parthian text (M 284) and in the exhortation “Exert yourselves with zeal on this Monday, the blessed day of sinlessness! Each one of you shall in (by, through) confession (i.e., when you confess your sins) implore, pray (i.e., for mercy), and praise” in another Parthian text (M 763; both texts now in the former Akademie der Wissenschaften in East Berlin; Henning, 1950, p. 646).

That confessional texts were limited to eastern Manicheism is thus clear. Central Asia was the Buddhist area in which emphasis on confession of sins was greatest, as is suggested by the numerous fragments of *Prātimokṣā* texts found there. Although in the Buddha’s own lifetime confession of sins had been a monastic practice, it subsequently spread to the laity as well. Even within the older, Hīnayāna, school of Buddhism, which in Central Asia prospered in harmony with the younger, Mahāyāna, school, this process was actively encouraged. The early prototype for Buddhist confessions is to be found in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra*, which enjoyed enormous popularity in all Buddhist countries (Baruch, p. 75). The Manichean imitations are structurally similar to those in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra* and to other Buddhist confessions of sins (Asmussen, 1965, pp. 255-56; Klimkeit, 1977, pp. 193-95).

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