

CHAPTER SEVEN

FROM POWER TO POWERLESSNESS: ZOROASTRIANISM IN
IRANIAN HISTORY

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The present chapter discusses a relevant, but generally neglected case of a religious minority in what is generally referred to as the 'Middle East', namely the case of Zoroastrianism. This is one of the oldest religious traditions of the world, with roots in the second millennium BCE and primordial ties to Iranian history and the country of Iran, where Zoroastrians until well after the Arabic-Islamic conquest in the mid-seventh century CE constituted the majority religious group.¹ While focusing on more recent developments,² the present chapter will put the minority question in a more long-term perspective. It starts with some reflections on terminology, before giving the argument a historical twist and looking at the historical origin of the majority/minority configuration, which is shown to have pre-Islamic antecedents. The conclusion will briefly wind up the argument by pointing to some dimensions of the core issue of this volume: power and powerlessness.

Speaking of Religious Minorities

The notion of 'religious minorities' rests on a double distinction: Speaking of *religious* minorities only makes sense when religion can be distinguished

¹ I wish to thank my colleague Jenny Rose for reading and correcting an earlier version of this essay. Thanks also to the editors of this volume for their careful editorial work and to Maurits van den Boogert for suggestions and comments.

² For general historical surveys of Zoroastrianism in modern Iran see Writer 1994; Stausberg 2002b: 152–262 (in German); Mehr 2002; Choksy 2006. Local ethnographic studies include Fischer 1973, who did fieldwork among the religious minorities of Yazd during the late 1960s; Boyce 1977, who paints a somewhat romantic picture of religious life in a remote village based on fieldwork in the early 1960s; Kestenberg Amighi 1990, on assimilation and ethnic persistence based on fieldwork in Teheran in the early to mid-1970s. For a more recent sketch of Yazd, see Green, 2000. See also Sanasarian 2000, for a synoptic survey of the religious minorities. Sarah Stewart (SOAS) is currently engaged in a comprehensive study of contemporary Zoroastrianism, including oral history.

as a recognizable, sufficiently differentiated sphere of social interaction—implying that the different religions acting within a religious field recognize each other as specimens of the same category, even though they typically attempt to deny the status of other religions by polemically referring to them as ‘idol-worships’, ‘cults’, ‘sects’ or whatever derogatory label may come to mind. At the same time, speaking of religious *minorities* is predicated on the existence of (religious) majorities, even though such majorities typically exist in the singular, with one majority versus several minorities.

On the face of it, the relationship between a minority and a majority is of a numerical kind, pointing to the distribution of religious affiliation in a given demographic context. In scholarly and non-scholarly discourses, however, beyond the numerical facts, the very establishment of which often serves specific interests, speaking of minorities is entangled with notions of power. (The present volume is a case in point.) The influential Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth (1897–1952) of German-Jewish descent articulated that very clearly in a seminal article published in 1945, where he defines “a minority as a group of people who, because of their physical and cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination” (Wirth 1945: 347). The relationship between majority and minority here exceeds the purely numerical³ and is conceived as one of position and participation in society, mutual perception and self-perception, attitudes and behavior. In this understanding, as articulated by Wirth, but apparently generally taken for granted, discrimination is a defining feature of being a minority.

Although the minority group discussed in the present chapter, namely the Zoroastrians of Iran, neatly fits the proposed scheme in various respects, for the sake of logical consistency and conceptual clarity I would prefer to disentangle the numerical from the discriminatory aspects. To my mind, the asymmetrical power-relations beyond the purely numerical and statistical facts (which can go along with various power-relationships) should be referred to as *subordinate* versus *dominant* groups.⁴ The dominant groups are powerful in that they, or allied forces such as the nation states, have the capacity “to decide what is decided” (Lukes 2005: 111), to carry out their

³ Wirth 1945: 349: ‘... minorities are not to be judged in terms of numbers. The people whom we regard as a minority may actually, from a numerical standpoint, be a majority’.

⁴ Another set of power relationships is hegemony, characterized by the subordinates’ consent. This does not seem to apply in the case studied in the following.

own will even against others and to frame the agenda for the others.⁵ While the agency of the dominant group is affirmed and enabled, the agency of the subordinate group is restricted. Turning to religion, this means that the religious field is regulated in such a manner as to benefit the dominant group(s) and to curtail the agency of the subordinate group(s).

The Historical Genesis of 'Religious Minorities' in Pre-Islamic Iran

The minority-question of the Middle East is typically identified with Islam as being the religious majority in question. Turning to Iranian history, in my interpretation (for more details see Stausberg, 2002a) it was during the reign of the Sasanians (224–651), the last of the pre-Islamic empires of Iran,⁶ that the religious field—the ensemble of religious expressions in a given territory—was reorganized in such a manner that we find a dominant majority religion and several subordinate religious minorities. Zoroastrianism, the dominant religion backed up by the Sasanian kings, has a history going back far beyond the Sasanian period, to the earliest times of the emergence of Iranian ethnogenesis, in the sense that the ancient Zoroastrian texts, collectively known as the *Avesta*, at the same time provide the earliest evidence of Iranian languages and cultural concepts. Nonetheless, it is clear that not all Iranian territories were 'Zoroastrianized' in the sense of exclusive religious adherence, and there is plenty of evidence of religious forms of expression that cannot be classified as Zoroastrian (in a wider or a more narrow sense).

It is only with the early Sasanians that one finds kings who actively and exclusively sponsored Zoroastrian religious institutions, apparently as part of their project to create a unified empire. Already half a millennium earlier, Achaemenian kings had invoked Zoroastrian deities, most prominently Ahura Mazdā, and other elements of the Zoroastrian religion in their attempt to legitimate the creation and perpetuation of their empire (Lincoln 2007). Yet, it is the Sasanian kings who in their official proclamations not only recurred to the protection and support of (Zoroastrian) deities, but even explicitly professed their adherence to Zoroastrianism as a religion. The Sasanian kings identified themselves and were identifiable as Zoroastrian kings roughly a century before Constantine became

⁵ I follow Lukes 2005: 109 in his view that power refers to "an ability or capacity, which may or may not be exercised".

⁶ See Daryaee 2009 for a recent comprehensive portrayal of the Sasanian Empire.

the first of the Christian Roman emperors. Besides the affirmation of religious identity, their use of religious symbols in official documents and their patronage of religious institutions such as ritual fires, religion was variously interlinked with the State in terms of administration and law. (This is why many scholars speak of a Sasanian 'state church'.) The tightening control over the religious field is also reflected in religious tensions aiming at the destruction of certain sanctuaries and at the elimination of religious variation ('heresy') and 'irreligion' and in reported codifications of the religious tradition. Zoroastrian religious texts from the Islamic era articulate the ideology of a 'religiocracy' by affirming the inseparable unity of kingship and religion. While this idea may well have had its supporters in Sasanian times, reality was more complex.

Besides unmarked or unnamed religious practices—i.e. religious practices, often of a local or regional nature, that cannot be identified in terms of an encompassing religious tradition—other groups with clearly marked religious identities had settled on territories that were (or were to become) part of the Sasanian Empire. Jews had been living on Iranian soil for many centuries, and Christianity took root there from early on in its history. No less than twenty Christian bishops were recorded in Iranian territory at the beginning of the Sasanian period. There were also other religious groups, and, with Manichaeism, a new, expanding, international religion came into being from within Iran in the early Sasanian period. In some regions of the Empire, especially in Mesopotamia (no longer a part of modern Iran), Zoroastrians never were the majority of the population. There is evidence that the different religious groups did not live isolated from each other but engaged in various forms of interaction and exchange, even though most of their normative documents tried to erect clear behavioral and ideological boundaries and often displayed critical or even hostile attitudes to each other. In fact, the reorganization of the religious field that occurred with the ascendance of the Sasanians swiftly led to unprecedented harshness in interreligious relationships. Mani, the apostle of Manichaeism, died in a Sasanian prison c.276 CE, and in his inscriptions a high-ranking (but later forgotten) third century priest proudly mentions that he instigated persecutions of several non-Zoroastrian religions. Sanctions like these were unheard of in pre-Sasanian times, not necessarily because people were less pious and aggressive or more tolerant, but because the religious field was not yet organized as an arena of competition between different, clearly identifiable, religious groups. Persecutions of Christians and Jews are also attested for later periods of Sasanian history, partly in conjunction with political events such as the wars with Rome.

Beside persecutions, the novel minority politics also entailed elements of official recognition and representation. The Jewish Exilarch, for example, was recognized as the head of the Jews and in charge of dispensing justice and collecting taxes. In the fifth century CE there was an edict officially recognizing Christianity, and an independent Persian Church came to be established, the head of which had to be recognized by the Sasanian emperor. There were various interactions and bonds between Jews, Christians and the Sasanian emperors: Khusraw I (r. 531–578), one of the most important Sasanian kings, even had a Christian wife. Khusraw II (r. 590–628) had two Christian wives from different branches: Maryam, the daughter of Byzantine emperor Maurice, and Shirin, an Aramaean Christian. The increasing acknowledgment of Christianity in the Sasanian Empire was reflected in a saying attributed to king Hormizd IV (579–590), reported by the historian Tabari, who compared the different religions of the Empire to the four legs of the throne: deleting one of them would lead to the collapse of the entire structure (Bosworth/al-Tabari 1999: 298). The king even advised the Zoroastrian priests that renouncing the desire to persecute the Christians and ‘to become assiduous in good works’ might in fact lead to the adherents of other faiths becoming attracted towards Zoroastrianism (Bosworth/al-Tabari 1999: 298). Tolerance of the dominant versus the subordinate religions is here conceived of as a means to strengthen the position of the dominant religion by making it more attractive.

The Islamization of Iran and the Eclipse of Zoroastrianism

The Arab/Islamic conquest of the Sasanian Empire did not immediately translate into the Islamization of the country. It took several centuries before Islam became the majority religion of Iran, even though it had been the religion of the rulers right from the beginning. According to Jamsheed Choksy, it was only as late as around 1300 CE that Muslims had gained “complete control” over Iranian society (Choksy 1997: 143). Conversely, Zoroastrianism shrank into the role of a religious minority. More than that, Zoroastrians became a marginal group. Contrary to the Jews and the Christians, the Zoroastrians were virtually eradicated from the political scene in Medieval Iran (Khanbaghi 2006: 25). Concurrently with the entry of Iran into *dar al-islam* and the emergence of the Iranian shape of Islam (Yarshater 1998), or the Persianization of Islam, and despite the Zoroastrians’ primordial ties to Iran, they apparently became ever more isolated in Persian-Islamic society.

While the Mongol invasion (1219–1224) gave fresh impetus to the Jews and the Christians in Iran, subsequent Mongol rule did not do much to alleviate the fate of the Zoroastrians, who perceived it as yet another major affliction. Also during the next main period, the reign of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), when Twelver Shiism was introduced as the official religion of the country, it seems that “the Zoroastrians were the least well accepted of all the non-Muslim groups” (Khanbaghi 2006: 97), even if they did not suffer hardship all over Iran. It must have been sometime during the early modern period that several Iranian Zoroastrian communities in Khorasan (northeast Iran) and Sistan (east Iran), as well as the Safavid Zoroastrian community of Isfahan, ceased to exist. In late Safavid times in the eighteenth century, it seems that the Zoroastrians got involved in the armed conflicts between the Safavids and the Afghan invaders and between the Zand dynasty and the Qajars, leading to retaliations against the Zoroastrian communities (Choksy 2006: 140–141; Khanbaghi 2006: 156–157).

As is well-known, Islam has a developed corpus of legal regulations concerning the recognition and treatment of other religions. The Zoroastrians have a somewhat ambiguous status in this system, because their recognition as a protected people (*dhimmi*) is not unequivocal and therefore open to negotiation. The notion of subordinate versus dominant religions, as outlined above, seems to fit the model of the Islamic legal framework quite well. Besides legal regulations, such as the payment of the poll-tax and strict enforcement of community boundaries including prohibitions of intermarriages, interreligious interaction was governed by a series of codes of conduct, some of which—especially those concerning water, food, and eating—were grounded in rules of purity of the respective religions; others, notably the special colors of clothes and restrictions in modes of transportation imposed on the minorities, clearly served to mark and stigmatize them. Some rules—such as those forbidding Zoroastrians to carry umbrellas—were clearly “ludicrous” (Mehr 2002: 281). Some rules and laws, such as that privileging Muslim offspring in matters of inheritance, served to stimulate de-affiliation from minorities and conversion to Islam.

In the twelve centuries from the Arab/Islamic conquest of the country to Euro-Russian expansion during the period of the Qajar dynasty (1779–1925), Zoroastrianism was reduced from a diffuse and partly dominant majority religion to a compact, subordinate religious minority.⁷ In fact, apart from the Indian Zoroastrians, also known as Parsis, who had established indepen-

⁷ See Hourani 1982 [1947]: 14 for these terms; for a later discussion see Ben-Dor 1999: 7–11.

dent and stable communities on the Indian West Coast concurrently with the increasing Islamization of Iran, in the nineteenth century the former diffusion of Iranian Zoroastrianism was reduced to two geographical areas in central and southeast Iran respectively: the cities of Yazd and Kerman and some surrounding villages. While Zoroastrians still constituted the majority in a number of such villages, the number of these insular majority villages shrank in the long run; there were Zoroastrian quarters in the cities, but these were eventually infiltrated and reduced or even destroyed in the course of the centuries.

For the second half of the nineteenth century, available figures (Stausberg 2002a: 365–366) indicate that the number of Zoroastrians in the Yazd and Kerman regions together was well below 10,000. Moreover, available reports show that the Zoroastrians were suffering from pervasive and persistent discrimination and humiliation on the part of the Shia-Islamic majority population. These took the forms of ‘ordinary’ rules and codes of conduct, including the levying of the poll tax (often resulting in crisis and violence), but also ‘extraordinary’ acts of violation such as blackmailing, raids, assaults, rape, abduction, and murder were far from uncommon (Stausberg 2002: 368–372). There occurred a constant small-scale flow of conversions to Islam—partly enforced, such as when Zoroastrian girls were abducted and married off to Muslims against their will. Given the discriminatory laws of inheritance, according to which a Muslim descendent would inherit the entire estate of his minority parents at the expense of his minority siblings, conversions also threatened the material wealth of the community.

Colonialism, Legal and Political Changes

Unsurprisingly, the memory of this large-scale discrimination is still very much part of the collective identity of the present-day Iranian Zoroastrians. In retrospect, it could well seem that the very existence of the Zoroastrian communities would have been endangered in the long run, if they had had to continue struggling in isolation against the same odds. At that point, transformative change could only come from the outside—and so it did, as the direct and indirect consequences of colonialism. As a result of developments during the subsequent century (as outlined in the following), the number of Zoroastrians tripled to some 25,000 (or even 30,000) in the mid-1970s (Stausberg 2002b: 240–241).

There had been occasional contacts between the Iranian Zoroastrians and the Parsis, their coreligionists in India. With the Indian West Coast

becoming part of colonial trading and political networks, and the Parsis getting increasingly involved in trade and establishing close ties with the British, contacts between Iranian and Indian Zoroastrians became more regular. In fact, something like a mass exodus of Iranian Zoroastrians to Western India started in the late eighteenth century, only to intensify during periods of the nineteenth century, and to continue down to World War II. This kind of refugee network again came in use after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The Iranian Zoroastrians who migrated to India in the modern period have constituted something like a sub-group of Indian Zoroastrianism, known as 'the Iranis'.

In part stimulated by the arrival of the Iranian refugees, in part by a continued attachment to their 'original homeland', and in part by the claim to the heritage of a glorious ancient civilization (Iran) that could enhance their cultural prestige in the colonial context, the Parsis not only accommodated Iranian Zoroastrian refugees (even if somewhat reluctantly), but they also directly intervened in Iranian affairs. One of the most effective ways of doing this was by founding, in 1853, an association that explicitly aimed at ameliorating the conditions of the Iranian Zoroastrians. In 1854, this association sent an emissary to Iran; he not only filed important reports about the miserable situation of the Iranian Zoroastrians (he also blamed their ignorance and lack of education and collaboration for their fate) but also coordinated a vast array of activities that served to relieve the distress of the Iranian Zoroastrians and to rehabilitate (and to update) their material culture, for example by renovating religious buildings; to some extent these activities can be described as foreign aid. Manekji Limji Hataria, the first Parsi emissary, who remained in Iran for almost 35 years and who married an Iranian Zoroastrian lady from Kerman, networked and campaigned widely, also involving foreign diplomats and international connections (Stausberg 2002: 154–164; Ringer 2009).

Manekji's campaign resulted in a substantial legal change: in 1882, by an imperial decree, Zoroastrians were in perpetuity liberated from the payment of the poll tax, the levying of which had always caused serious problems and tensions. Apart from abolishing the *jizya*, the imperial decree put the Zoroastrians on equal footing with the Muslims in all matters of taxation. In 1898 another royal decree officially abolished all the discriminations suffered by the Zoroastrians (Stausberg 2002: 164–165). Even so, there was a great distance from the lofty promises of a royal decree to the day-to-day realities in the provinces, and Zoroastrians continued to be discriminated, and even the poll-tax was temporarily re-imposed (Stausberg 2002: 165–168). Now, however, circumstances had changed in such a manner as to allow

them to challenge their fate, and the royal decrees were a way to give legitimacy to their claims. Moreover, the Zoroastrian community of Kerman found itself in a special situation; the British consul had extended his good offices to the Zoroastrians, given that a vast majority of the Zoroastrians, namely the Parsis in India, were British subjects (Sykes 1906: 760). At the same time, as Jamsheed Choksy has rightly pointed out, unlike the close links between the Parsis and the British colonial power in India, there never developed very strong ties between the Iranian Zoroastrians and the British in Iran (Choksy 2006: 144–146).

While the contribution of the Indians, the work of the Parsi emissary and, regionally, the occasional intervention of the representative of British colonial power were crucial to open up the closed situation of powerlessness of the Iranian Zoroastrians, towards the end of the nineteenth century the Zoroastrians themselves started to affirm their own political agency. This was facilitated by the creation of new associations that served to regulate the internal affairs of the local Zoroastrian communities and to represent them to the outside world. Apart from providing forums for protest against maltreatment, this reorganization of the community administration obviously had implications for the power structure within the communities; collective effort replaced the will of the elders, mostly merchants and priests (Mehr 2002: 287). Moreover, since the late nineteenth century, Zoroastrian merchants managed to accumulate capital, and they started other ventures and enterprises, including banking; their capital and networks allowed them not only to react to injustice but to contribute more actively to influencing the political agenda and to developing a framework for the future development of the Zoroastrian communities.

An important case in point is the early twentieth century Constitutional Revolution, where the leading Zoroastrians contributed by providing shelter, weapons and funds for the revolutionaries. Among many other things, the debate on the new Constitution, which was proclaimed in 1906 (and mainly modeled on the Belgian Constitution from 1831), dealt with the position of Islam and the civil status of the religious minorities. Seen from the perspective of the minorities, the results were ambivalent. In the Supplementary Constitutional Law (1907) Islam in its Jafari (Twelver Shia) form, is affirmed as the official religion of the country (article 1), and while the existence or the rights of the other religions are nowhere affirmed, article 8 decrees that all people of the Persian Empire are to enjoy equal rights before the law—a wording reportedly smuggled into the text by an influential Zoroastrian; in the original draft that right was only granted to Muslims (Stausberg 2002b: 174–175). Articles 9 and 10 specify a series of

legal provisions concerning life, property, etc. This provision was soon to be tested when a prominent Zoroastrian banker and constitutionalist was murdered for political motives. While there was a public outrage demanding the execution of the murderers, the idea that several Muslims should be executed for the death of a single Zoroastrian was apparently inconceivable, and the murderers were punished by lashes and prison (Afary 1996: 138). While this was a high-profile case in the center of the Empire, for most minority people in the remoter provincial areas the provisions given in the constitutional laws remained lofty words only (Choksy 2006: 151).

It can be argued that, although the 1906 Constitution (which largely remained unchanged, but without being always in force, until 1979) does not mention Zoroastrianism as a religion, it does grant the Zoroastrians, as people of the Iranian Empire, fundamental individual rights.⁸ Nevertheless, individual Zoroastrians (or members of other religious minorities for that matter) are far from being on equal footing in the political system. Note that article 58 specifies that only Muslims can attain the rank of Minister. Moreover, a Zoroastrian cannot become an elected representative of Muslims in the parliament (*majles*). On the collective level, however, the non-Islamic religious minorities are implicitly acknowledged, since Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians were given the right to elect representatives of their own—amounting to an indirect recognition of their existence and giving them a minimal loophole of participation in the political system. Even this minimal acknowledgment, however, was perceived as so problematic as to potentially jeopardize the nationalist movement, resulting in a ‘request’, in reality a threat, to the minorities not to execute their rights. While the Jews and the Christians complied, the Zoroastrians maneuvered their way around and got their representative, the merchant, estate owner, and banker Arbab Jamshid (1850–1932), admitted to the *majles*, otherwise an all-Muslim body (Afary 1996: 70; Stausberg 2002b: 173; Mehr 2002: 281). The Jewish and Christian representatives were admitted from the second period onwards. Now, however, it was stipulated that all candidates had to declare their adherence to Islam, and even the three minority candidates had to have a “sound” religious reputation in their respective religion (Afary 1996: 263). Moreover, as in the case of the individual rights, while this scheme worked on the national level, it was not immediately transferable

⁸ See Afary 2005, for a comparison of the Iranian Constitution with the Belgian, Bulgarian, and Ottoman Constitutions respectively. For the status of the minorities, Afary notes that “the language of the law was less explicit and forthcoming” than that of the other Constitutions (Afary 2005: 158).

to the provinces; hence, “[i]n Yazd, contrary to specific regulations from the Majles that the provincial anjumans [councils] must represent their regional constituencies, the anjuman refused to seat a Zoroastrian, since the ‘ulama would not recognize the rights of the Zoroastrian community to public representation” (Afary 1996: 316). The political turmoil remained in the country until Reza Shah (1925–1941) effectively ruled out the enforcement of the spirit and the letter of the Constitution.

The reign of Reza Shah brought important legal changes which can be described as a secularization and nationalization of the judiciary system. In the long run, “the uniform national nature of these civil codes . . . brought greater physical safety, increased access to education, enhanced opportunities for employment, and provided freedom of expression of religious and cultural practices for Zoroastrians” (Choksy 2006: 154). During the reign of Reza Shah some specific forms of discrimination were formally abolished, albeit not without resistance. Here are just two examples: Zoroastrian men were no longer forced to wear the yellow dress, and Zoroastrians were eventually allowed to ride on mules, donkeys, and horses (Stausberg 2002b: 169–170, 180). When general conscription was introduced in 1925, at first members of the national minorities were excluded; this law was changed in 1938, and henceforth also Zoroastrians were allowed to fight for the country with which they identified (Stausberg 2002b: 180).⁹

In the early 1930s, the minorities were granted separate personal status laws, which took some time to be accepted by the government, mostly because of a specific rule in Zoroastrian law of adoption and divorce (Stausberg 2002b: 181). The Family Protection Law of 1967, which was applicable to all Iranian citizens and which also made it possible for Zoroastrian women to apply for divorce in civil courts (Mehr 2002: 295), brought the Zoroastrian community under closer patronage of the state.

The fact that in theory the Zoroastrians enjoyed equality under public law, on equal footing with the other people of the Empire (except in some matters of family law), went a long way to providing some amount of agency to minorities by putting an end to the subordinate position to which

⁹ The inclusion of Zoroastrians in general conscription is generally celebrated as an achievement and not as an act of exploitation; Zoroastrians actively sought to be admitted. In a speech in the Majles in March 1925, in the context of a debate on conscription, the Zoroastrian representative argued that this issue should not divide the Muslim from non-Muslims Iranians who must share ‘joy and sorrow’ with their Muslim Iranian brothers. In his eyes, not being considered for conscription would amount to being separated from the honour of ‘Iranianism’ (Shahrokh/Writer 1994: 136).

they had found themselves confined. The theory, however, was not always followed in practice; discrimination and prejudice remained “daily experiences” for minority people living in the province (Sanasarian 2000: 56); Zoroastrian girls continued to be abducted, and insults and manhandling still occurred (Choksy 2006: 161). On a greater scale, the more stable and equal treatment of the Zoroastrians came into effect only in the final decade of the reign of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (Choksy 2006: 154), shortly before the Islamic Revolution—and in a climate of general political repression. Zoroastrians experienced a more equal treatment especially in the capital, where, as a result of rapid urbanization, around half of the Zoroastrian population of Iran was living by the 1960s (Stausberg 2002b: 240).

Nationalism: Ideological Reassessment and Civic Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrians are the oldest religious community living in Iran, and Zoroastrianism can claim to be the original religion of the country.¹⁰ Already in apologetic and polemical texts in Middle Persian, written in the first centuries of Islamic rule, Zoroastrian theologians presented their religion as the Iranian religion per se, the given (natural) religion of the Iranians, contrasted to the foreign ones and to the religions of the non-Iranians. (Insofar as Iran is better than all the other countries, this also implied an ethnocentric and apologetic evaluation of the religion of the Iranians, namely Zoroastrianism.) About the texts written by Zoroastrians between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries, Aptin Khanbaghi has recently observed:

One of the most interesting features of the texts produced by the Zoroastrians in the Medieval period is their belief in their apanage of Iranian identity; Iranian and Zoroastrian are synonyms in these texts and it is only in the 20th century that Zoroastrian authors accept their non-Zoroastrian compatriots as Iranians (Khanbaghi 2006: 147–148).

Thus the Zoroastrians have a long history of religious nationalism, which they stubbornly maintained in spite of their increasing marginalization in Persian society.

¹⁰ Contrary to Christianity and Islam there are no direct records of the pre-Zoroastrian religious situation; the pre-Zoroastrian ‘paganism’ therefore needs to be reconstructed; this was done by Zoroastrian theologians in ancient times (see de Jong 2005) and is still being done by modern scholars (Stausberg 2002a: 115–117).

As a modern political concept, nationalism could engage various attitudes to religion, from anti- or irreligion to various reinterpretations of traditional religion,¹¹ from stressing continuity to rupture between pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran. An important ideological resource for nationalist identity myths (Smith 1991: viii) and discourses was recourse to pre-Islamic Iranian civilization. Since the mid-nineteenth century, one finds new systematic attempts at studying ancient Iranian history, and Manekji, the Parsi emissary, actively involved himself in these projects (Stausberg 2003). Another central aspect of nationalism was language politics, i.e. the attempt to 'purify' the Persian language by 'cleansing' it of Arabic elements and by 'restoring' its 'purity'. Moreover, in 1925, in the early period of Reza Shah's reign, the calendar was reformed by introducing a solar year (with the Hijra as the starting point for the era), the twelve months of which were given the names of Zoroastrian deities and divine beings, in agreement with the Zoroastrian calendar. This is an example of an element of minority religion becoming part of mainstream civic culture. In the field of onomastics, in nationalist-minded circles one finds a preference for Iranian names, mostly taken from pre-Islamic history and epics—including the very name of the country which was changed from 'Persia' to 'Iran'. When last names were introduced, people were exhorted to choose genuine Iranian names. Archaeological projects of recovery were started and symbols from pre-Islamic Iran became prominent on public buildings.

Finally, the celebration of the ancient Iranian heritage, as a form of symbolic capital, was an important maneuver for creating political legitimacy, especially by the second and last Pahlavi Shah. Some well-known instances include: Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi's assumption of the fictive old Iranian title *Aryamehr* ('Light of the Aryans') in 1965/67; the pretentious and pompous feast to celebrate 2,500 years of kingship in Iran at Persepolis in 1971—an event which probably helped to end the tradition it sought to celebrate; and, in 1976, the replacement of the Hijra as the starting point of the era, substituting the alleged date of the founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great, which turned the year 1355 (solar Hijri) into the year 2535 of the royal era (*shahanshahi*). This act of imperial hubris provided another attempt at 'de-Islamifying' public national culture, and it provoked outrage among opponents who, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, claimed that replacing the Islamic era amounted to a desire to abolish Islam. Acts such as these nourished rumors that the Shah—similar rumors had already

¹¹ For an early study of early Iranian nationalism, see Keddie 1962.

been circulated about his father—was secretly adhering to Zoroastrianism (Stausberg 2002b: 211–214). Representing a source of symbolic capital, Zoroastrianism moved closer to power and its abuse.

As these (unfounded) rumors show, there was only a fine line dividing discourses on pre-Islamic Persia from discourses on Zoroastrianism. Declaring an attachment to the pre-Islamic past can be positively or negatively related to a commitment to Zoroastrianism. While one can, theoretically, be interested merely in the artistic, martial, or political aspects of the pre-Islamic past, aficionados of pre-Islamic culture would generally also hold a sympathetic attitude towards Zoroastrianism, since this religion was an integrated part of the whole. From being a marginal, marginalized, discriminated, and suspicious minority, Zoroastrianism had moved into the core of mainstream discursive, imaginary, and symbolic representations of Iranian identity, giving it some degree of symbolic power. I suggest calling this 'civic' Zoroastrianism. It entails a discursive or symbolic attachment to a former national religion but not a commitment to a specific religious minority group, which did not derive any immediate benefit from its new symbolic representation. The community is of interest only insofar as it has kept the flame of memory alive. This becomes apparent, for example, when the main fire temple of Yazd is overcrowded by visitors during the New Year (*norouz*) celebrations. Others can proclaim themselves to be Zoroastrians at heart, even if they would not seek formal admission to the religion (but some covertly did and some still do). Especially in the Islamic Republic, proclaiming a Zoroastrian identity appears as a mode of cultural critique, as a third way between State-Islamism and Westernism. While there is also an Islamic Iranian nationalism, which tends to regard Islam as the fulfillment of ancient Iranian civilization (if a positive significance is ascribed to that at all) and thereby replaces Zoroastrianism as a point of reference, pre-Islamic Iranian nationalism tends to be secular, with an un- or even anti-Islamic flavor.

Diffusion, Education, and the Breakdown of Ritual Boundaries

Concurrently with Zoroastrianism moving into the symbolic core of Iranian nationalism, many Zoroastrians migrated to Teheran, the (new) capital of the state. As a result of this migration, in the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1960s, the percentage of the Zoroastrian population living in Teheran increased from one to over 50 percent of the entire Iranian Zoroastrian population, with the main increase occurring

since the 1950s (Stausberg 2002b: 239–241). This process has continued since then. Moreover, Zoroastrian villages have become parts of provincial towns; many villages are by now only nominally populated, with the majority of the people who stay on being old members of the communities, while others maintain houses but *de facto* live elsewhere. From an overwhelmingly agricultural community with some elements of trade, Iranian Zoroastrianism turned into something like an urban middle-class society. Some entered professions such as medicine, engineering, and architecture, or applied sciences. Some Zoroastrians even obtained prominent positions in the state bureaucracy and the army, but even during the reign of the Pahlavi-dynasty “Zoroastrians continued to be barred from the judiciary” (Mehr 2002: 299).

Although the Zoroastrian community of Teheran increased the Zoroastrians have remained a tiny minority in the ever expanding capital—something like a drop in the ocean. While there is one residential housing colony, some residential buildings and some neighborhoods with a higher concentration of Zoroastrians, in general the Teheran community appears scattered in spatial terms. There is what can be described as kind of a community centre with a fire-temple, the seat and offices of the community organization and a hall to celebrate initiations and weddings in Teheran, but many Zoroastrians continue to regard the former settlements in the province as the more important ritual centers. From a compact minority, Zoroastrianism has turned into a diffuse/scattered one.

The mentioned changes in the occupational structure, corresponding to a declining significance of land, which lost its value as a basis of agriculture (but remained an important capital for developers), are also a result of a greater importance of modern education. Emphasis has been laid on education since the work of the Parsi emissary, and this has been continued to some extent, leading to the creation of schools specifically meant for Zoroastrian children. While it would be wrong to say that Iranian Zoroastrians are a community of intellectuals, they seem to be a fairly well educated by Iranian standards, and this has enabled many among them to compete for modern white-collar jobs.

Until the twentieth century, the organization of the religious field operated with clear-cut boundaries between robust and compact religious groups. Several of the changes indicated above resulted in making such boundaries less visible and apparently less important (but far from non-existent). This is also reflected in religious practice. In the key-period of the modernizing project—from the 1920s to the 1970s—some of the most distinctive ritual practices of Zoroastrianism were abolished (Stausberg

2004). Most visibly, the Zoroastrian funeral practice of exposing the dead to vultures in so-called towers of silence (*dakhme*) was done away with, and also some related elements of the funerals were discontinued. Their replacement by burial in cemeteries expressed a clear desire to become part of the cultural mainstream (even though the graves, in order to do justice to Zoroastrian purity rules, are constructed somewhat differently from their Muslim counterparts). Purity rules are an important mechanism of creating and maintaining boundaries between different religious groups. Purity rules are prominent both in Zoroastrianism and in Shia Islam. Accordingly, in tune with the decreased importance of community boundaries, purity rules were downplayed, important rituals of purification were no longer practiced, and the purificatory substance considered to be most efficient, namely consecrated bull's urine (*nirang*), was no longer produced and applied. Educated Zoroastrians apparently found these practices embarrassing. In a similar fashion, the extended priestly rituals, often systematically connected to both the rituals of purification and the funerals, were shortened or discontinued. Related to this, the significance of the fire was redefined, and the fire cult was simplified. In a radical departure from previous stipulations, some fires and fire temples have to some extent been made accessible to people from other religions. At the same time, and often in reception of interpretations from Western and Parsi scholars, the foundations of the religious identity of Zoroastrianism have, often in reception of interpretations by Western and Parsi scholars, been redefined to consist of the alleged original message of Zarathustra, thus emphasizing ethics and monotheism rather than rituals and the variety of the presence of the divine (Stausberg 2002b: 219–234). To some extent, discourse has replaced ritual as the key-idiom of religious communication.

The Islamic Republic

During the 125 years from Manekji's arrival in 1854 to the Shah's departure in 1979, the socio-economic situation of the Iranian Zoroastrians substantially improved: from being a subordinate minority group the Zoroastrians were on their way to becoming citizens of the Iranian empire, and their religion had received positive recognition in nationalist discourse. This does not mean that all Zoroastrians were uncritical supporters of the Shah. Nevertheless, once the revolution steered onto an Islamist path and the country turned into an Islamic Republic, the political change took a heavy toll on the situation of the Zoroastrians although the revolution as such did not

cause casualties among Zoroastrians. Khomeini, the leader of the revolution and the subsequent head of state, was highly critical of the pre-Islamic nationalist discourse. He held a traditional view of the religious minorities as impure heathens, and he kept on using derogatory vocabulary when referring to them, even though he made more accommodating statements after having come to power (Stausberg 2002b: 188, 190).

Paradoxically, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran from 1979 is the first legal document that officially acknowledges the rights of the 'recognized' religious minorities, namely Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians (in this order). This "institutionalization of segmentation" under the label of *aqaliat* ('religious minorities') has become "a unique byproduct of the new regime", as Eliz Sanasarian aptly puts it (2000: 154). According to the Constitution, article 13, "within the limits of the law" the religious minorities "are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education".¹² It turned out that the seemingly innocent qualification "within the limits of the law" was to entail serious restrictions. The subsequent article (14) states that "the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights." Taking past experiences with the interpretation and application of Islamic principles of justice and equity by Iranian Muslims into account, such a wording could not instil much confidence among the concerned parties. In continuity with the Constitution from 1906, minorities (including Zoroastrians) maintained the right to elect their own representatives to the parliament. On the other hand, a Zoroastrian cannot be elected to represent a Muslim electorate, and the Zoroastrian representative hardly has any significant power within the political system of the Islamic Republic.

Article 4 of the Constitution stipulates: "All civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. This principle applies absolutely and generally to all articles of the Constitution as well as to all other laws and regulations". Given that this reversed the secularization of the legal system, this stipulation turned out to have very serious ramifications for the Zoroastrians, especially with regard to the penal code and the law of

¹² All quotes from the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran are taken from http://www.servat.unibe.ch/law/icl/i00000_.html (accessed May 18, 2009).

inheritance, which again makes conversion to Islam an attractive option.¹³ Where they occurred, such conversions were publicized for propaganda purposes.¹⁴ A particularly sensitive issue has been the question of the compensatory blood money (*die*) that was denied in the case of murders of non-Muslims. In this question, however, the government changed its policy in 2002 by acknowledging an equal share of compensatory blood money for the recognized minorities.

Apart from the paradox of the simultaneous constitutional recognition and discriminatory legal stipulations, especially in the early period of the Islamic Republic, the subordinate minority status has once again characterized the negotiations of daily life. Zoroastrians faced more hostile reactions, more limited public security, some amount of persecution and forced marriages, and occasional revival of the concept of ritual impurity (*najes*) as well as the use of insulting terms such as *gabr* and *kafir* (Choksy 2006: 164–165), not to speak of the restrictions in public appearance and behaviour imposed on all inhabitants of the Islamic Republic. Given that the state obtained an explicit Islamic identity serving the interests of Muslims as its main constituency, careers in the army and the public sector were effectively blocked for Zoroastrians (Choksy 2006: 166). “Job discrimination became rampant throughout the 1980s” for all minorities, reports Sanasarian (2000: 87). The war with Iraq and the perpetual economic crisis of the Islamic Republic, resulting in high unemployment and inflation, affected Zoroastrians as much as all ordinary Iranians without specific access to the networks of power. While it would be wrong to classify the Iranian Zoroastrians as a poor community by Iranian standards, there certainly is a fair amount of poverty in the community, and the emigration of wealthy members of the community occurred at the expense of networks of support, even though many of the rich people continue to provide various forms of aid from abroad.

Despite some misleading information contained in previous census records (which the Zoroastrian community did nothing to dispel),¹⁵ and in line with available information for the other recognized religious minorities, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Zoroastrian population of Iran has declined by some 25–30 percent (to less than 20,000 adherents), and their birth rate is lower than that of the Muslim population.¹⁶ (I am

¹³ See also Sanasarian, in this volume.

¹⁴ See Sanasarian 2000: 130–131 for the example of a convert from Zoroastrianism.

¹⁵ It was also uncritically adopted by Hemmassi and Prorok 2002.

¹⁶ Richard Foltz (Montreal) informs me that the fertility rate is well below replacement level.

told that according to an internal census, there are at present some 18,000 Zoroastrians in Iran.) Moreover, again as with all other religious minorities (Hemmasi and Prorok 2002), urbanization has continued and even increased after the revolution; there was, and continues to be, a strong trend of emigration (which, together with the low fertility rate, is the main reason for the demographic decline of the community). The general prospects for the community appear to be grim, given the structural framework of the Islamic Republic. While Zoroastrian spokespersons have not avoided criticizing the government right from the beginning (Sanasarian 2000: 70–71), and while some continue to do so (Choksy 2006: 180–181), no Zoroastrians have become prominent in any sort of resistance movement; as a community the Zoroastrians keep a low-profile—everything else could easily lead to retaliations.

When it comes to religion, the trends observed for the Pahlavi period have continued; there has been no rise of any form of Zoroastrian fundamentalism. Members of the laity have been increasingly admitted to perform priestly duties. In general, religion has certainly attracted greater attention in the Islamic Republic than before, and the imposed sense of being part of a religious minority “has served to galvanize the community, strengthening its sense of identity, purpose and continuity” (Choksy 2006: 172). The dominant religious idiom of public discourse has been appropriated in that sense. On the other hand, the government heavily regulates the field of religious education (even within Zoroastrian schools) and does not give Zoroastrians access to the media in order to disseminate insider perspectives on Zoroastrianism, nor does it easily grant permission to erect new religious buildings. In spite of these restrictions, a number of smaller shrines have come into existence, and others have recently been renovated. One desert shrine some 50 km northeast of Yazd now functions as something like a national Zoroastrian pilgrimage centre, attracting large crowds during the annual pilgrimage in summer. Security police prevent Muslims from access to the shrine, thereby at the same time protecting and shielding the event.¹⁷ Given that religious rituals and feasts are the only legitimate occasions for relaxation of certain rules of conduct imposed by the Islamic Republic—at least as long as these events are shielded from the Muslim population and have been authorized by the government—these have turned into important social celebrations and displays. Fifteen Zoroastrians who lost their lives as soldiers or in bombings during the war against Iraq are now generally acknowledged as ‘martyrs’ (*shahid*). This

¹⁷ See Langer 2008, for an inventory of these shrines and pilgrimage-centres.

index of the sacrifice of Zoroastrian blood for their motherland is not only proclaimed in official pronouncements and to some extent acknowledged by the government, but also photographs of these martyrs are found in Zoroastrian public buildings and are displayed in public celebrations. There is an apparent mimesis of the martyr-discourse of the Islamic Republic, given that the concept of martyr had been absent in Zoroastrianism (Stausberg 2002b: 218f; 2004: 533–534).

Some Conclusions and Prospects

In this chapter I argue that it is not the numerical size and distribution of religious groups that matters (minority/majority), what matters most is their relation in terms of domination/subordination: in other words, relationships of power. I furthermore contend that this sort of relationship is not a natural fact, but requires a specific organization of the religious field, which is a product of historical developments. In the case of Iran, I hold that the decisive developments into this direction occurred in the (early) Sasanian period, i.e. several centuries before the coming of Islam.

Zoroastrianism was at the forefront of this process, and the fate of this religion in the course of a millennium, from the third to the thirteen centuries CE, was to change from being a dominant majority religion to a subordinate religious minority. The subsequent six centuries reduced the spread of the religion to some limited geographical areas, to become a compact regional religion in the Iranian context. Larger-scale geopolitical developments and the modernizing project again changed the picture, and Zoroastrians successfully challenged their fate. They were on their way to becoming ‘ordinary’ citizens of the state, with a prospect of equal social and economic opportunities. With a limited adjustment in the form of de-emphasis of religious and ritual boundaries, and a reformulation of the doctrinal, ritual, and organizational structure of the religion in the nationalist context, Zoroastrianism moved upwards in the symbolical and discourse universe, so that both the religion and its adherents became part of Iranian civic culture. This process was stopped, and to some extent reversed, after the Islamic Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Although some Zoroastrians bravely voiced criticism, often also in the name of the Iranian nation, which the Zoroastrians claim to represent in a primordial manner, there was neither militancy nor mobilization; the prevalent responses were submission and loyalty, emigration/exit, a “clanish” (Wirth 1945: 360) withdrawal into themselves, and a return to more

group-specific identity projects, mainly with a religious focus. Throughout these twentieth century trajectories, Zoroastrianism sacrificed some of its distinct traits to this project of nationalist mimesis, and discourse replaced ritual as its main idiom.

Power and powerlessness are social and interactive categories which relate to a number of issues and aspects. As this chapter hopefully has illustrated, power is negotiated, produced and reproduced in discursive, economic, educational, geographical, legal, political, and symbolical forms. Power is exerted both in overt and more subtle forms. In extant scholarship there is a tendency—call it implicit Marxism—to consider religion exclusively as the object, result, or symptom of non-religious relationships of power, be they of a political, economic, or otherwise nature. (As the attentive reader will have noted, the present chapter is not quite innocent in this regard either.) Yet, religion in itself is an important arena of empowerment and disempowerment, by creating, regulating, and denying human and superhuman agency.¹⁸ Power is more than domination over others (Lukes 2005: 109).

Let me conclude with a final statement of a much more general nature. It may sound paradoxical, but may well be true: There will be no acceptable solution to the minority question as long as there are minorities in the first place. There will always be majorities and minorities in the numerical sense—religions that are more or less efficient in attracting and sustaining adherence¹⁹—but it is only as long as the relations between (numerical) majority and minorities are conceived in terms of dominant vs. subordinate groups that there will be a ‘minority issue’. One solution is the abolishment of subordinate minorities altogether, not by way of their extinction, of course, but by the very idea of a pluralistic society, which has minorities in a numerical sense, but no subordinate ones. Yet, although there is no ‘minority issue’ in a truly pluralist society, issues of power and powerlessness will not disappear in such a society either.

¹⁸ For supernatural agents as the cognitive and evolutionary cornerstone of religion, see Pyysiäinen 2009. Religion establishes ways to communicate with non-human agencies, but religions also restrict access to and certain forms of such communication, for example through gender rules and roles or by delegitimizing communication with some agents such as ‘demons’.

¹⁹ Religions with more members or higher growth rates are of course no better than others; nor are they more successful, for it may well be possible that smaller religions do not regard growth as their main aim or mission.

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