



CONVERSION I. OF IRANIANS TO THE ZOROASTRIAN FAITH

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Although modern Zoroastrians question whether their religion even allows conversion (see vii, below), Zoroastrianism, as an ethical and essentially monotheistic religion based on a historical figure, originally had pronounced missionary characteristics, as is clear from the extent of its dissemination. An example is the conversion of Vištāspa (*Yt.* 13.99-100; *Dēnkard* 7.5.1; cf. Molé, pp. 348 ff.; Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 187, 249, 279-81), his wife Hutaosā (*Yt.* 9.26), his brother Zairivairi (*Yt.* 5.112, 117; 13.101: Pahl. Zarēr), and his son Spəntō'āta (*Yt.* 13.103: Pers. Esfandiār), which occurred, according to tradition, in Zoroaster's forty-second year. In popular legend Zoroastrianism is said to have spread first to Sīstān, a region to which both Vištāspa and the Kayanian cycle (legends about his dynasty) were closely linked (*Abdīh ud sahīgīh ī Sagestān*, in *Pahlavi Texts*, ed. Jamasp-Asana, p. 26 l. 9; Markwart, *Provincial Capitals*, par. 36; Gnoli, 1967, pp. 37, 79, 96, 115; Christensen). The profession of faith (*Fravarānē*, lit. "I profess"; *Y.* 12-13) and the idea of choosing between the opposing camps of the followers of Aša and Drug (Young Av. *ašavan-* and Old Av. *drəgvant-*, Young Av. *drvant-*) were no doubt central elements in conversion to the new religion (cf. Lommel, pp. 156ff., 243; Boyce, 1979, p. 35). Conversions presumably came slowly (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 185ff.): The



“first teachers” (*paoirya-ṭkaēša-*) and the “first to have listened to the teachings” (*paoirya- sāsno.gūš-*), mentioned in *Yt.* 13.149 (cf. Malandra, pp. 151, 220), must have initially been very few.

Several passages in the Avesta imply that in the earliest period different ethnic populations were converted to Zoroastrianism. The *Farvardīn Yašt* (*Yt.* 13) refers to the *fravašis* (guardian spirits) of heroes from such unidentified countries as Mužā, Raoždyā, Tanyā, Aṇhvī, and Apaxšīrā and from different peoples or tribes, like the Airyas, Tūiryas, Sairimas, Sāinus, and Dāhis (see [dahae ii](#)). In addition, there are references to *ašavan* men and women of all countries and all peoples, from Gaya Marətan (Pahl. Gayōmart), the first man, to the victorious Saošyant at the end of history (*Yt.* 13.125, 127, 143-45). Although all these groups probably lived on the eastern Iranian plateau, not all were necessarily Iranian speakers; there is no evidence that early Zoroastrianism was a rigidly ethnic religion. If *tūra-* can be taken as the ethnic name “Turanian” (cf. Young Av. *tūirya-*), the special esteem in which Tūra Fryāna (*Y.* 46.12) was held can be taken as evidence of the universal nature of the Zoroastrian message (see Moulton, p. 197 n. 1; Pettazzoni, p. 90; Dhalla, 1977, pp. 25, 26, 45, 49, 137; for contrary views, see Kellens and Pirart, I, pp. 6, 9, 162, II, p. 249).

Although the idea of the prevalence of the “Aryans” (Av. *airya-*; Old Pers. *ariya-*) found in later tradition is the result of a long historical development (Gnoli, 1989), the Avestan *yašts* do reflect the predominance of Aryans (cf. *airyō.šayanəm* “Aryan homeland” [*Yt.* 10.13-14]; *airyā daiṇ’hāvō* “the Aryan lands,” *airyanəm vaējō* “region of the Aryans”; Gnoli, 1989, pp. 29-70; see [arya](#), [aryan](#)). Furthermore, the Airyas occupy the first place in the lists of the different ethnic groups sharing in the Zoroastrian tradition. There also seems to be no real difference between the idea of a *kavaēm xʷarənō*, the Kavian Xʷarənah, which had belonged also to those who preceded the Kayanian dynasty and that of an *airyanəm xʷarənō* (*Yt.* 8.1, 5, 7, 8), the Aryan Xʷarənah, or rather the Xʷarənah of the Aryan lands, both mentioned in the *Zamyād Yašt* (*Yt.* 19.9ff., 56ff.; Gershevitch, p. 186 n.).

There is thus every reason to believe that during the early stages of the new religion a process of “Aryanization” of the Zoroastrian tradition took place in eastern Iran, a development that was probably encouraged by the power and prestige of the Kayanian dynasty, which had its power center in Sīstān. The religion founded by Zoroaster thus ultimately became an essential part of an “Aryan” tradition, or one that was defined as such. The first chapter of the



Vidēvdād probably represents confirmation of this hypothesis (Gnoli, 1985, pp. 25, 30): The list of sixteen countries given there recalls the sixteen “great lands” (*ṣoḍaśa mahājanapada*) of ancient India, conquered by the Aryan people and mentioned in the Buddhist, Jain, and epic sources (Lamotte, pp. 8-9: cf. Fussman, p. 581; Gnoli, 1989, pp. 44-45, 61). In Avestan terminology these lands were in the region of Bāxδī (Bactria), on one hand, and the Haētumant (Helmand) basin and Harax^vaitī (Arachosia), on the other; the former lay to the north of the great chain of the Hindu Kush, the latter to the south. In this part of eastern Iran Zoroastrianism first began to spread among the Aryan people and gradually became a national tradition, the common heritage of an Aryan ethnic element that progressively extended its political and military hegemony over several regions of the Iranian plateau, first in the east and then in the west (Gnoli, 1989, pp. 71ff.). This process, which naturally encouraged the conversion of Iranians to Zoroastrianism, was particularly effective in western Persia, where some time before 500 b.c.e. the Median priests (Magi), belonging to a single tribal group, became the main carriers of Zoroastrian tradition.

In addition, during the westward migration of the Iranian-speaking Aryan peoples Zoroastrianism continued to spread among the Medes and Persians. In fact, there are reasons to suppose that the ruling groups of these two peoples considered themselves Aryans (Herodotus, 7.62). Conclusions about the period before the reign of Darius I (522-486 b.c.e.) must be hypothetical. Cyrus the Great (559-29 b.c.e.) and other early Achaemenids may or may not have been Zoroastrians (see, e.g., Duchesne-Guillemin, 1972; idem, 1974; Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II; idem, 1988; Herrenschildt; Gnoli, 1985, pp. 53-72), but certainly Darius and Xerxes (486-65 b.c.e.) acknowledged Zoroastrian teachings, albeit emphasizing aspects compatible with their political interests: the rejection of falsehood (*drauga*), the banning of *daiva* worship, and the invocation of a future state of bliss in the possession of Arta (XPh, ll. 47-48, 54-56; Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 151; see *aša*). The use of *ariya* to refer to their race, language, and worship of the great god is certainly linked with the Zoroastrian tradition (Gnoli, 1989, pp. 86ff., 102); it was a title of particular nobility in which religion played a predominant part (Gnoli, 1989, p. 29). Contemporary non-Iranian sources do not conflict with this view. Plato (*Alcibiades* 1.121E-122A; cf. Bidez and Cumont, p. 22) actually claimed that among the Magi who were in charge of the young prince’s education the wisest attended to the teaching of the Magian lore of Zoroaster, son of Horomazes (i.e., *Ahura Mazdā*).



As Zoroastrianism spread among the Medes and Persians, it became the religion of the higher social classes of the Achaemenid empire—the court, the Magi, and the military aristocracy—as well as of Persia proper, the main source of military and civilian officials. This connection was one of the main causes of the spread of Zoroastrianism throughout the empire. Another was certainly the force of Zoroaster’s spiritual message. A number of communities of Magi were established in the farther reaches of the empire and continued to survive after its collapse. The Achaemenid conception of royalty and their religious policy became linked with Zoroastrianism and helped to ensure the future of the Zoroastrian religious tradition (Gnoli, 1974).

In the Hellenistic and Parthian periods Zoroastrianism continued to influence both the Iranian populations of Persia, Asia Minor (for the Achaemenid period, see Asheri), and Armenia (Russell) and non-Iranian groups affected by the syncretistic tendencies encouraged within the Persian empire and by the conquests of Alexander (cf. Duchesne-Guillemin, 1962, pp. 224-76; Widengren, 1960; idem, 1965, pp. 174-242). Although Zoroastrianism itself did not spread beyond Iranian lands in this early period, it did exert an influence on Hellenistic religious thought, especially in the gnostic and mystery religions. The Arsacid dynasty sought a source of legitimacy in the Achaemenid tradition through a process of gradual “Iranization.” The Arsacids must have accepted the Zoroastrian faith, as is clear from the archeological discoveries in their ancient capital at Nisa, in Parthia proper (Boyce, 1979, pp. 80ff.; Duchesne-Guillemin, *Camb. Hist. Iran*). Zoroastrianism must have remained predominant in Fārs during the Seleucid and Parthian periods (Frye, pp. 271-73; Wiesehöfer). Despite the spread of new religious beliefs, like Buddhism in the east and Christianity in the west, Zoroastrianism held its ground on the Iranian plateau, in a semifeudal rural society wedded to the values of an archaic culture and reinforced by a solid oral tradition and a clergy influential in the western regions of Persia and Media.

The political and military antagonism with Rome and a general tendency toward formation of a national culture in the 3rd century c.e. transformed Zoroastrianism into a national, even a nationalistic, religion, under the leadership of the Magi and the Persian Sasanian dynasty (ca. 224-652). Dynastic propaganda emphasized a legitimating ideology in which Ērānšahr (empire of the Iranians) and Weh Dēn (good religion) were conceived as two aspects of the same reality. The Middle Persian term *ēr* (Iranian; cf. Av. *airya-*, Old Pers. *arya-*; see [ēr māzdēsn](#)) took on both religious and political



connotations (Gnoli, 1986; for evidence that the corresponding Armenian term retained this dual meaning, see Russell, p. 90). In the early Sasanian period hellenized Magis scattered in many sanctuaries in the new empire, both inside and outside Iran, were converted or reconverted (de Menasce), a development that had all the features of the foundation of a new church presented as a restoration of the faith of the early fathers. The inscriptions of the Magian Kerdīr are significant in this regard, for they reflect the nationalistic political and religious program propounded by a hereditary clergy, ensuring its perpetuation as a closed social class through kin marriage (Pahl. *xwēdōdah*; cf. Av. *xʷaētvadaθa*; see KN Rom, pars. 15-16; MacKenzie, pp. 55, 58-59, 65).

Zoroastrianism probably attained its widest acceptance among Iranians in the Sasanian period, though it was always in competition with universalist religions like Manicheism, Christianity, and Buddhism, which were propagated through missionary activity. The Sasanian state strongly supported the national religion. For example, a slave who converted to Zoroastrianism would automatically be freed from his Zoroastrian master (Perikhanian, p. 638). Such measures reinforced the position of Zoroastrianism as the Persian state religion. Well after the Arab conquest and the conversion of many Persians to Islam, in the 9th century, the close links between the Mazdean religion and Iran (*Dēn ī māzdēsn ud Ērān*) remained a major theme of Pahlavi literature; the inevitable defeat of the invading foreign infidels was to be followed by the restoration and triumph of the “good religion,” which not even the godless deeds of the accursed Alexander had succeeded in destroying.

As the process of “nationalizing” Zoroastrianism had been completed in the Sasanian period, the ethnic exclusivity of Zoroastrianism in the communities of both Persia and India was intensified in the periods that followed (see vii, below). Although there was never a rigid objection to conversion from other religions in India, the Hindu caste system and a favorable socio-economic situation engendered a tendency within the Zoroastrian community to reject even the child of a Parsi father and a non-Parsi mother (cf. Kulke, pp. 47-48; Hinnells, pp. 49-50). The belief that blood and religion were part of the same heritage was not universal among Parsis, however, and reformers held less rigid, even opposing views (cf. Dhalla, 1914, pp. 323ff., 367-68; idem, 1977, p. 476; Duchesne-Guillemin, 1962, pp. 30ff.; Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, pp. 174, 193, 227; idem, 1984, pp. 153ff.).



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