

CONVERSIONS IN IRAN

Dr. Kersey Antia, Mar 20, 2020

What Nehemia Levtzion observes in *Conversion to Islam* (Holmen and Meier Publishers, New York, 1979, p. 92) may perhaps help us in understanding what went on under the process of conversions in Iran: Western observers before Mathew Arnold stressed traditions of change of fellowship for political, economic or social reasons, and called such change conversion, suggests that they too knew they had entered a new religious world, one for them intelligible at least, if not particularly admirable.

That world is the one of religion as a social belonging more than (not “rather than”) a set of beliefs. In this world, more European commentators, other than Arnold, saw Islam as a form of social belonging ready, indeed required by Allah, to use worldly inducements to gather men unto it and into it.

In the first, “Note per una tipologia del monoteismo” Professor Bausani argues that, despite the efforts of Arnold to prove otherwise, Islam is a monotheism of a nation, of a holy nation, united not by blood but by allegiance to a new “state faith” seeking the political submission of other “holy nations” to it. While not true in all cases, this may elucidate what was often meant by conversion in post-Sasanian Iran. In the second article, “Can Monotheism be Taught?”, he points a distinction between a primary monotheism with its ethic of power and will, and a secondary monotheism with its ethic of the “fermentation” of a spirit in the heart and mind of the individual. “The truth (*haqq*) of Islam,” writes Bausani, “is not, or is not chiefly, a theoretical truth, but also and prevalently, law and customs felt as given by God, and obviously cannot be spread through personal persuasion, but only through the physical conquest of the region to be converted.... The Truth is not, for Islam, a theology, is not a knowledge that brings salvation to the single, but a true attitude or behaviour of an entire society.... This cannot be taught personally, but only, more or less violently, imposed.”