

TREATMENT OF CHRISTIANS IN SASANIAN IRAN

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Hitherto historians hold a very negative view of how the Christians were treated in the Sasanian empire, but recently Richard Payne has dispelled many of their misconceptions in his well researched book, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians and Iranian Political Culture in late Antiquity*, (University of California Press, Oakland, California, 2015). He explains at length how the practice of kingship and its authority were so intricately intertwined with the conceptions and mythical assumptions of the Zoroastrian religion and how such derived their authority from the other. And yet it in no way hindered the contemporaneous diffusion of the institutions of other religions, particularly Christianity, in Iranian territories. In the course of Sasanian history, Christian churches were established in every region and in seemingly every major settlement. In some regions where the religion became predominant, the Christianization of the leading aristocratic houses took place before their incorporation into Iran.

The Cambridge History Of Iran (Vol. 3(2), New York, 1983, p. 879) notes: "According to the "Chronicle of Seert", Christians became numerous in Iran because Shapur installed many of them in the cities he founded; and we know from John of Ephesus and above all from the Armenian historian Elisaeus Verdapet that the King of Kings gave an edict to the effect that "Magi, Zandiks (Manichaeans), Jews, Christians, and all men of whatever religion should be left undisturbed and at peace in their belief". Towards the Jews, Shapur was not only tolerant; he even sought their support against the Romans." It should be further noted that the Christians Shapur transferred to Iran from the Roman territories he had conquered were very much suppressed and persecuted by the pagan Roman rulers and so they were very appreciative of the tolerant attitude of the Sasanian kings, some of them becoming wealthier than even many Iranian nobles because of their technological skills in building canals, dams, forts, etc.

Armenia and Iberia were converted to Christianity by their rulers Trdat and Mirian who were converts from Zoroastrian subject to the Persian king a hundred years before they became part of the Persian empire. They experienced few obstacles to the expansion of the Caucasian churches, which continued to grow even beyond the Sasanian period. Elsewhere in Iran however, the Christians never enjoyed the patronage of a Christian monarch despite the occasional rumors that the king had promoting Zoroastrianism. Yet Christianity established

itself in Iran under the authority and even the support of Zoroastrian elites. “Historians have struggled to explain” notes Payne of how these two religions could develop institutionally in tandem, at the same time and often in the very same places.” Payne tries to resolve this paradox through a reconstruction of the ways in which Zoroastrian elites integrated Christians into their socio-religious institutions and Christians in turn managed to survive and even thrive.

The Sasanian kingship was conceived as a cosmological project to inspire women to bring about *frashokereti* – the restoration of the world to the primordial state of perfection that would mark the end of all the ills in this world, (Yasna 30, etc.)

Until then good and evil remains mixed in this world even in the political sphere, which, Payne posits, “provided an ideological framework for including religious others in Iran.” (pp. 9-10).

There were at least sixty bishops in EACH of Iran's major districts and archaeological finds bear this it out. However, Payne does not attribute such an institutional efflorescence neither to widespread proselytization nor to the swelling of Christian ranks. He compares this scenario with the Jains in Mugal India, comprising just one percent of the population, became famous as the builders of “some of the most impressive monuments of Delli.” (I am tempted to add that this could be true of the Parsis in modern India, albeit in a different context). Payne narrates at length how the East Syrian leaders acquired wealth, devised contacts with royal authorities and started forming socio-religious institutions for transmitting their influence across generations, (which again seems reminiscent of how the Parsis cultivated their base and progress in the colonial India). The busy Aramaic-speaking networks in the region, the settlement of Christian prisoners-of-war from Rgnan territories (who were so highly skilled in building bridges, dams, canals, etc, that they, as I have noted elsewhere, became even richer than some rich nobles in Iran but they tended to be appreciative of the fact that they were given shelter in Iran at a time they were fiercely persecuted by the Romans.) The mercantile networks across the Silk Road as well as the Indian Ocean further facilitated the spread of Christian doctrines in the area. Consequently, Payne challenges “the notion that Christianity expanded at the expense of Zoroastrianism,” and finds it “unsubstantiated” and “implausible” (p. 13).

The Sasanian kings, found the bishops as their willing agents just as the Christian Roman emperors did. In 410, Yazdgard I formally recognized the bishop of Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sasanian empire, as the Catholicos, which later in the sixth century became Patriarch, comparable in every way to the one prevailing in Rome, but distinct from Roman Christianity in its allegiance to the Sasanian king “whom its bishops honored as “the victorious,” as if he were himself a

Constantine. The Romans prevailed in wars against the Sasanians only half the time as noted by me at length elsewhere and peace treaties with the Romans resulted in an exchange of envoys, including the Roman bishops who persuaded the Sasanian king to establish an imperial church of his own," designated as "the Church of the East." A Roman envoy advised Yazdgard I for subordinating bishops to himself by creating political dependency on the king which "East Syrian leaders were prepared to accept. Indeed, the bishops served as diplomatic envoys on behalf of the royal court, as intermediaries with the king's Christian populace and "even as companions of the Sasanians on military campaigns in Christian Roman territories." Unlike their Roman counterparts, they hardly sought "religious authority to question that king's actions, at least publicly." As a rule, they demonized the kings in the distant past but not the present ones, such as for instance, Shapur II or found faults in the religious authorities rather than in the Zoroastrianism or their rulers. Such a demarcation of secular and spiritual domains made the leaders of the church of the East" more docile servants of empire than the bishops of the Christian Roman Empire."

Payne regrets that scholarship on this subject tend to perceiving these Christian communities as rather discreet, even insular and autonomous within the Sasanian empire, forming their own ethno-religious group. Payne takes issues with Michael Morony's observation that "religious identities took precedence over social and political relationships." He questions the validity of regarding such as called autonomous communities as the genetic forerunners of the Ottoman millet system, as "it sits uneasily with the shared practices, discourses and networks that are increasingly known to have characterized the relation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian elites." (pp. 13-14).

Relying on the recent findings of the well-known researcher, Nina Garsoian, Payne questions the judgment of the earlier historians that emphasized the cultural and ethnic distinctiveness of the Christian inhabitants of Armenia, Iberia (Georgia) and Albania. The Armenian Christian elites continued to adhere to the Zoroastrian concepts such as Khwareh and regarded their Christian landowning nobles, the Nakharars, to be as valiant as their Iranian counterparts at court. Armenian nobles shared the same genealogy with their Iranian houses. Payne finds the Iberian situation to be similar since Christianity did not deter the political integration of the noble clans in the Caucasus.

Payne refers to the research of Yaskov Edman and Isaiah Gafini, leading Jewish scholars, who have to discovered the vast extent of the Jewish leaders' involvement with Zoroastrian thought, legal system and even the royal court. As I am currently writing a book on this subject, I do not see the need to dilate on it here.

As the various accounts of hagiographers who wrote the story of Christian martyrs form the basis for highlighting the persecution of Christians in the Sasanian times, Payne painstakingly reviews their narrative structures, signs, symbols and discourse in order to uncover the shifting self-understanding and self-representations of Christian sects. He finds that the best of such studies link Christian agenda with social and political practice in general and in the sphere of inter-religious interactions in particular. Hagiography was thus a significant step towards establishing and maintaining boundaries between Christians and the religious others. Some authors of the story of martyrdom, for example, of Simeon, were distinct individuals with sharply divergent views on the relationship between Christianity and the empire, one of them even emphasizing the need for being loyal to the Sasanian king. (pp. 20-23).

Since the inscriptions of Kerdir who served three successive kings were hitherto held out by most historians as evidence of the persecution of the religious others, who were to be “struck” (Zadan), Payne asserts that this does not really refer to their elimination since “a struck object is neither destroyed nor eliminated” but, “rather subdued”, and “striking” implies disciplining and subordinating rather than eliminating or destroying them, even as others such as the alleged idolaters and demon worshipers were to be destroyed. Kerdir's real goal was to ensure and solidify the very foundation of the Zoroastrian religion which was just emerging almost diluted and unadorned unclaimed and uncrowned from the Parthian times “when the ideology of Iran was merely an idea, without fire temples, ritual performances, or laws as its anchors in space and society. The reference to religious others in the inscriptions rhetorically defined the superior position of the Good Religion in relation to its known rivals at the same time as fire temples, a class of religious professionals and law were being treated,” on a scale I may add, unlike in the past known hitherto. Payne, therefore, rules out physical or symbolic violence against religious others as the real motive of Kerdir or even of his successors. Many scholars agree with this new and note, even as Payne does, that there have been no historical records of such persecutions – even the Jewish records do not show it, as I have mentioned in my thesis on the Relations Between the Jews and Zoroastrians (p. 24).

Payne refers to Kerdir's “industrious self-promotion,” which I found some scholars regarding it as boasting and as a clinical psychologist I find him to be either a die-hard egoist or, more likely, as a very pragmatic and shrewd salesman trying his best to convince his adversaries to believe in what he badly wants them to, as it could not be attained in actual reality without creating dire consequences for the stability of the new kingdom. (p. 25). In this respect he may be a

forerunner of present day politicians.

Payne observes that instead of seeking, or even imaging, the systematic exclusion of Christians and others, the Zoroastrian clergy sought to regulate and discipline them in order to ensure the smooth running of the Good Religion. However, I find it hard to agree fully with him when he notes: "If ancient Zoroastrians are best known for their dualism, their concepts of mixture, intermingling and hierarchical order will emerge as equally salient in Iranian political culture." (p. 27). The dualism he is referring to is essentially the dualism contained in the Pahlavi texts of tenth century A.D. is tinged with many alien notions whereas the dualism of Zoroaster (circa 1200 B.C.) is radically different from it. As I have explained this in a lengthy thesis (forthcoming) I need not dilate on it here, except that it may indicate a fault line in his otherwise blaze trailing and eye opening thesis, but then a blaze trailing revision of Zoroastrian dualism is also sorely needed. I concur with him fully when he maintains the martyrologies' narration of how Sasanian authorities thought or behaved cannot be accepted as historical. He shows how the religious institutions of the Sasanian empire helped and not hindered the expansion of religious others and therefore they should be acclaimed "for having practiced differentiated hierarchical inclusion rather than intolerance." (p. 27).

Payne observes that Kerdir's views go too much limelight because of his inscriptions which no other mowbed ever resorted to which speaks for itself. This in turn has led scholars to regard his views as representing the Zoroastrian view since there is none else. But his views run counter to the opinions in the Pahlavi texts of the ninth century which include the religious others in Zoroastrianism. He adds: "In her study of tolerance and intolerance in Zoroastrianism," Mary Boyce juxtaposed the mowbed's (Kerdir's) claim of having struck Christians and others to the statements of Sasanian kings of kings and scholars hostile toward non-Zoroastrian groups, providing a catalog of intolerant views which argued that the supposedly destructive fantasies of Kerdir's proliferated in the following centuries. (Saeculum ____21, 1970, pp. 32-43). What such studies of Zoroastrian thought and practice have overlooked are statements in the selfsame texts expressing a positive regard for the *agden* "those of bad religion," within the empire. Zoroastrian discussions of bad religions as social and political problems were grounded in the concerns of late Sasanian scholars over the capacities of humans to contribute to the cosmological struggle that the kinds of kings superintended in league and inveterate antipathy toward religious others that the label *intolerant*, often applied to them, evokes. The third-century mowbed's differentiation of bad religions into separate categories meriting distinct actions and approaches finds resonance in these later years that evaluated religious others in terms of

a hierarchy of better and worse rather than a binary of good versus evil. Their novel perspective on the religious landscape of late antiquity merits exploration.” (p. 25).

In addition to the inscription of Kerdir as evidence for the persecution of Christians in Iran we find additional evidence in the East Syrian histories of sixty martyrs at the Sasanian era. The reigns of various kings were “reported to have contained periods of persecution against the Church of the East, even though its rapidly developing institutions continued to expand unabated. The catalyst for violence was, in the hagiographical representations, the unwavering hostility of Zoroastrian religious authorities toward Christians. In the accounts of persecution, mowbed torment and kill Christians with bloodthirsty glee, devising ever more elaborate modes of torture and execution to inflict as much pain as possible on the persecuted. If their willingness to slay Christians and destroy churches was constant, their influence at the court of the king of kings was supposed to have fluctuated. Kings of kings who heeded the religious authorities persecuted Christians, while those with the will to ignore their demands did not. This framework for understanding and representing interactions between Zoroastrian religious authorities and Christian communities ultimately derived from East Syrian self-representations, remains the historiographic consensus.

“Periods of persecution, fluctuating relations between kings of kings and mowbed, and intolerant Zoroastrians are stock themes of historical writing on the Sasanian period that have been perpetuated in the absence of critical studies on the East Syrian and Armenian hagiographical sources on which these accounts are based. The Christian representation of Zoroastrians, in other words, has triumphed in the modern imagination of the past, regardless of whether East Syrian authors achieved the social and political ambitions they set for themselves in antiquity.” Payne tries to discount this assertion of Zoroastrian intolerance and replace it with a model of the differentiated, hierarchical inclusion of religious others based on Zoroastrian cosmological thought. He examines the particular contexts in which Christians and Zoroastrians negotiated the terms of the inclusion of Christians. He does not see in the empire concepts of tolerance and intolerance as helpful methods for the analysis of ancient societies. As they often do not capture Sasanian understanding of religious differences and their corresponding practices. The claim of Sasanian intolerance fails to take into account Zoroastrian conventions of inclusion and exclusion that evolved in tandem with the empire. Acts of violence were the means of regulating ancient political cultures, and “decoding their significance can as often reveal the dynamics of cooperation as of conflict.” (pp. 25-26).

Explaining his thesis on the basis of Zoroastrian texts and cosmology (albeit Sasanian for the most part), Payne sees the Sasanian empire conceived as a vehicle, almost representing Ahuramazda's creation to motivate humans to work for the *Frashegird*, the renovation of the world by ceaselessly joining the forces of good against the forces of evil. To be *er* (Iranian) was to evince highest ethical disposition "transmitted via a lineage that positioned me as an ally of Ohrmazd more efficacious in facilitating the cosmological struggle than any other kind of human," (p. 28) a tall claim indeed since, he says, even seekers from India were allowed to be Zoroastrian. "This branch of humanity enjoyed such superior ethical qualities as loyalty, righteousness and nobility that rendered theirs a "lineage of leaders," according to *Denkard* V. 32-34. The *er* were also those who had full knowledge of the religion that Zoroaster had revealed *Denkard*, VII 10-12. However, Payne posits that the flexible nature of Zoroastrian mythology allowed non-Iranians from diverse backgrounds to join the Iranians in their cosmological mission, if not to become *er* themselves." (p. 29). *Denkard* VII, 4-6 that informs us of Zoroaster's revelation to Vishtasp also informs us of the Wakhshwar (spirit-bearers) as earlier agents of Ohrmazd who taught various arts and crafts to the first human couple, the ancestors of all humankind, Mashya and Mashyane. "Thus," maintains Payne, "according to some scholars, the perfection of the *Frashegird* was the common inheritance of humanity, and Zoroastrians and non Zoroastrians alike would ultimately enter paradise." Albert de Jong, in *Genesis and Regeneration: Essays on Conceptions of Origins*, edited by Shaul Shaked, Jerusalem, 2005, pp. 172-209.

The concept of Wakhshwar leads de Jong to assert that since it granted "most aspects of human culture and civilization, including the germs of what it means to be pious and righteous, as the inheritance of all humans," (Op. cit., p. 203) it implied acceptance of Agden's potential for contribution to the Iranian kingdom whose mission was to bring about *Frashegird*.

Payne posits that only select Agdens merited expulsion or eradication and "in the state of mixture, adherents of bad religion could make valuable contribution to the cosmological struggle. Zoroastrians did not practice a rough tolerance of non-Zoroastrians in the manner of crusader Christians, who tolerated heretical Christians, Jews and Muslims in their territories but would have preferred forcibly to convert them. Rather Zoroastrians possessed ideological, cosmological foundations for enlisting adherents of some bad religions, such as Christians and Jews, into their imperial project," as per *Denkard* VII, 10-12. Payne criticizes those who believe that Zoroastrian authorities not only refrained from interfering with the construction of churches, monasteries, saint's shrines, etc., but the Iranian king often contributed

funds for them. "In the entire corpus of Zoroastrian literature, there is not a single injunction to destroy the institutions of Christians, Jews or other monotheists along the lives of the cases of the eradication of idol worship." (p. 34).

In keeping with Kirder's verdict, Christian and other groups that possess at least some proclivity for goodness were to be "subdued," or suppressed, while idolaters had to be eradicated as they possessed no such promise, proclivity or potential. Nevertheless, Payne cites opinions of the scholar-priests of the time for their awareness about the Agden's contribution to the realization of Eranshahr. (p. 36). Payne quotes Zoroastrian scriptures that hold: "In every (religious law there are righteous people." (p. 36). Payne reviews certain passages about Agden in the Pahlavi text, Pursishniha, a text comprising of questions and answers and concludes: "These passages make plain that non-Zoroastrians were routinely thought capable of performing meritorious deeds, Kirbag, through military service or military activities that enhanced the prosperity of Iran." (p. 36).

Payne cites the example of Richard Kalmin reinterpreting passages in the Babylonian Talmud that were hitherto interpreted as suggesting persecution of Jews at various periods during the Sasanian rule but instead he found that the Jews "were never subject to the persecutor y violence that scholars claimed Zoroastrians sometimes exercised against them." As I have presented details about it at length in my treatise on Relations Between Jews and Zoroastrians, I need not dilate on it here. Payne makes a similar review of East Syrian Christian sources for deconstructing narratives of persecution and finds discrepancy and variance between what they deserve in terms of their bias, "subordinating the events they recorded to the shaping of Christian communities in accordance with the interest of ecclesiastical leaders," and what they wrote to the Syrian elites who came to enjoy the rank of aristocratic circles. To the latter "they did not invent the basic facts of their accounts, often including details that are seemingly at variance with their overachieving representations and thus allow for alternative interpretations," which Payne does judiciously. Instead of denying the historicity of the episodes of martyrdom, he interprets them "in light of the Zoroastrian cosmological discourse of religious difference, with a view to showing how they served to order hierarchically, and thereby to integrate, Christian elites indispensable to the functioning of the empire. If force was at all used by the Sasanians, it was only when the Christians "challenged the supremacy of the Good Religion, or disobeyed the king, destroyed fire-temples, or tried to convert Zoroastrians." "To characterize such violence as persecution," comments Payne, "is to overlook its ultimately inclusive intentions and effects." (pp. 37-38).

Payne cites the case of two martyrs, Narsai Abda and Narsai who ostentatiously destroyed fire temples and were given the opportunity to repair the damage but refused and even justified the act “as a pious demonstration of the falsehood of Zoroastrianism.” (p. 47). After researching this subject in as much detail as he possibly can, Payne considers the “Great Persecution” as “a myth,” (p. 43), and attempts to expose this myth in the very first chapter, entitled, “The myth of Zoroastrian Intolerance scholars astray in their grasp of it.” (pp. 23-58).

As I do not want to interject my own views or bias but try to present the findings about a very crucial epoch in the history of Zoroastrianism that has led even astute scholars astray in their grasp of it. As Payne's is the only research on this subject I know of I see the need to quote him verbatim when necessary based upon my own views. Some Christians openly and ostentatiously challenged the imperial authority and faith. “As long as Christians did not seek to expand their institutions or ranks at the expense of the Good Religion, their ecclesiastical leaders could establish churches, shrines, and bishoprics and secular elites could gain office in the imperial administration and attain aristocratic status. The sources for the ideas and actions of East Syrians in the late Sasanian period suggest that ecclesiastical leaders accepted these limitations as the terms of integration. That secular elites would continue to experience some violence was unavoidable, given its structural position within political relations. And public acts of apostasy in favor of Christianity, however rare, would continue to precipitate conflicts. But within these boundaries, Christian communities consistently grew in the fifth century, in their institutional structures and the social, economic, and political power of their members, a trajectory that did not slow until long after the Islamic conquests. Far from representing an inescapable antagonism between Christianity and Zoroastrianism, acts of violence constituted the foundation for their cooperation and coexistence.” (p. 56).

The Sasanian kings, nobles and clergy established a cosmologically conceived, hierarchically organized social order which could incorporate religious others. It was based on the institutions of the Good Religion—the fire temples, rituals, and corpora of cosmological thought contained for the good religion. “The supremacy of the Good Religion was therefore to be maintained, with violence if necessary, but religious others were to be included in positions subordinate to *wehden* and *er*.” The East Syrian hagiographical tradition despite always complaining persecution, counter-intuitively admits the prevalence of an inclusive empire. For instance the strongest resistance from bishops sprang from the King's effort to enlist them in the fiscal system, which “caused them to encounter the dangers that came with power, as they began to experience the violence that the Iranian court used to

discipline its elites,” (whether Zoroastrian or not). Their advancement as officeholders and aristocrats was dictated by the Zoroastrian ideology and not by an alleged antipathy toward religious others. They contributed good work, *kirbag*, as a result of gaining access to the good things of life which is the common inheritance of humanity or choosing to lead an ethical life. The concept of intolerance in this context is both of doubtful validity as well as inaccurate in terms of a propensity toward violence against religious others.” Christians were not killed, in any historically verifiable episode, in general persecutions because of their religious identities. They were killed for disobeying the court or for violating mutually recognized norms in particular acts. The absence of persecutory violence, moreover, suggests the importance and influence of Zoroastrian views of the potential merits of *agden*, despite Christian representation to the contrary. Zoroastrian authorities, in theory and practice, recognized the place of Christians and Jews in Iran and regarded their institutions as ancillary to the empire. Their capacity to recognize and emplace religious others distinguished Zoroastrians from their Christian contemporaries in the Roman world,” (p. 56) who apparently lacked such a capacity.

Christians could flourish in the Iranian Empire if they did not challenge the superiority of the Good Religion. Christianity as an acutely proselytizing religion trying to propagate universal truths globally forever acted as a significant threat to Zoroastrianism. Sasanians did not allow the destruction of fire temples or the attempts at converting prominent nobles to Christianity. These were the terms of inclusion, and Christian ecclesiastical and secular elites overwhelmingly accepted them, precipitating the efflorescence of Christian institutions characteristic of the era. Even if in practice Christians refrained from disturbing the foundations of Zoroastrian institutions, in theory they acclaimed the superiority of their faith. Christians had no concept akin to the Zoroastrian concept of a hierarchy of religions as they believe theirs was the *prima facie* acceptance of Zoroastrian categories and structures therefore required a ceaseless reminder and awareness of the incommensurable superiority of Christianity vis-a-vis Zoroastrianism to which they were politically subject. “This was the polemical project in which every single hagiographical and juridical text that the East Syrians produced was involved.” (p. 57).

Since the Zoroastrian religion as interlinked with the land, Eranshahr (or for Christians Walashfarr where Christian captives from Roman territory were deported to Iran by Shapur I), the polemics of martyrs, especially the Martyrdom of the Pethion found it necessary, rather a prerequisite, to claim that they fully belonged to the land and were “sons of the land.” Such a claim enabled them to strengthen their church “politically through the adoption of Iranian social and political

categories in the very process of defining boundaries between the two religions.” (p. 92).

In the sixth century the patriarch Mar Aba forbade the Christians from “marrying the wives of the agnates or partaking of Zoroastrian meats” which implicated the Christian aristocrats “in the defilements of a sinful world” and rendered them “unworthy of leading Christian communities.” As the feasts by the Zoroastrian officials were “inclusive of persons irrespective of their religion, but it “required compromise from the Christian faithful.”

It was during the tenure of Mar Aba that Christian elites reached their prominence when they supported Khushrow I's son, Anuslizad's campaign to seize his father's throne, though the right to decide such a matter was entirely the privilege of Iranian aristocracy such as of Surent Mehren Anushzad may have presented himself as a Christians in Khuzistan where he was posted to gain the support of Christian communities but he was accused of exhibiting his “bad seed” and “forsaking the religion of his ancestors.” His rebellion was suppressed by Khushrow I, surprisingly with the help of Mar Aba.

Christian writers began to “produce texts that are simultaneously histories of ancient kings, saints, cities and aristocrats” as “an act of political self-definition,” for reciting at the feasts of the martyrs,” which “historians have often considered incompatible for an audience of East Syrian aristocrats who routinely cooperated with Zoroastrian elites in the project of empire.” “But,” Payne in the very act of recalling their difference they asserted their commonalities with the Zoroastrian nobles of the region.” (pp. 162-3).

After Khushrow II's death Christians began to hope for an end of Zoroastrian kingship. The Roman emperor Heraclitus even “embarked on the project of Christianizing Iran's ruling dynasty and Iran as a whole in cooperation with the famous conqueror of Roman territories. Shahrwarz indeed succeeded temporarily to establish his own Iranian house but was outright deposed by the Zoroastrian aristocracy. Christians came to believe that Khushrow II had converted to Christianity at least clandestinely because of his loose association with Christian saints, besides having a Christian wife, but, as Payne observes, that “in no way undermined his position as an idea ruler” (p. 197). As Payne concludes, Christians regarded the adoption of the practices of have seen throughout the preceding chapters, regarded the adoption of the practices of another religion as a self-evident sign of apostasy. They brought the same understanding of identity to bear on the adherents of other religions. A king of kings who petitioned a saint, invited a holy man into his entourage, honored the True Cross, expelled Jews from Jerusalem, and organized an inquiry into Christian orthodoxy appeared obviously to be a Christian. But Zoroastrians did not share their

exclusive understanding of religious identity. The question for *wehden* was not whether one participated in the institutions of another religion but whether such participation contradicted or complemented Zoroastrian institutions. As long as one worked to realize the cosmological project of the Good Religion, one could adapt the practices and institutions of another religion in one's practical, everyday social and political life. Christianity's proselytizing tendencies did pose a challenge to this cosmological project, at least theoretically. The Iranian court accordingly took decisive action to contain this aspect of the religion while remaining supportive of its leaders and their institutions." (pp. 198).

Payne begins his book by Khoshrow II approving and honoring a new bishop and ends it by Christian monks provided a decent, albeit Christian burial to the floating body of the last Sasanian king, Ajazdagird III they found in a river. "These Christian monks," observes Payne, "insisted on their loyalty to the king of kings and accorded him the honors worthy of a ruler" even when the Marzban (governor) of Mari betrayed him and threw him in the river, sinfully polluting it. In the concluding chapter, Payne reiterates that Christians did obtain elite status recognition and office in a Zoroastrian empire." They appropriated Iranian legal practices such as the substitute successor ship and "participated fully in Iranian political culture." "They conceived of their past, present and future" within the framework of Iranian history, (pp. 200-201), which yielded them "prerequisites for the wielding of imperial authority on behalf of the court." They believed that religious rituals, whether Zoroastrian or Christian sustained the prosperity of Iran." They regarded the prayers of their holy men "ensured imperial (Iranian) victory as efficaciously as those submitted on behalf of the christian Roman Empire." In the early seventh century "they (Even) looked to the king of kings to fulfill the functions of a Christian ruler. The coins of Fars and Khuzesten during the first Islamic century saw a combination of Christian and Iranian symbolism. Christians even adopted such famous names of the Zoroastrian aristocrats as Swren to claim noble status and even the lowly Christian often tried "to fashion oneself as a Dehgan," long after the Arab conquest. The geographical reach of the Church of the East, spread as it was from China to Kerala in India), far outweighed its Western counterpart. "The Christians of Kerala" reports Payne, "prominently displayed Middle Persian inscriptions in their sanctuaries, expressing an identification with the empire from the Sasanian period to the end of the first millennium C.E." (pp. 202-203).

"In South India, East Syrian copper plates from Quilon, on the coast of Kerala demonstrated the ubiquity of cooperation among Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews—as well as Muslims—of a kind that the previous

chapters have shown characterized Christian-Zoroastrian interaction in the Sasanian period. As the local ruler granted an East Syrian bishop, Sabrisho, and his community far-reaching commercial privileges, representatives of Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Muslim communities pledged to assist the church in its administration of trade in which emerged as a key Indian Ocean emporium.” A bishop working on behalf of a Hindu ruler and in league with Zoroastrian Jewish, and Muslim peers to place the East Syrian community on a solid material footing well captures what distinctive dynamic of the Christianity to which the Iranian Empire gave rise,” (pp. 203-4) Even long after, I may add, it vanished.

Thus, Payne has rendered yeomen service to the historians of Sasanian-Christian relations by daring to dispel the established negative views on this subject and assiduously challenging them in a brilliant manner.

Further observations by Payne on Sasanian relations with their Christian subjects

Richard Payne, et. al. further expounds on this topic in *Cosmopolitanism and Empire* (edited by M. Lavan, R. Rayne and J. Weissweiler, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 209-230) and maintains that the Sasanians used the dialectical disputation method practiced by the Roman empire for managing religious differences by upholding the common elements basic in all religions and philosophies without in any way compromising the superior position of Zoroastrianism. At times the Sasanian kings were even arbitrated for competing Christian claims during their doctrinal disputes. Christian elites were persuaded to acknowledge their Sasanian rulers as their superiors and as the basis for deriving their own cultural legitimacy as well as their imperial perquisites and status.

Kushrow II conquered Jerusalem and brought the True Cross, the most powerful symbol of Christianity to his court in Iran and tried to position Iran as the center of a global Christianity. He contemplated to form an alternative Christian universalism which will be quite different from the one in the Roman empire because its orthodoxies tended to be multiple but “united around a shared loyalty to an unbelieving king of kings, and were subordinated to a Zoroastrian political elite regarding itself as transcending the cultural peculiarities of its subject. Christian universalism became ancillary to Iranian cosmopolitanism”

Payne added “The religious disputation was an institution primarily designed to facilitate not the exchange of ideas, but the recognition of difference, of a bounded cultural entity. ----- The power of Iranian cosmopolitanism resided in its ability to have Christians accept

subordinate positions for themselves in the very act of articulating their beliefs, in its ability to place groups in a hierarchical ordering that underpinned the authority of the court.” “The initial use of violence gave way to patronage in the early fifth century as a means of ensuring Christian discipline. But the inherent irreconcilability of Zoroastrian and Christian cosmologies remained. The growing importance of Christian aristocrats as provincial officials, military commanders, and cavalrymen stimulated the court to innovate cosmopolitan practices that preserved its universal political order while overcoming the differences that threatened to break the ties binding its religiously disparate elites. One such practice was the continued patronage of bishops, monks, and saints as well as the use of relics symbolically to represent the kings of kings as Christian rulers, even as they remained Zoroastrian. The polemical assaults of ecclesiastical leaders against Zoroastrianism were thereby deprived of their potency.”

Payne adds: “Bishops became agents of Iran throughout the late Sasanian period and the satellite Christian communities that appeared in China and India were perceived as Iranian institutions, so close was the link between the Church of the East and the court.” “Yazdgird I established the Church of the East – hence the label East Syrian – on the model of its Roman imperial counterpart, granting ecclesiastical leaders patronage in exchange for loyalty for assisting the Iranian court in economic and diplomatic affairs.” (p. 216).

Even a Roman Christian anonymous author “recognized the greater openness of Iranian disputational and intellectual culture in locating this imagined debate at the court of the Sasanians,” at the court of (K)hushraw I. “Such a portrayal of (K)hushraw's court was not without foundation,” and Payne gives evidence to support it. When King Kawad (Kobad) decreed that each religious community should submit a summary of their core beliefs, Iranian courts became familiar with the Christian doctrines they were not yet familiar with. This led different Christian sects competing for royal recognition for validation and recognition of their sectarian beliefs. In the seventh century the Persian King “came to occupy the role of arbiter of Christian truth that the Roman emperor had once occupied and the East and West Syrians alike readily acknowledged Husraw II as a guardian not only of their churches, but (also) of their doctrines.” Instead of threatening the universalist projection of Iranian empire, as explained in detail by Payne, they tended to complement it. Moreover, it was with Sasanian approval that the East Syrian sect converted the Sasanian allies, the Lakhmids, to Christianity in the 590's. Unlike in the past, “Husraw I and Husraw II expressly identified themselves as agents of the Christian god and, vice versa, Christian supernatural powers as agents of their empire. The Sasanians even became rivals to a Rome seeking to create a

global commonwealth of Christian kingdoms.

Unlike the Roman court, the Iranian court tried to unite its multiple Christian sects around the principle of a shared loyalty to the Persian King, despite his being an unbeliever as well as to subordinate them to the Persian elite which transcended the cultural differences of the populace. Thus, Payne concludes, "Christian universalism became ancillary to Iranian cosmopolitanism, which indeed resolved around its ability to have Christians accept subordinate positions for themselves in the very act of articulating their beliefs, ---- even as bishops and monks continued to rail against the Good Religion, Christian aristocrats and even the majority of the ecclesiastical leaders could view the Iranians as a benevolent ethnic class that recognized their religious legitimacy without denying its own religion."

Aptin Khanbaghi's independent research seems to concur with Payne's findings when he concludes: "Culturally they (Christians) flourished under the Sasanians and had established important intellectual centres in towns such as Susa, Pumbedite, Nehardia, Nisibis, Gundishapur and even Merv on the eastern frontier of Iran. The multicultural characteristic of western Iran and the Zoroastrians' 'liberal' approach towards proselytization, being harsh only on apostates (from Zoroastrianism), enabled Christians to remain numerically dominant in provinces like Asuristan (Iraq) and Armenia. The intellectual, political and demographic rise of Jews and Christians enabled them to secure for themselves high positions right after the fall of the Sasanian Empire." However, later on "The Jews and Christians' loss of authority and support from the (Mongol)rulers made them vulnerable to the vindictive action of Muslims. Iranian Christianity suffered immensely as most of the dioceses in Iran disappeared from the records after the 14th century. Its members lost their vitality and ambition and retired to remote and isolated places, as the Zoroastrians had done a few centuries earlier. The 're-Islamification' of Iran had such a traumatic effect on these Christians that they felt estranged from the dominating Persian culture." He adds: "For more than a thousand years the Christians had been active in Iran. The Sasanian king Hormizd considered them as one of the pillars of his Empire." See "The Fire, The Star and The Cross," I.B. Taurus, London and New York, 2006, pp. 159-62). He also notes that when an apostate from Zoroastrianism, Maraba became Catholicos (head of Nestorian church) at Ctesiphon, Christians even "prevented Khushraw I from killing him" as was required by the custom. "Henceforth," adds Khanbaghi, even "Zoroastrian officers who converted to Christianity were allowed to maintain their rank in the Persian army and were no longer ostracized." (p. 11). He also reviews various attempts by Muslim authorities to convert the Jews in Iran during various periods (pp. 106-110).

What James Russell observes on this subject also supports Payne's views: "The Sasanians generally continued the traditional policy of religious toleration, and their attitude towards the Jews, whose *Resh Galuta* often dined with the King of Kings, contrasts with the growing antisemitism of the Byzantine legal code (and this despite increasing evidence that Christians and Jews had lived peacefully together most of the time in the early Christian centuries). The Sasanian state tended to persecute primarily those Christians who were converts from Sasanian noble families, although there were many more Iranians of lesser dignity who became Christian and generally escaped ill-treatment. The beginnings of the Islamic *millet* system have been seen in the Sasanian organization of tolerated religious minorities, whose leaders were directly responsible to Ctesiphon, and, in the case of the Nestorian Church were forced to reside there. Sasanian behavior toward loyal Christians was correct, even cordial – Xusro II dedicated a silver plate to a Christian saint at Reshafa (see Peeters, *Analecta Bollandiana*, 1947, 5-56) – but the fires of persecution, as S. Brock has suggested, were fanned by the suspicion of Christian loyalty to the Byzantine enemy. Although Byzantine-Sasanian treaties provided for the toleration of Christians in Iran and *magousaior* in Asia Minor, the Church of Persia flourished while the Mazdeans of Asia Minor are described by the fourth-century writer St. Basil as a degraded, impoverished minority. When Byzantine administration of its Armenian *themes* led to the astonishingly rapid disappearance of the Armenian dynastic families, and of all the national traditions attached to them, it is scarcely surprising the Zoroastrians (in the Asia Minor under the Byzantine rule) should have vanished the more completely." (*Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute*, Bombay, 1986, pp. 138-9).