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An Analysis of Manichaeism as the First Ideological Challenge During the Sasanian Dynasty

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Abstract

With the establishment of the Sasanian empire, Ardashir became the heir to the feudal and lenient legacy of the Parthians. He sought to establish political and religious centralism under his reign. At the same time, Manichaeism, much like the other existing religion in Iran, brought together pieces of the other religions and presented its teachings and tenets in any possible form. However, this religion presented severe ideological problems for the newly-established Sasanian empire, since it could undermine the religious and political centralism that the Sasanians desired, hence the first major ideological challenge. The present research seeks to answer the following question: What could justify the lenient behavior toward Manichaeism despite Shapur's intention to officialize Mazdayasna? Since the Sasanians initially focused on unifying their entire territory, they showed more leniency and tolerance towards the Manicheans. However, against this backdrop, the research hypothesizes that Mani's ideas gradually became an ideological threat to the Sasanians' desired political and religious centralism. The Sasanians familiarized themselves with the Manichean discourse through meticulous analysis and then sought to dismantle it. This research resorts to description and analysis of the available related information. It seeks to answer the research question and confirm the hypothesis.

Keywords: Sasanians, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Ideological Crisis, Manichean Beliefs.

Article Type: Research Article

Introduction

The inception of the Sasanian dynasty led not only to a political revolution, but also to a metamorphosis in the religious foundations of the society. Political and religious centralism constituted part of the efforts of the Sasanians to unify all Iranian and Aneranian territories. Therefore, the new creed of Sasanian Zoroastrianism entered into an immediate battle with nihilistic beliefs. On the one hand, the Sasanians tried to revitalize some kind of unity or integrity in Iran by adopting a centralist form of rule. They claimed that their intention was to revitalize some of the forgotten traditions of the Achaemenians (Herodian, VI, 2, 1-2; Dio Cassius, LXXX, 4, 1-2: 482-485). They also claimed that the Macedonians, the Seleucid, and the Parthians had all contributed to the dispersion of Iran (Tabari, 1996: 580). Up until the discovery of the written books of Manichaeism, historical documents related to Manichaeism were limited to the narratives of Islamic-Arabic, Christian, and Zoroastrian historians and authors of the Sasanian dynasty. Since, in these references, Manichaeism was considered a form of heresy, the contents were mostly biased and were against Manichaeism. Some successful archaeological explorations ensued, and some of the writings of the Manichaeans were unearthed from underneath great sands in Turpan, China. Coupled with some other works that depicted a novel picture of Manichaeism in Central Asia, which were not in stark contrast to the previous reports, the researchers were presented with a new image of Manichaeism (Lieu, 1998: 22-53). These works were written in Sogdian, Syriac, Pahlavi, Uyghur, and Manichaean scripts and disclosed a large number of Manichaean religious beliefs. Equally

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important were some Coptic poem-like works discovered in Egypt, praising Mani. These works suggest that Manichaeism enjoyed an integrated and vast system among its followers. One of the most invoked works in the study of Manichaeism is Confessions of Augustine. This Roman saint was initially a follower of Manichaeism for nine years but repented and converted to Christianity. Although his book is replete with aggression toward the Manichaeans, it provides invaluable information about their religion (St. Augustine, 2008). Other Christian writers followed suit and adopted the same approach towards the Manichaeans. Given the denouncement of the Manichaeans as infidels and atheists by the Catholic Church, these essays and books were written in their condemnation. During the Sasanian dynasty and even after its demise, the Zoroastrians produced some works against the Manichaeans in their condemnation. In many of their works, they also wrote about Mani and the beliefs of the Manichaeans.

One of the most salient of such Zoroastrians is Madanfarrox Hormazan, an eighth-century priest. In his book Shikand-gumanig Vizar, he devoted one chapter to explicating the beliefs of the Manichaeans and rejected them one by one (Gozaresh-e Gaman Shekan, 2008). Also, in his book Denkard, the Zoroastrian writer Azarfarnbagh Farroxzādān has presented some accounts on the beliefs of the Manichaeans from his perspective (The Third Denkard, 2020). During the Islamic era, the Manichaeans were called ‘Zandaqa’, the killing of whom was even ordered during the Abbasid Caliphate. At that time, despite the dissipation of Manichaean communities in many regions, Muslim authors studied the beliefs of the Manichaeans more than ever. As a result, many different books were written about the Manichaeans, almost all of which were in the condemnation of Manichaeism. Al-Masudi, Ibn al-Nadim, Al-Biruni, and Shahrestani were some of the greatest authors who focused their attention on Manichaeism and were less biased and, thus, provided invaluable information on the religion.

The Religious Crisis of the Sasanian Era

The Sasanians sought to unify the local governors under one single empire. Changing the religious geography of Iran led to numerous problems for the founders of the Sasanian dynasty. The diversity of religions and rituals, deeply tangled with the Iranian society, proved to be a formidable barrier against this policy. Moving past feudality to a centralized government did turn into reality. However, the multiplicity of religions in Iran made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to prevail one single belief throughout the country. Overtime, it became apparent that Sasanians could not turn their idea of a unified religious creed into reality immediately as not only changing peoples’ beliefs was impossible in a short timespan, it would also stir up discontent and resistance in the long run. They were seeking to disseminate fire temples all through the territories belonging to the Sasanians and even those of other religions. Some strategies included collecting Avesta and powering Zoroastrian priests as a socio-religious caste. Just like political representatives or border guards who were sent to each province in Iran, the priests also received governmental mandates as religious representatives. At the same time as the central government was attempting to actualize its policy of centralism, the priests were seeking to dominate all the territories. The Zoroastrian priests utilized the political and military power of the Sasanians to export their beliefs to other areas and suppress all dissidents, accusing them of distortion and heresy. However, gradually, the obvious and secret collaborations between the priests and the nobles broke down because of altercations as to the extent to which the power of either of the two sides was expanding. Heresy and infidelity on either end were considered inappropriate and punishable. Prosecuting and harassing religious minorities and suppressing heretics or Zandaqas and the Manichaeans were considered a crucial undertaking. For the Sasanian society, the emergence of Mani’s thinking was a religious and political challenge. Fighting Mani’s beliefs was a reaction to the emergence of the thoughts of a group whose thinking was based on a distorted interpretation of Zoroastrianism. Manichaeism challenged the Sasanians’ religious centralism. The priests were trying to direct the society toward their own dictated reality and were adamant about any flexibility to opposing ideas. This led to the downfall of thoughts and thinking in the Sasanian era (Sediqi, 1996: 20). In fact, the linking together of the state and religion led to an enclosed and limited culture. Although it was initially able to fight against the Greek and Roman cultures, it gradually turned into a stagnant culture due to the bias, inflexibility, and monotony incorporated into it. It did not take long

for this culture to fall short against any cultures challenging it. Indeed, the dependence of religion on the state amounted to the interdependent falling of one after the fall of the other. From the onset, the religious policies of the Sasanians were based upon a link between religion and the monarchy. The enmeshment of Manichaeism with the religious orders of other religions made it easy for the people of different lands to accept it. Mani himself argued that, 'the earlier religions existed in just one region and one language, but my religion is so that it has spread to all regions and all languages and are taught in remote lands' (Biruni, 1984: 309-310). He considered himself the Paraclete[1] , whose arrival had been foretold by Jesus (Ibn al-Nadim, 2002: 484). Mani travelled extensively and could gain a large following for his creed. Since his writings were accompanied by picturesque images and euphonious music, he could pique the interest of any culture to which he traveled (Al-Jahiz, n.d.: 459-460). By the end of Mani's life, Manichaeism found its way to Jordan. However, it eventually fell to the aggressions of Zoroastrian priests who saw their position in danger. They urged the Sasanian king Bahram to order the killing of Mani (Van Gorder, 2010: 27-28). Consequently, Mani was arrested and horridly killed following devastating tortures. His corpse was hung from the entrance gate of the city of Jundishapur (Moqadasi, v. 6: 45-46). With the empowerment of Zoroastrian priests, they seized any opportunity to further their influence, suppress their enemies, and interfere in political and religious affairs. They attended the coronation ceremonies and bestowed the crown on the kings' head. During the long period of the Sasanian rule, the priests relied upon their religious power at times. Since they considered the advancement of religious minorities as a barrier to dissemination of their own religion and regarded them as dissents, they encouraged the kings to resort to acts of violence against them. The resolution of the salient Zoroastrian priests about the selection of Sasanian kings was decisive, and they also had the authority to depose them.

Kartir, an influential and prominent priest in the Sasanian Empire and who played an important role in the preservation of ancient Zoroastrian traditions and fighting against the infiltration of other religions, has engraved his biography on a stone along with some of the other important embossments belonging to the Sasanian dynasty. It seems that what was known as Zoroastrianism in the Sasanian era is not similar to the true spirit of the Zoroastrianism. It is marked by distortions and interventions in the religion's original tenets. As a result, the spirit of liberty and lack of religious bigotry existing among the Achaemenians and the Parthians morphed into an imperative religion.

The Sasanians' Centralism and the Policy of Cultural Transformation by Zoroastrian Priests

The Zoroastrian priests of the Sasanian period had fully realized the fact that if Zoroastrianism was to successfully resist the strength and infiltration of other rapidly-expanding and prominent third and fourth-century religions in eastern and western Iran, it was vital to make some modifications and changes in this religion. On the other hand, the domestic religious movements that had transgressed their thought circle also threatened Zoroastrianism as an official state religion. Although Mani's beliefs did not come out victorious in the battlefields and domestic religious-political struggles, they landed vicious and serious strikes upon the official Zoroastrian beliefs in the early years of the Sasanian Empire. The collapse of the Parthians and the emergence of the Sasanian dynasty in the second half of the second century and the first half of the third century led to an era during which Mani founded a new religion while the Sasanians were focused on consolidating the foundations of their empire. Mani attended the coronation of Shapur I and dedicated to him his book *Shapuhragan* (Mojtabaei, 2005: 34-35). Mani traveled to different locales and sent representatives to both the eastern and western regions, and formed numerous Manichaean communities. After his death, his followers fled to the eastern Sasanian territory for fear of their lives.

[1]Paraclitus, Paraclete, Holy Spirit, Gabriel. A sublime helping and calming spirit. See 'Paraclete' and 'Holy Spirit' (Britannica encyclopedia). Christians believe it to be the Holy Spirit. However, in other works and holy scriptures from Jesus and Moses, it has been proven that Paraclete means 'the comforter', referring to the Seal of the Prophets (Anandraj). According to Jesus, the word 'Paraclete' has been used to refer to the prophet proceeding him. This word in the sense of 'the comforter' has been used rather vaguely drawing on the contextual clues preceding and proceeding the word in Bible. 'Comforter' is the translation of the Greek word 'Paraclete', for which other meanings such as 'teacher', 'mediator', 'guidance', and 'guider' have been suggested. In the Gospel of John chapter 13 verses 13 and 14, the Gospel of Luke chapter 20 verse 28, the Gospel of Mark chapter 10 verse 17, the Gospel of Matthew chapter 26 verse 25, both the apostles and the inquisitors of Jesus considered him their master-teacher.

During his life, Mani wrote seven books, all of which were in Syriac, except for *Shapuhragan*. Later on, Mani's disciples translated his works, speeches, and essays into different languages, including Persian, Parthian Pahlavi, Sogdian, Chinese, Greek, Coptic, and Latin, hence the dissemination of his beliefs throughout the Sasanian territory. As a result, the beliefs and ideas of the Sasanian priests were secretly challenged more than ever. The word 'Zandaqa'[1] was probably first used in the third century on Kartir's inscriptions in the Cube of Zoroaster, to describe Rustam as a Manichaean with corrupted beliefs. This description can clarify the ruling priests' opinion towards the iconoclastic beliefs and ideas of Mani. These Zandaqs were constantly tortured and killed throughout the Sasanian era. The torturing and slaughtering of the Manichaean community are well-documented in the historical scripts. It could safely be argued that the Sasanian Empire suffered from religious and intellectual crises. This situation continued to exist as one of the most crucial factors contributing to the intellectual downfall and spiritual collapse of the empire until the rise of Islam.

The Development of Manichaeism and the Start of Conflict with the Zoroastrian Class System

With the collapse of the Parthian empire and the expansion of Christianity, which was built upon the tenets of Mithraism, the followers of Mithraism were quick to convert to Christianity (Taqizadeh, 1956: 28-29). Mani had, more or less, borrowed some principles from all renowned religions. For instance, he had borrowed very little from Buddhism. He was influenced by Zurvanism to a slightly greater extent and even more by Christianity. He was inspired the most by the principles of 'Gnosticism', especially by Marcion of Sinope. However, Manichaeism was not just a hybrid of these adaptations; its foundations were laid upon Mani himself. Most probably, the limited adaptation from other religions was for the easier dissemination and acceptance of the religion in other territories by the Indian, Zoroastrian, and Christian populations (Taqizadeh, 1956: 36; van den Berg, 2011:265). The history of the Manichaeans and their propaganda until the insurgence of the Mongols is a long story, the most salient manifestations of which being the rapid dissemination of Manichaeism. The expansion was so rapid that, by approximately 300 AD, i.e., almost a quarter century past the death of Mani, Manichaeism expanded to Syria, Egypt, Northern Africa, Spain, and Gal (Taqizadeh, 1956: 18). Manichaeism gained a large following in Bactria and Mary (Lieu, 1985:183) so that Hiuen Tsang, a Chinese traveler in the second quarter of the 7th century, states Manichaeism as the absolute religion in Iran spread across the entire country as far as the border of Bactria, where Manichaeism was so strong (Taqizadeh, 1956: 19; Lieu, 1998). In the early 8th century, a Manichean caliphate has been in place in Bactria (Taqizadeh, 1956: 19; Lieu, 1998). Despite the pressure and strictness of the Zoroastrian priests on the Manichaean community, it survived in Iran, although clandestinely. There are numerous narratives regarding the prosecution of the Manicheans under Narseh and Hormizd II in Coptic discourses. Amr ibn Adi, the Arab king of Al-Hirah, supported this sect (Glassé, 2008,308). Manichaeism found its place among the Arabs of Quraysh through Al-Hirah (Azarnoosh, 1995: 171). Manichaeism originated from Babylon (Mesopotamia), i.e. the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon, which included a large Manichean component. However, due to the existing pressures at the time, some groups moved to Mashriq and northern regions, where Iranian clans inhabited. A large population of the Manichaeans resided in Sogdia. These eastern Manichaeans would lose connection with their western kins over time (Christensen, 1989: 225; Foltz, 2016:43).

Manichaeism indeed was a spinoff of Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, and Christianity and was considered an eclecticism. The role of the Zoroastrian class system as a primary factor in the emergence of the Manichaeans is undeniable. Class privileges and a large number of the Iranians being deprived of ownership made it impossible in the Sasanian era to achieve unity, hence the formation of revolutionary groups. A large portion of the population was dissatisfied, concerned, and deprived. Two revolutions were the outcome of the people's dissatisfaction with the situation and their being deprived of their God-given legitimate rights. A description of these two revolutions follows.

[1] ***Zandaqa***: One who obeys the commands and prohibitions of Pazand, the Arabicized form of which is 'Zandaqa'. (Burhān) (Nazem Al-Atebba) (Jahangir's dictionary) (Anjoman Arā) (Anandraj). In Pahlavi (Zandaq) (Manichean). The word was probably first used in the early third century in Kartir's inscription, the prominent priest during the reign of Bahram I and Bahram II in the temple of Zoroaster, to describe Rustam.

First, in AD 240 in the coronation of Shapur I, i.e., fourteen years after the establishment of the dynasty, Mani announced and developed his religion, which was considered a safe haven for the deprived groups. The history of the Manicheans and their propaganda continued into the Islamic era. Mani regarded himself as a global missionary and believed that his ideas would be heard by people of different languages both in the East and West (Brown,2007: 99-98; Daniel,2001:59). According to one approach, the expansion of Manichaeism was only possible through strong propaganda. Ghirshman argues that Mani grew up in an aristocratic family and developed a religion similar to Christian thoughts, open to all human beings, regardless of their social class, ethnicity or wealth. But the official religion of the Sasanians was dependent upon the court and natural (worldly) and social foundations. It encouraged its followers to get married and breed and avoid any kind of abstinence. Zoroastrianism was a dynamic and motivating religion, encouraging its followers to produce. In addition to the profound benefits it provided to its followers, it was always a favorite choice for the Sasanians in terms of war and conquering since production and farming could compensate for the heavy expenses of the war. Mani stood against the ruling body, through opposing the court and the noble class, casting doubt on the increasing power of the priests, and disentangling the encapsulated people. Since he did not have the military strength to fight, he focused his attention and insurgence on the ideological battleground. From another perspective, since the Sasanian Empire was concerned about the increasing infiltration of Zoroastrian priests and found its foundations trembling, it used Mani to stand against the power of the priests (Van Gorder,2010: 27). In other words, it sought to present a barrier against the priests by accepting the negative aspects of the Manichean teachings.

Creating a Single Official Religion and the Reactive Effect of Manichaeism

After a period of dispersion and recess that lasted until after the collapse of the Achaemenians and the Parthians, Zoroastrianism was relatively consolidated. After the defeat of the Achaemenians and the rise of the Seleucids in Iran, the first chapter in the failure of this religion and fighting against the Iranian culture on a broad scale opened. For more than seventy years, most of the religious and cultural teachings were destroyed, and Zoroastrianism lost its credibility. Then, the Parthians initially pretended to be supporters of the Greek culture. They even minted their coins in Greek. During the 500-year dominance of this dynasty, there was no single religion that would be supported by a large population. Against this backdrop, ancient Gods and ancient mythological religions gained popularity, and diverse beliefs emerged in different corners of Iran, which was a broad country composed of various and somehow remote ethnicities, e.g., Mithraism – various religions that considered themselves dependent upon Zoroaster. However, despite the multiplicity of religions, they did not play so central a role that would lead to obnoxious political struggles. Under Parthians, there was still no trace of extreme bigotry, and no extended pressure was exercised against different religions. Everyone could accept any religious thought with total liberty. For instance, some Parthian princes had converted to Buddhism.

With the emergence of Jesus (PBUH) during Phraates IV, known as Arsaces I of Parthia XXIV (37 BCE- AD 2), a new religion with global popularity emerged. It did not take long until Christianity was recognized as the official religion of the Byzantine Empire. Unlike Romans' efforts to convert their territories to Christianity, the Iranians did not exert any pressure to force others to convert to Christianity. From almost AD 50, Christianity enjoyed a religious organization and advertising agency. During this time, a large population of Zoroastrian Armenians converted to Christianity as a result of the existing pressures and advertisements. During this time, Tiridates, the king of Armenia, converted to Christianity as well. Shapur II, dissatisfied with Armenians conversion to Christianity, stirred the dissidents of this religion and crowned Arsaces as the king of Armenia. Christianity turned into a political means for advancing the purposes of the Eastern Roman Empire. Consequently, the biggest social and political crisis in Iran springing from religious struggles broke out in the early years of the Sasanian rule. Hence, it could be predicted that the prototypical model of ruling in Iran was to go down in history as one of religious foundation and strong centralism. When the Sasanians rose, Zoroastrianism was divided into numerous sects and branches. Non-Iranian creeds such as Buddhism from the east, Christianity, and Judaism were active throughout the country. In Mesopotamia, colorful philosophical

and agnostic thoughts such as mysticism schools, neo-Platonian thoughts, Jewish thoughts, and various encounters with Zoroastrianism could be observed. Artaxerxes, who was the heir to such chaos, felt it incumbent upon himself to unify the Iranian society. The Sasanian Empire did not intend to revive the monotheism towards Zoroastrianism or Gatha rationalism. Instead, they sought to establish a single-religion system to expand their power.

Manichaeism developed and embraced in an environment replete with gnostic, Christian, and Jewish thoughts (Van Gorder,2010:27). This religion could be effective in the political sphere, but it was soon encountered the strong dissent of Zoroastrian priests who had surrounded Shapur, the most prominent of whom was Kartir (Wikander, 1946: 206; Wiesehöfer, 1998: 254). The corpus of Manichean narratives regarding the relationship of Shapur and Mani and the position of Shapur I suggests that Shapur supported Manichaeism. Some Muslim authors also corroborate this idea. For instance, Yaqubi (Wiesehöfer: 195) and Al-Masudi (The Meadows of Gold, 2003: 243) report that Shapur supported Mani and had even converted to his religion for several years (Herzfeld, 2002: 171). Manichaeism was present in Mesopotamia, Rome, Egypt, and Northern India. In Iran, some influential and prominent figures converted to the religion. With the coronation of Shapur I, Mani stood before Shapur (Henrich, 1970: 120). Mani asserts that he went to Shapur, and he embraced him with the utmost respect and allowed him to speak the words of life throughout the country, and he was amongst Shapur's entourage for several years (Christensen: 225). Mani dedicated one of his books, Shapuragan, to him. In Al-Fihrist, Ibn-Nadim argues that Tome angel emerged on him at the age of 24 (Ibn al-Nadim, 2002: 583). In Mani's autobiography, we read that "I started my teachings in the final years of Artaxerxes I" (Al-Masudi, Al-Tanbih wa l-ishraf, 2002: 124; Yaqubi, 2005: v. 1/195; Yarshatir, 1994: 421). The teachings of Manichaeism were built upon a pessimistic approach that could not serve as a powerful foundation for the Sasanian Empire and could not suppress the religious chaos existing at the time of the Sasanian Empire. Especially, all the tenets of Manichaeism were in contrast with Zoroastrianism, and the Zoroastrian priests were extremely hostile to the religion. Consequently, Shapur and a group of prominent figures who were in search of a single religion for Iran were frustrated with the religion. On the other hand, the military advancements of the west had presented a new challenge to the Sasanian Empire, and it was of great importance to consolidate the power of Iran in the territories under control. As a result, religious leaders accompanied the king's army to propagate Mazdayasna. The Mazdayasna that the Sasanians were looking for was a combination of all Iranian religions, that is, ancient Gods, Zurvanism, and Zoroastrian. At the time, the Sasanian Empire realized the importance of strengthening the foundation of the Iranian religion to be able to withstand the penetration of other religions, especially Christianity. The Zoroastrian priests were commissioned with the task of strengthening Iranian religions. Despite the efforts made by the Parthians to collect Avesta, this goal was yet to be realized. Against this backdrop, Kartir could play a pivotal role in the political and religious contexts thanks to his wisdom and acumen. There is no mention of Kartir in the list of Artaxerxes's entourage. However, in that of Shapur's, only one priest is mentioned, and that is Kartir. He gradually achieved high ranks. With the recognition of Mazdayasna as the official religion and the support of the Sasanian kings, religious, intellectual, and philosophical freedom was eradicated. The high authority of the state religion to stand against the dissidents and the unprecedented intellectual restrictions gradually led to an absolute religious dictatorship. With the strictness and excessive violence of Kartir, the official religion of Mazdayasna was forced onto the residents of all provinces in Iran and territories under the control of Iran. The taxation system was based on being Zoroastrian or not, and it peaked by the putting in place of a Jizya[1] . For the first time ever, religion and state, which were separated in the teachings of Zoroastrianism and Gatha, combined with each other. It seems that, from the early days of the Sasanian dynasty, Mani and Zoroastrianism were vying to become the official religion of Iran, and the efforts of Kartir and Mani were of crucial importance in this regard. Kartir, a Zoroastrian priest who was a first-rank politician under the rule of six Sasanian kings, i.e., Artaxerxes I to Narseh, was the most salient supporter of Zoroastrianism and is regarded as one of the most hostile enemies to Mani. During the Sasanian Empire, two nascent religions were developed, the followers of both of which

[1]Meaning *per capita* in Pahlavi. Jizya refers to the taxes that non-Zoroastrians had to pay before Islam. It is originally Hebrew Aramaic..

were regarded as infidels. The Zoroastrian priests and some kings opposed them, and, in some cases, excessive violence and slaughter were resorted to suppress both of them. Zoroastrianism believed in one single God namely 'Ahura Mazda', meaning 'the powerful sage'. Against him, all Aryan and non-Aryan Gods were regarded as sinister, dark, violent, disturbing, painful, and fatal creatures. Although Manichaeism could not dominate the domestic religious-political sphere, it landed serious strikes on the beliefs of the Zoroastrians. Manichaeism thought well of all religions and opened the doors of Manichaeism to all humans, regardless of their status and ethnicity. It could, at first glance, consolidate the foundations of the government. Following the death of Shapur I, Kartir managed to persecute the Manicheans and force them to move to other lands and territories, and, eventually, Mani was accused and executed. Due to the pressures exerted upon the Manicheans, a group of them migrated to the east and the north, where Iranian tribes resided. A large population of the Manicheans settled in Sogdia. These eastern Manicheans gradually lost contact with their fellow Manicheans in the west (Golzar, 2008: 93-95). After a while, the followers of Mani were slaughtered. However, despite the gravity of Sasanian kings to eradicate Manichaeism, they were not slaughtered completely, and many of them fled to Europe and China, spreading the Sasanian culture and civilization to the different corners of the world. Some Manicheans who had moved to the east settled in China, while some others chose Sogdia and Uyghur. According to some documents obtained through the discovery of a Sogdian inscription, Sogdia had turned into a center for propagating Manichaeism (Widengren, 1997: 176). Also, strong footprints of Manichaeism can be found in cities such as Samarkand and Tashkent. Especially in Samarkand, the Manicheans enjoyed great influence. Consequently, Manichaeism could continue its intellectual and social life in different regions even after losing a large number of allies and supporters and the death of its founder and prophet. It could even maintain its followers for a long time as an underground religion. With the conversion of Iranians to Islam, the dominance of Zoroastrian priests was removed. As a result, the Manicheans who had fled to Iraq, Mani's birthplace, from the fear of death and persecution returned after over four centuries of itineration. By then, Iraq had turned into the focus of attention. Although Christianity had found its place in Egypt and the Levant and Zoroastrianism was still rampant in different regions of Iran, fruitful religious encounters and theoretical arguments were underway in Iraq. Aside from Basrah and Baghdad, which served as the conglomeration center for the prominent Muslim figures, Iraq has long been a bridge between the west and the east, a situation that had turned it into a multicultural and multi-religion territory. Especially, since the early second century, with the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate and the migration of the followers of different religions, including Manichaeism, to the capital of the Islamic state, the religious diversity increased.

In addition to the Zoroastrians' defeat in Iran, the weakness and languor of the Christians in Egypt, Iraq and the Levant solaced the Manicheans. On the other hand, Muslims' leniency regarding other religions turned Iraq into a more favorable place for the Manicheans. In some cities of Iraq, especially Baghdad, some Manichean groups emerged and built temples and monasteries (Ibn al-Nadim, 2002: 460). The Manichean travelers also propagated the religion and served as missionaries. Since Manichaeism was protected by the secrets and myths in the form of literature and music, it was very desirable to other people. During the early days of Islam, given the Muslims' religious leniency, the Manicheans recentered their establishments in Babylonia and started to build temples. This can be indicative of the power and influence of the Manicheans even after the collapse of the Sasanian Empire during the early years of Islam in Iran. The early years of Islam in Iran were characterized by a nourishing environment in which the Manicheans' publications, tenets, and beliefs could be propagated rather quickly. The fact that the Manicheans were adroit at writing and authoring might be related to them being close to the writers and authors of the Caliphate. The Manicheans, who were also called 'Sasanian Zandaqs', pretended to convert to Islam. They benefitted from their experience in the court and met the Muslims' needs regarding administrative and governmental affairs. Figures such as Abdul Hamid, Ibn al-Muqaffa', and Bashar ibn Burd were some of the most prominent Manichean writers and scripters who were renowned for heresy.

The Cause of Mani's Success

The pessimistic nature of Manichaeism was a reflection of the grim situation of the third century.

Due to this reason, it could find relative success in some respects (Pigulevskaya, 1998: 477). On the one hand, during the Sasanian dynasty, religions were no longer limited to a particular locale and had attained a global attraction. While Christianity and Manichaeism were not restricted to ethnic boundaries, Judaism and Zoroastrianism were still dependent upon the religious prototypes of the east and were, thus, enclosed within ethnic boundaries. The propagating efforts of the Zoroastrians to expand their religion are well-documented in inscriptions, e.g., thorough constructing fire temples (Frye, 2006: 481). The Roman emperor Diocletian's order to his envoy in Africa in AD 296 suggests that the Manichean teachings were frequently used among the public (Lukonin, 1971: 123-124; Greenlees,2007:C; Kaatz,2012: 62). It was of great importance to Mani himself to write books and depict his teachings. Unlike Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus, who never wrote anything, Mani was the author of eight books.

The Manichean literature is a compilation of different books in different languages. Hence, Manichaeism is also of great interest in terms of the number of languages into which its teachings are translated. Manichean scripts have been written in Middle Persian, Pahlavi, Sogdian, Chinese, and Uyghurs. Mani's imagery and works (especially Arzhang) are considered some of his highlights(Iliffe,2005:47-48;Ort,1967:109-112). Furthermore, although Manichaeism has been seemingly on the fall, it still persists in the form of a gnostic sect, especially in the world of Christianity thanks to its gnostic origin. In an analysis, the contributions of Mani and Shapur can be highlighted. Both Shapur and Mani belonged to the royal family and benefitted from the shared benefits of being Iranian. Mani dreamed of a broader world encompassing Iran and beyond. Shapur was thinking of a 'global kingdom' and Mani was in the thought of a 'global religion' to provide this kingdom with spiritual monotheism.

Conclusions

With the foundation of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardashir attempted to establish religious-political centralism in his newly-formed state. On the one hand, Manichaeism presented its insights to the world through any possible form of art that could serve as a way to introduce the religion to other territories. Borrowing from other existing religions in Iran, the application of painting, and the establishment of a major advertising organization were considered great feats. On the other hand, this religion was considered a major ideological threat to the new Sasanian dynasty and undermined its political and religious centralism. Consequently, Manichaeism could be considered as the first major ideological crisis of the Sasanian dynasty. Shapur I was the heir to the feudal, tolerant, and decentralized system of the Parthians. Since Shapur found the official Zoroastrian insufficient for implementing his ideas, he temporarily turned his attention to Manichaeism, which boasted a global aura. Manichaeism was a combination of the then-existing religions in Iran. It incorporated some features from Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Buddhism, and other minor religions. In fact, given the prevailing political, religious, and military conditions in Iran, Manichaeism proved to be a better means for unifying the entire kingdom and also justifying Shapur's developmentalist agendas in the east and the west. Shapur was battling against the Buddhist Kushan Empire in the east, on the one hand, and the Christian Roman Empire in the west, on the other. Also, Zoroastrianism held a stranglehold over the domestic population. It is probable that one of the reasons for Shapur's leniency towards Manichaeism was to prevent the ever-growing power and influence of Zoroastrian priests. Changing the religious geography of Iran led to numerous problems for the founders of the Sasanian dynasty. The multiplicity of religions, which formed an integral part of the Iranian society, was considered a great barrier to the realization of Sasanians' policies. Although Sasanians managed to leave the feudalist government behind and establish a centralist state, it did not seem as feasible to solve the problem of religions plurality within Iran and institute a single religious thought. He resisted the idea that changing the beliefs of the public is not possible within a short period. Over time, expanding fire temples to all of the territories under the Sasanian dynasty and even the territories of other religions, collecting Avesta, and empowering the priests turned into Sasanians' mainstream strategies to implement their policies. The priests made use of the political and military power of the Sasanian dynasty and imposed their religion on the public, and suppressed the dissidents with accusations of infidelity and heresy. Persecuting and prosecuting religious minorities and suppressing heretics or Zandaqs and the Manicheans were considered

crucial. For the Sasanian society, the emergence of Manichean thought was a serious political and religious challenge. Manichaeism challenged the Sasanian ideological centralism. The enmeshment of Manichaeism with the orders of other religions made it easy for the people of other territories to accept it, and this was a great threat to the propagation and expansion of Zoroastrianism. Kartir, a prominent Zoroastrian priest in Sasanian dynasty who played a pivotal role in preserving traditional Zoroastrian rituals and fighting the influence of other religions, stood against Manichaeism. It seems what was regarded as Zoroastrianism under the Sasanian dynasty is in contrast with its true spirit and the original, more traditional sources and tenets. It clearly shows signs of distortions during the process of writing the religious Zoroastrian tenets. As a result, the spirit of freedom and lack of religious bigotry, characterizing the Achaemenids and the Parthians, turned into an authoritative and assertive religion. The Zoroastrian priests sought to direct the contemporary society towards their dictated beliefs and ideologies and completely ignored leniency, hence the declination of thoughts during the Sasanian dynasty. In fact, the linking of religion and state led to a closed and limited culture that could initially fight against the Greek and Roman culture; however, it turned into an inflexible and stagnant culture in the long run. It soon fell short to any culture that ever challenged it. Indeed, the reliance of religion on the state meant that with the collapse of one, the collapse of the other was inevitable.

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