

MMW3, Section Co4

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Prospectus

The Islamic conquest of the Sasanid Dynasty in 651 C.E. was the beginning of a new era in Iran's history. During Sasanid rule in Iran, which lasted from 223 to 651 C.E., Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the empire (Craig et al. 290). Because of Arab expansion, however, Islam was poised to take Zoroastrianism's place. Nonetheless, Zoroastrianism did not die out completely; rather it was still practiced by a small portion of the Iranian people and even managed to affect Islam itself. For example, many Zoroastrian ideas, such as the religious notion of two different kinds of wisdom, were used in Islamic literature (Shaked 30-31). This phenomenon leads me to ask the following question: Why did Zoroastrianism survive even after Islamic conquests ended the Sasanid Dynasty in 651? In the course of answering this question I will discuss the Sasanid Dynasty, the Islamic caliphates that succeeded it, Zoroastrianism, Islam, and the Iranian people in the time frame of 600 to 1000 C.E.

Scholars have different explanations for why Zoroastrianism survived the arrival of Islam in Iran. Some propose that the geography of Iran and the location of certain portions of the population shielded Zoroastrians from interaction with Muslims, thereby allowing the belief system to survive. According to this hypothesis, the mountains and desert of Iran hindered Islamic expansion, thus protecting some Zoroastrians (Chosky 141). In addition, the great distance between rural communities and other cities from the

center of the Islamic caliphate allowed devout Zoroastrians to practice their faith mostly undisturbed (Chosky 78, 87-88). Other scholars claim that the stout resistance of Zoroastrian communities to Arab invasions was able to preserve Zoroastrianism for future generations (Amighi 77). According to this view, even though the resisting groups were small in relation to the rest of the Iranian population, their efforts were enough to maintain their belief system (Chosky 84). While both of these theories provide good explanations (and serve as good alternative hypotheses to my thesis) as to why Zoroastrianism survived after the Sasanid Dynasty declined, they are incomplete because they do not address the political decisions of the Islamic caliphate that affected the Iranian people and their adjustment to Arabic rule.

In my research paper, I plan to argue the following: Zoroastrianism survived in spite of the spread of Islam because many of its ideas and practices were adopted by Islamic caliphates, thus leading to the tolerance and the endurance of Zoroastrians and their faith in the Muslim world. My thesis is supported by the fact that Zoroastrian administrators and the Sasanid structures that they created, such as the coinage system, remained intact under the four Orthodox Islamic caliphs and during the beginning of the Umayyad caliphate (Amighi 61). Additionally, Muslim mysticism made use of Zoroastrian ideas, which were “adapted to the teachings and the language of Islam” (qtd. in Boyce 26). Finally, Muslim rulers allowed Zoroastrians to who accepted Muslim rule to continue practicing their beliefs as long as they paid taxes to the state (Stepaniants 163-164).

The topic of the survival of Zoroastrianism in the face of Islam is significant because it is a peculiar phenomenon. One would assume that a conquering people would

establish their supremacy by ensuring the eradication of any remnant of the previous ruling power; this did not, however, happen in Iran. In light of this occurrence, my thesis is significant because it takes into account the blending of Zoroastrianism and Islam in Iranian culture, a stance that I have not found to be discussed at great length by the scholars whose work I have consulted in my research.

Works Consulted

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