The Religious Situation

The Islamization of Persia

Whoever wishes to gain a full understanding of the cultural conditions of the East will have to endeavour to familiarise themselves with the prevailing religious situation. This applies especially to Persia from the seventh to the eleventh centuries CE, since this is the time during which this country gave up the religion which it had called its own for over a millennium, namely Zoroastrianism, and joined the emerging religion of Islam. Consequently, the Persian nation contributed to the broadening of Islam beyond the confines of a merely Arab national religion and helped to give it the character of a world religion in a way that few others can claim.

Yet the development of this religion in Persia was quite different from its progress in many other countries in the Middle East. Almost all the Persians became Muslims within a few centuries without significant outside coercion on the part of their conquerors. This contrasted with the situations in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Spain where large Christian communities remained in existence for centuries and either victoriously prevailed, as in Spain through the re-conquest undertaken by the Christian kingdoms of the North, or survived as smaller communities, as in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. However, Persia did not wholly lose itself by adopting Islam. To a great extent it moulded Islam into a religion suitable for its own needs. The Persian national spirit asserted itself independently and successfully in the Khārijite and Shiʿite communities of this country, and later in its brand of mysticism, even though these religious movements were not genuinely Persian. On the other hand, Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and largely also North Africa gave up their languages, despite the fact that these tongues went back to languages of the civilised world which had millennia of history behind them, as was the case with Aramaic and Coptic. Even the Christians in these areas came to speak the language of the Muslim conquerors after a few centuries. But this was not so in Persia. Even as a Muslim country it retained its language and managed to preserve it through years of Arab supremacy, with the result that finally it was able to usher in, with Firdawsi, an era of literary New Persian, to which the world owes many an immortal piece of literature.

This process is not simply explained by the low density of the Arab settlements. Even in the heavily settled river valleys of the Euphrates–Tigris and
the Nile, the Arabs can have constituted only a minority, and the affinity of the languages cannot be sufficient in order to understand this process, as Coptic was not noticeably any more related to Arabic than Persian. Therefore it is advisable to deal with the Islamization of Persia in detail in order to arrive at a solution to this problem. Hence we shall begin by focusing on the expansion, formation and character of Islam in Iran. The subsequent chapters will attempt to sketch the situation of the other religions in this region, in particular undertaking an evaluation of Zoroastrianism’s contact with and reaction to Islam in early medieval Persia.

The Muslim Arabs had often experienced swift and easy successes in spreading their religion among their Christian neighbours on the edge of the Syrian desert (although by no means did all Christian tribes convert immediately to the teachings of the Prophet). Thus it is not surprising that (Christian) Arab units in the ranks of the Persian army would often join the new religion quickly, and we know that the Muslims – often successfully – asked them deliberately ‘as their countrymen’ to join them, with the result that the Persian army was weakened at the crucial moment.¹ For the Persians, the situation was different. The existence of their state and their nation was at stake if they did not persist in their conviction. And yet the protracted battles of the preceding decades which brought with them the disintegration of inner morale led some Iranians to turn towards Islam early on as well, though probably not towards the dissolution of the social structure of the state,² as we have no reason to assume this to have been happening at this particular time. We are told that these recruits were officers, who were then joined by a larger or smaller number of their soldiers.³ Their aim was to gain social, military and economic equality with the Arabs. Only the promise of a considerable part of the spoils by the caliph

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¹ Ṭab. i 2278 (636); 2475 (637: Arabs from the tribes of Taghlib, lyād and Namr, who formed the garrison of the fortress of Takrit); Athīr ii 202 (637). For a general comparison see Gautier, L’Islamisation de l’histoire de Maghreb.

² Christensen¹ 431f. also mentions the inner disintegration of the Zoroastrian religion, which is, however, difficult to detect after the great restoration at the end of the fifth century.

³ Ṭab. i 2284 reports explicitly that from among the three possible options which the Arabs normally proposed for a peace (see p. 294 below: ‘Terms of submission’) the general Rustam referred to the acceptance of Islam as the most agreeable [AD: actually this sentiment was expressed by the Arab offering the choice to Rustam and not by Rustam himself; cf. Ṭab. i 2279]. See also: Ṭab. i 2257 (635; where a dream is said to have played a part); i 2260 (635); 2265 (635); Athīr ii 214 (643). These converts were, however, not completely reliable and would occasionally turn their weapons against the Arabs in favour of their countrymen, for example in 710 in eastern Iran: Ṭab. ii 1228. Caet. 111 916–20; Dennett 32.