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## A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity

Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015.  
320 pages, \$95.00/£70.95, ISBN (hardcover) 978052028619

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# A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity

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*A State of Mixture* deals with the dynamics that integrated Christians into the political system of Sasanians which was Zoroastrian in its base. For this, the book pays special attention to the role of institutions and introduces a triangular relationship among Christian secular elites, Christian religious specialists and Zoroastrian ones. The study considers not only textual material, i.e. martyrdom narratives, historiographies and legal sources, but also archaeological and sigillographic evidence. The most welcome feature of Payne's study is that he evaluates the historicity of the events documented in East Syrian hagiographical sources against the background of their narratives. He regards the hagiographies primarily as a "literary genre dedicated to the commemoration of conflict" (p. 56) and calls the reader's attention to their ritual usage during the annual feast of the martyrs.

The book is divided into five chapters. An introduction (pp. 1-22) in which the author introduces his main theses precedes them. A conclusion (pp. 199-204), a comprehensive bibliography (pp. 237-91) and a short index (pp. 293-301) conclude the book.

The first chapter deals with the scholarly position on Zoroastrian intolerance towards other religions. Payne points out that this position is

based mainly on two groups of sources: On the one hand, Kerdīr's inscription has been used in the scholarship as the definite document for Zoroastrian persecution of other religions. On the other hand, the self-representations of Christians in the martyrs' literature has been reflected too uncritically in scholarship. The author argues convincingly, for example, that the great persecution of Christians by Shapur II is not justifiable: The execution of Simeon, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, was not undertaken because of his religion but because of his refusal to collect taxes from Christians (pp. 38-44).

Payne bases the first chapter (pp. 23-38) on two assumptions: Firstly, the Sasanian Empire was based on a Zoroastrian cosmological worldview, and the Sasanians found themselves in the state of Mixture of two principles of good and evil. The Empire took the responsibility to contribute to Ahuric powers in their struggle against the demons. Secondly, Zoroastrianism served a hierarchical model of members of other religions and, therefore, provided a base for different treatment according to this model in the Sasanian Empire. Based on these hypotheses, Payne advances the view that Zoroastrianism offered the ideological and cosmological foundation that some 'bad religions', such as Christianity and Judaism, could contribute to the Iranian Empire, but some could not. According to Payne, differentiation between monotheism and polytheism formed the hierarchizing factor between these two groups of religions.

According to the Zoroastrian cosmology, world history is divided into three periods: Creation, Mixture and Separation. The beginning of the last period is marked by the appearance of Zarathustra. Payne argues that Sasanians equate their era in which different religious communities were mixed with the period of Mixture in the Zoroastrian cosmology. By doing so, he neglects, however, the last period of world history, that of Separation. Zoroastrians in the Sasanian era must have found themselves

in post-Zarathustrian times and therefore in the last period. Thus, if the Zoroastrian worldview had provided the base for the political interaction of the Sasanian empire with other religions, Sasanians must have tried to forcefully separate 'good religion' (Zoroastrianism) from 'bad religions'.

As evidence for his second hypothesis, the hierarchical model of others in the Sasanian Empire, Payne gives his interpretation of Kerdīr's inscription (pp. 23f.) as well as the claim that one would find in Zoroastrian literature statements "expressing a positive regard for the *agdēn*." (p. 25) He did not give any sample of such statements so that the claim remains vague. He asserts that in Kerdīr's inscription the other religions are categorized in two groups: a group of more or less tolerated religions, namely Jews, Buddhists, Brahmins, Nazarenes, Christians, Baptizers and Manichaeans, which were 'only' smitten, as against the idolaters, who were not tolerated and whose temples were destroyed. The author does not explain why, from the perspective of Zoroastrian worldview, Judaism was able to contribute beneficent actions to the battle against evil but Buddhism was not, although they are mentioned after each other in this inscription. Payne holds the opinion that Sasanians distinguished between monotheistic religions, Christianity and Judaism, on the one hand and idolatric religions on the other hand. The listing of others in Kerdīr's inscription, however, clearly contradicts this division. If one is forced to assign Buddhism to either monotheistic or idolatrous religions the latter group is much more fitting. Nevertheless, Kerdīr lists Buddhism along with Judaism and Christianity. Moreover, how could Zoroastrian authorities treat monotheistic religions better than polytheistic ones although they explicitly, even in Kerdīr's inscription itself, praised multiple gods? The hypothesis of hierarchical others, monotheists and idolaters, seems to be based on another hypothesis, namely Sasanian iconoclasm, which has been questioned in recent scholarship. Furthermore, it should be pointed out

that if there was a hierarchy of others in Zoroastrian theology it must have been implicit because one cannot find in object-language level equivalent terms for bad and worse religions as Payne puts forth (p. 33).

The second chapter represents with the self-definition of Christian communities within the spatial network of the Empire, in regional landscape as well as urban cityscape. Moreover, it deals with some Zoroastrian cosmogonical narratives which are transmitted primarily in Christian sources, for example the Zurwān-myth, a Zoroastrian cosmogony in which Zurwān, Eternity, gives birth to both a Good and an Evil spirit, to the former through his 1000 years long sacrifice, to the latter through his single moment of doubt. Payne's representation of this myth is not free of contradiction: He expresses his reservation against the Zurwān-myth because it implicitly offers the Zoroastrian priests the possibility to generate evil in their ritual as the imitation of the premordial act of Zurwān (p. 84). This reservation can be clarified by a Zoroastrian ritual rule stated by him himself on page 86: A bad ritual, a doubtful one for example, reaches not the divine, but rather demons. Furthermore, it is not clear why the author argues that the hagiographers did not produce their accounts of the Zurwān-myth from their own knowledge of Zoroastrianism (p. 81), but Pethion had enough knowledge of Zoroastrianism and his narrative of frog and water, another Zoroastrian cosmogonical myth, is based on Zoroastrian material.

Payne notes in this chapter (p. 66) that Christian authors avoided Middle Persian as the language of Iran because of its significant connection with Zoroastrianism. In this regard, one has to consider the evidence of the remains of Christian literature in Middle Persian, namely Psalms. In this chapter and actually throughout the book, Payne uses the term 'Yasna' in

an unfamiliar meaning. Mostly, he seems to mean 'Zoroastrian rituals' and not specifically the *Yasna*.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter three regards East Syrian laws as evidence of the political behavior of Christian communities. It discusses firstly Mar Aba's activities in the 6th century for law making: He tried unsuccessfully, Payne shows, to disentangle ecclesiastical and worldly spheres, and to strengthen the superiority of the former over the latter. Moreover, he aimed to produce an empire-wide homogenous church. The chapter represents Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian laws in the Sasanian period not as isolated independent laws; by contrast, it shows their entangledness. Payne argues convincingly that the East Syrian law was more harmonious to the Zoroastrian than to the Roman law, as far as questions of inheritance were concerned.

In East Syrian polemical literature, the consumption of 'meat of murmur'<sup>2</sup> is condemned. Payne equates this consumption with the participation in a Zoroastrian ritual in which sacrificial meat has been consumed collectively and takes this as evidence of participation of Christians in Zoroastrian rituals. This interpretation, however, is not the only possible one: It is at least as much verisimilar to think of 'meat of murmur' as the meat of a sacrificial animal which has been slain in a Zoroastrian ritual. In this way, the East Syrian literature does not necessarily evidence the participation of Christians in Zoroastrian rituals, but rather their consumption of the meat produced through Zoroastrian rituals.

Whereas chapter three focuses on Christian communities in Khuzestan, the following chapter deals with Christians in Northern Mesopotamia. The

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1 *Yasna* is one of the priestly Zoroastrian rituals beside some others as *Drōn*, *Wisparad*, *Wīdēwdād* etc. The main components of the ritual are the recitation of the Avestan *Yasna*-text as well as the preparation of the Haoma libation.

2 'Murmur' alludes to the act of Zoroastrian recitation of the Avestan texts which sounded to Christians, as well as later to the Muslims, as murmuring. It is a polemical designation for Zoroastrians.

existence of a noble class in Mesopotamia and claim to nobility in their hagiographies form, Payne argues, one difference between these two communities (pp. 136f.). Sasanian kings introduced a new elite group from the Fars province into Mesopotamia who functioned as brokers between the royal court and the local nobility (p. 136). Furthermore, chapter four tries to answer the following question:

How did provincial elites earn recognition as nobles from their Iranian peers? How did Christian and Zoroastrian elites find bases for collaboration within imperial institutions? What was the relationship between landed aristocratic houses and the cities of the empire? (p. 131)

The informative fifth chapter deals with the treatment of Christian symbols in the religiopolitical field by the Sasanian court and great nobles and its reception by the Christian and Zoroastrian clergy. The actions with most Christian symbolic value were undertaken by Husraw II (590-628): He married two Christian wives, petitioned a Christian saint, invited a distinguished Christian man to his banquet and most importantly brought the True Cross to Iran and put it in his treasury. According to the author's analysis, the Christian clergy understood these symbolic acts as exclusively Christian, whereas the Zoroastrian counterpart did not perceive these as parts of a possible Christian identity, but as complementary to Zoroastrian institutions. Husraw's II activities regarding Christianity seem to be paradoxal, simultaneously elevating and suppressing it. However, they are all in harmony with the main principle of the Sasanian Empire, namely hierarchical conception of humans. The *History of Karka* and the *History of Mar Qardagh* provide, through the combination of three traditions—Greek historiography, Iranian mythical histories and East Syrian hagiography—Payne identifies textual evidence for the representation of aristocratic

ancestry on the part of Christians of North Mesopotamia and by the nobility of the two cities, Karka und Arbela.

Payne offers a spatial perspective on hagiographical material without neglecting the historical view. He provides, with his book, a comprehensive map of the sacral landscape encoded in Eastern Syrian hagiographies and offers important conclusions for the late Sasanian political landscape. He represents how Christian institutions were integrated in the Zoroastrian empire of the Sasanids, although hagiographers pointed out their conflicts, and how Christians in the Sasanid empire generated an Iranian identity although this was combined with Zoroastrian identity. The entangledness of politics and religion in the Sasanian Empire is well-known. The survey demonstrates, however, how it was the case also in Sasanian Christianity although bishops tried to separate the accelestical and worldly affairs.

As the recent studies in the field of Irano-Talmudica opened new perspectives on the relationship of Zoroastrianism with other religions in the Sasanian period, this book contributes to our understanding of religious contact in the Sasanian empire.

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