

ZOROASTRIAN CONTINUITY IN IRAN AFTER ARAB CONQUEST

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Continuity of Zoroastrian Elements in Early Islamic Iran

In addition to what I have already noted on this topic, I present more evidence about it from Wilfred Madelung of the University of Oxford, (*Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran, Bibliotheca Persica*).

At the very onset he notes: “Islam required from its early Persian converts an almost total break with their own religious traditions. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, whose prophetic origins were acknowledged by Islam, Zoroastrianism, even though it gained a similar legal status as the “book religions” tolerated by the Qur’an, was unequivocally condemned as a false religion. Its founder was a pseudo-prophet without any trace of divine authority. Muslims thus had not incentive to examine the Zoroastrian heritage for elements of religious value as they might search Jewish and Christian scripture and tradition. Zoroastrianism was equally negative in its attitude toward Islam. Put on the defensive by the victorious new religion, it strove to preserve its religious identity and heritage from foreign contamination. There was nothing to be learned from Islam.

“In spite of this uncompromising antagonism between the two faiths, the eighth and ninth centuries witnessed a number of popular (? not enough time for it to happen) revolutionary movements in Iran which overtly mixed Persian and Islamic religious beliefs and motives.” However, I find it difficult to concur with him here as he refers to the Khurramiyya movements here which must have little time or opportunity to acquaint itself enough with Islam to adopt its beliefs. He identifies them with Mazdakites and attributes “its very origin” to “the influence of other religions, particularly to Manichaeism, which may explain its syncretistic beliefs without it adopting Islamic beliefs in the first century or so after the Arab conquest of Iran.

The Mazdakites claimed to represent the true religion of Zoroaster rather than a new faith. Although they were critical of established Mazdakism, they did not endeavor to destroy the basic structure of the Zoroastrian Church or to leave it. They thus could be described as a Low Church, representing popular religious and social sentiments, in relation to the High Church of orthodox Zoroastrianism, which

represented the conservative interests of the aristocracy. The arguments in favor of this view are strong. It is also in agreement with what is known about the character of the Khurramiyya in the time of Islam. The Khurramiyya represented Persian national sentiments looking forward to a restoration of Persian sovereign rule in contrast to the universalist religious tendencies of Manichaeism.

Madelung describes the Magdakites "as a conglomerate of sects and currents basically characterised by a cosmic dualism and a gnostic syncretism and loosely held together by an allegiance to the revolutionary movement of Mazdak and at least nominal commitment to an ideal Zoroastrian state church, though not to its established hierarchy. Yet it required a movement of a similar revolutionary and syncretistic nature to being about the fusion of Iranian dualist and Islamic elements apparent in the Khurramiyya. Such a movement arose in the Kaysaniyya, the radical Shi'ite messianic movement which initially backed the imamate of "Ali's son Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya and later gave rise to the 'Abbasid revolutionary movement. But Madelung does not elaborate on how and what Islamic elements in the Khurramiyya beliefs except that many Khurramiyyas were recruited by al-Hanafiyya's son Abu Hashim. Madelung traces similarities between the dualistic beliefs of Mazdakites and at least were recruited by Kanthacans and Mahaniyya sects.

The widest allegiance among the Khurramiyya all over Iran and Transoxania was, however, gained by Abu Muslim al-Khurasani. The heresiographers indeed often identify the Khurramiyya with the Abu Muslimiyya or Muslimiyya who recognized Abu Muslim as their imam and a prophet or an incarnation of the divine spirit. The widespread and fervent popular backing of Abu Muslim in Iran which is reflected in this religious allegiance of the Khurramiyya is a significant factor in the success of the 'Abbasid revolution and must be stressed in view of recent interpretations which see the revolution as essentially Arab. While the revolutionary army was led by Khurasanian Arabs, it had the backing of the Persian populace, Muslim and non-Muslim. The Umayyad armies might not have collapsed so quickly if they had not been operating in enemy country.

The watershed between the 'Abbasid movement and the Khurramiyya was reached with the murder of Abu Muslim by the caliph al-Mansur in 137/753. The Khurasanian Muslims, Arabs and Persians, remained loyal for the most part to the house of the 'Abbasids. The Khurramiyya reaffirmed and strengthened their religious commitment to Abu Muslim who had come to symbolize Persian self-assertion against Arab domination and 'Abbasid perfidy. Revolts in his name broke out in various regions of Iran. Some of his followers denied his death and expected his return. Others held that the imamate had passed

to his daughter Fatima. Later her son, named Mutahhar or Gohar, was recognized as the imam and the *kudak-idana*, the omniscient child, who would reappear as the Mahdi. Some of the Khuramiyya claimed, according to al-Dinawari, that Babak, the real Khuramiyya rebel, was a son of this Mutahhar.

It has been thoroughly investigated and described by H. Sadighi in his well-known book *Les Mouvements religieux iraniens au II et III siècle de l'hégire* and by others after him. In conclusion, attention may rather be drawn to a report on a Khuramiyya group which has so far escaped proper notice. It is one of the last definite reports on the sectarians and comes from the pen of a Nizari Isma'ili chronicler, Dehkhoda 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Ali.

A group of Mazdakites who had earlier joined the Isma'ili *da'wa* revealed their abominable secret beliefs. The sectarians called themselves Parsis (Parsiyan). The name, which was also used for the Zoroastrians, especially in India, is not attested elsewhere for the Khuramiyya. Its adoption by them evidently reflected their attachment to the Persian religion and national traditions.

The sectarians apparently lived in or came from Adharbayjan and thus were most likely remnants of the Khurami followers of Babak. Some decades before, they had nominally accepted Isma'ilism. This was, the Isma'ili chronicler comments, in accordance with their usual practice. When a faith or religious doctrine became dominant, they would pretend to back it while keeping their true beliefs concealed. Thus when they saw the Isma'ilis becoming strong they said: "This is the true faith, we accept it."

There is no reality to what is declared lawful or forbidden in religion. Prayer and fasting must therefore be abandoned. Budayl further told them that women were the water of the house which was licit for every thirsty man to drink. Dowry and marriage contract had no meaning. Daughters were lawful for their fathers and brothers. Thus they considered all forbidden things licit. They also said that heaven and hell were on earth and that every one who recognized the divinity of Abu I-'Ala' and Yusuf would return to earth in human shape, while those failing to do so would return in the shape of wild beasts.

They held that no one is allowed to harm any animal or plant, to such a degree that no pale should be hammered into the ground lest the earth suffer pain. It was improper to have two wives as harm would accrue to both of them. Nor was repudiation (*talaq*) of the wife or purchase of any slave allowed. There were indeed five sins (though only four are mentioned in the text) whose perpetrator would not escape hell: To shed blood unjustly, to have two wives at a time, to establish ties with a religious opponent, and to harm men by either tongue or

limbs. The sectarians interpreted the resurrection and the hereafter in the light of their doctrine of metempsychosis. Thus they said that paradise consists in (being reborn in) human shape, though the cosmic paradise (*behesht-e garzdmān*) is in heaven. The latter phrase may indicate that they believed in an eventual ingathering of the souls of the saved in a heavenly paradise. This description of their religion agrees largely with information about the Khurramiyya from other sources and, with allowance for some polemical exaggeration, probably represents it faithfully.

The sectarians held that the Great Kings of the Persians since Jamshid had been rightful imams.

This report and the polemic of the Isma'ili author highlight both the gulf between the Khurrami and Isma'ili conception of the imamate and the persistent commitment of the Khurramiyya to Persian religious and national tradition. In contrast to the line of Qur'anic prophets and their successors through which the Isma'ilis traced the pre-Islamic imamate, the Khurramiyya considered the Persian kings as their imams. Nothing is said about their attitude to the prophets recognized by Islam. This may further confirm my impression that Khurramiyya had little overt Islamic or few synergistic traits.

With Abu Muslim the imamate returned to the Persians. Although his heroic effort to break the Arab domination and restore Justice eventually ended in failure because of the perfidy of the caliph al-Mansur, his grandson would complete his work and restore the Persian religion and domination as the Mahdi. Islam thus was nothing but a brief interlude in the religious tradition of Iran.

It seems to me that Abu Muslim enjoyed such a high esteem and prestige among the Iranians that had he not been perfidiously murdered by someone he had helped the most and even had made the ruler of the land, the subsequent history would have turned out to be more favourable to the natives of the land and thus would not have subjected them to severe persecution and prejudice to this very day, there being no parallel in the world history to it.

Zoroastrians and Isma'ilis

I am trying to bring out the data presented by Madelung about the relations between the Isma'ilis and Zoroastrians in light of Madelung's reputable research. However, it is not complete and it is only intended to depict any trace of Zoroastrianism still surviving after the Arab conquest as anything else is beyond my scope as well as my objective or interest.

The Qarmati leader, Abu Tahir surrendered the rule in al-Bahrain in

931 to a young Persian from Isfahan whom he proclaimed as the expected Mahdi. The date was chosen, according to Al-Biruni, to coincide with the passing of 1,500 years from the death of Zoroaster, at the end of the year 1242 of the era of Alexander for which prophecies attributed to Zoroaster and Jamasp were predicting the restoration of the reign of the Magians. The Isfahani Mahdi indeed turned out to be rather a restorer of Persian religion than that descendant of 'Ali and Fatima who had been expected by the Isma'ilis to reveal the truths concealed in the scriptures of the Prophets of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It was claimed that he was a descendant of the Persian kings. His home-town Isfahan had long been associated by the astrologers with the rise of a Persian dynasty which would overthrow the Arab caliphate. He was said to be a Magian and ordered the worship of fire. There were evidently some links with established Zoroastrianism, for the chief priest of the Magians, Isfandiyar b. Adharbad, was accused of complicity with Abu Tahir and executed by the caliph al-Radi. Islamic worship and law were abolished; the Islamic prophets from Abraham to Muhammad and the imams from 'Ali on were cursed in public. According to a Sunnite eyewitness, Abu Tahir expressly repudiated the teaching of the Isma'ili *da'is* and told his followers that the true religion which had now been made public was that of "our father Adam. The later prophets, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad were all impostors. The reign of the Isfahani Mahdi lasted only eighty days. After he had ordered the death of some prominent Qar'mat leaders, Abut Tahir seized and killed him. He now admitted to his followers that he had been duped.

The significance of this episode must be judged with caution. It is evident that the idea of a restoration of Persian religion and Persian reign cannot have been spontaneously put forth by the Isfahani Mahdi. Abu Tahir and some other Qarmati leaders in al-Bahrayn must have favoured, and to some extent planned, it in advance. Abu Sa'id al-Jannabi was a Persian from Ganafa, a town on the coast of Fars and was active there as a *da'i* before being sent to al-Bahrayn. Persian sentiments must have remained strong in the family. Among his grandsons at least two bore royal Persian names. Abu Tahir gave one of his sons the name Sabur (Shapur) and his brother Abu I Qasim named onos his Kisra (Khosrow).

Isma'ili doctrine with its syncretistic view of religious history also gave Zoroastrianism and other dualist religions a place in the chain of prophetic revelation. Al-Nasafi had maintained in his *Kital al-Mahsul* that the Zoroastrians were followers of the religion of the third Speaker, Abraham. He seems to have claimed that Zoroaster was a missionary appointed by Abraham and was inspired by him when he ordered his followers to turn toward the sun and introduced the practice of tying

four knots on their ritual girdles. He also asserted that the Zoroastrians themselves said that Abraham was their prophet and that according to them Adam and Noah were also prophets, Adam being the beginning and Abraham the goal. Al-Nasafi thus seems to have had a positive view of these religions admitting their genuine, if marginal, prophetic origin, though obviously they, like Judaism and Christianity, were superseded by Islam.

While Abu Tahir thus could perhaps expect a certain amount of sympathy for some aspects of Persian religious tradition among the Isma'ilis, his transformation of the Mahdi into a restorer of Persian religion and kingship required a total repudiation of much of traditional Isma'ili doctrine. Rather it was the episode of the Isfahani which gave rise to the persistent charges of the polemicists that at the core of the secret Isma'ili doctrine lay a dualist atheism and that its founders were a group of fanatically anti-Arab Persian Shu'ubis plotting to destroy Islam and the reign of the Arabs while hiding in a cloak of Shi'ism.

The quick overthrow of the false Madhi by Abu Tahir may have been forced upon him as much as by widespread hostile reaction among the Isma'ilis as by the outrageous conduct of the Isfahani. There were, in any case, massive defections among the Qarmatis in Iraw and western Iran in the aftermath of the affair.

Abu Hatim also objected to al-Nasafi's views about the Zoroastrians and other dualist religions. He denied that Zoroaster could have been a follower of Abraham. Rather he belonged to the interregnum of the era of the fourth Speaker, Moses. Zoroaster was a lahiq of the time of David, the khalifa in the absence of the iman, and prescribed to the people of his province various rules and composed a scripture containing wisdom but no religious law. His followers, however, changed his precept. The position of Zoroastrianism in the fourth era coresponded to that of the Sabians in the fifth. Abu Hatim evidently identified the same dualist religions with the Sabians as did al-Nasafi.

Many of Ibn Karram's followers were new converts to Islam. He was active preaching the faith in the countryside of Nishapur. Still a century later; Ishaq b. Mahmashadh (d. 993), ancestor of the family leading the Karramiyya in Nishapur until the middle of the twelfth century, is reported to have converted numerous Zoroastrians and *dhimmis* in the region. Nishapur came to shelter a strong Karrami community with a distinct low-class character. The town always remained the leading centre of Karrami scholarship. In Herat, Ghur and Gharchistan, the province between Herat and Marwarrudh, Ibn Karram achieved his greatest missionary successes converting the native non-Muslims.

The first Sufi order in Iran, and indeed in Islam, was the Murshidiyya or Kazaruniyya founded by Abu Ishaq al-Kazaruni, known

as Shaykh-i Murshid (352/963-426/1035). Al-Kazaruni came from a poor local family in Kazarun, west of Shiraz; his grandfather had still been a Zoroastrian. Like Ibn Karram, he represented an activist asceticism, was a powerful preacher and converted numerous Zoroastrians to Islam. His strictures and aggressive conduct toward the non-Muslims brought him and his followers into sometimes violent conflict with the strong Zoroastrian community backed by the local Buyid authorities. He preached the *jihad* against the infidels, and groups of his followers carried out campaigns against the Christians in Anatolia.

Initially al-Kazaruni and his order found little recognition among Sufis, evidently since his primarily practical outlook and lack of gnostic teaching ran counter to the interests of mainstream Sufism.

He spoke to them of dualities in order to demonstrate through them the unity of God, but they took his words literally. The adversaries used this false belief to establish their worldly rule.

Their followers, moreover, had misunderstood and changed their teaching. Even more negative was an alternative interpretation of the position of these founders of dualist religions offered by Abu Hatim. According to it the Sabians were rather the followers of an adversary who misinterpreted the Christian teaching of the *lahiq* of his time. Likewise, Abu Hatim adds Zoroastrianism may have been founded by an adversary who rose up against a *lahiq*, presumably David, of the fourth era. In this interpretation no trace of a prophetic origin of Zoroastrianism and the other dualist religions is left.

The radicalism of the ideological challenge of the Nizaris (Ismal'is), reflected the idealism of their political oppression, their essentially revolutionary motivation. In this respect they were the true successors of Mazdakism before Islam and the Khurramiyya in the early 'Abbasid age. Nizam al-Mulk understood this well when he described the continuity between Mazdak, the Khurramiyya, and the Isma'ilis primarily in terms of their subversive activity, their threat to the order of the state. The Mizari movement represented Iranian opposition to Saljuq Turkish rule as the Khurami movement had represented the opposition to 'Abbasid Arab domination. Yet while the Khurramiyya opposition hoped for a restoration of Persian religion, the Nizari opposition was carried on in the name of the hidden, true meaning of Islam. Five centuries after the introduction of Islam in Iran, religious opposition was no longer conceivable in other than Islamic terms.

Thus, comes an end to the Zoroastrian Iran. But does it really? As detailed at length by me and others, from Darmesteter onwards, the conquered ended up becoming the conqueror ultimately, as explained in other chapters.