

Review Essay

The Iranian Reception of Islam: The Non-Traditionalist Strands (Collected Studies in Three Volumes), volume 2, IHC series, Patricia Crone, edited by Hanna Siurua, Leiden: Brill, 2016, ISBN 9789004319264, 368 pp.

This work is the second volume in a three-volume collection of the late Professor Patricia Crone's collected studies. They have been organized according to the subject matter and the volume under review covers religious trends in Iran, starting with Mazdak's revolt in the late fifth century to a few centuries after the arrival of Islam. The volume is a collection of articles, book chapters and two encyclopedia articles published over the span of a quarter-century (from 1991 to 2016).

Chapter 1 contains a revisionist account of Mazdak's revolt, which traditionally was thought to have started in the reign of the Sasanian king Qobād/Kavād (r. 488–96 and 498–531). Mazdak's revolt, and the religious worldview that inspired it, is the most scrutinized period of Sasanian history. This is because Mazdak, as well as his predecessor(s) had aspired to a social and economic model that can be best, albeit anachronistically, described as "communism." The sharing of property and women were seen, if we are to believe the antagonistic sources, as a radical cure for social ills, but significantly also as a personal prescription for overcoming the notoriously

powerful demon, Āz or concupiscence. The appeal of the subject matter aside, another reason for the abundance of scholarship on the topic is the question of, on the one hand, the seeming discrepancy of the contemporary sources (Syriac and Byzantine Greek), and the later Perso-Arabic accounts with each other, and the widely different versions of the events in the latter corpus on the other. The problem arises, most significantly, in the absence of the name Mazdak as the leader of the revolt in the contemporary sources. The solution to this problem offered by the prolific scholarship on the revolt are widely different and range from denying the existence of a historical figure by the name of Mazdak, to choosing one version over the other, to Crone's thesis claiming that there were two revolts, one in the time of Qobād and another during the reign of his son Khosrow I Anushirvan (531–570 CE). According to the author, there were two different heresies, one supported by the Sasanian king Qobād, in which he argued for "women sharing" (but not of property), which Crone argues was directed against the powerful nobles, and a second peasant revolt led by Mazdak and suppressed in the reign of his famous son and successor Khosrow I. The chronology offered by Crone is based on the assumption that the accounts of the two supposed revolts (one during Qobād's reign and one during his son's) were conflated into one. While this is possible, the task of textual analysis that would have shed light on this conflation is absent from the study. Instead, what we do have is one possible chronological arrangement of dates, but this particular interpretation of sources is as valid as some other less controversial interpretations, such as Yarshater's.¹ Additionally, one has to accept several ideas in order to believe Crone's two-revolt theory, one of which is Qobād's motivation for his heresy and why it was centered on sharing women rather than property: it was his way of getting back at noble houses by rendering their lineage obscure. The trouble with this assertion is that there is no evidence to support it, and since the thesis requires the acceptance of this practice as a kind of premise, Crone's two-revolt solution creates more problems than it solves.

Whether there were two revolts or just one, Crone agrees with her predecessors that the religious doctrine that fueled the radical movement can be traced back to the third century Zaradusht of Khrōsakān/Fasa (not to be confused with Zardusht/Zoroaster, the prophet and founder of Zoroastrianism). In the rest of the article, she sketches out the major tenets of Zaradushtism/Mazdakism, and in order to this, she examines the much later heresiographical sources, composed in the first 3–4 centuries after the arrival of Islam. The Muslim heresiographers were interested not in Mazdak as a historical figure, but as the founder of the Khurrami religion/sects, the adherents of which had a strong presence in territories stretching from greater Khurasan to Iraq. In doing so she delves into the problem of "women sharing."

Crone postulates that communal access to women was neither fiction, as some modern scholars have claimed, nor a stereotype. It was repeated in more sources, across a span of a few centuries in non-formulaic language. Rather than a powerful tool designed to besmirch the enemy, the author claims that this idea is rooted in a

¹Yarshater, "Mazdakism."

multitude of marital practices, including wife sharing, which seems to have been sanctioned by Zoroastrianism. Years later, she picks up where she left off in this article, to offer a spectrum of such practices in her monograph *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism*. In addition, she demonstrates that the Mazdakite brand of communism did not have to be imported from the West. In fact, since it was based on the teachings of Zaradusht, and advocated pacifism, vegetarianism, as well as “women sharing” (in the case of Qobād) and sharing women and property (in the case of Mazdak), she adds that sharing property did not translate into abolishing private property but redistributing it fairly. Another useful distinction that she offers to the debate is the relationship between Manichaeans and the Mazdakites. There has been confusion on the part of sources and modern scholarship alike about the affinity of Mazdakites with Manichaeans. This is because of some similarities in their religious practices, such as their pacifism, vegetarianism, as well as the commonly held belief in reincarnation. But Manichaeans’ vegetarianism grew out of their asceticism and their rejection of the material world, whereas the Mazdakite/Khurrami practice was to refrain from shedding blood (with the exception of when in rebellion) because they regarded all things in the material life as good and life in general to be enjoyed without causing harm to other beings.

In the part of the study where she is concerned with establishing the chronology of the revolt, she gives more importance to the contemporary Syriac and Greek sources. The later Perso-Arabic sources are not seriously studied partially because they were tainted with elements of romance. Aside from failing to prove the matter of conflation of the two revolts, she also often dismisses the value of these sources, sometimes without offering a persuasive reason. For instance, she dismisses Ferdowsi’s/Tha’alibi’s claim that the Mazdakite revolt occurred in the aftermath of a famine without offering any reason as why we are to disbelieve Ferdowsi/Tha’alibi (p. 46). All this notwithstanding, the study does set the record straight on several issues such as the distinction between Mazdakites and Manichaeans, the indigenous and specific nature of Zaradusht’s communism, and the possible connection between Mazdak’s massive revolt and Khosrow I’s tax reforms.

In chapter 2 we find a more detailed analysis of the Mazdakite/Khurrami belief-system or Zaradushti communism. As mentioned earlier, this brand of communism held that there should be equality in access to women and wealth, but in the case of women this did not translate into unbridled promiscuity. Instead the seemingly licentious sexual practices were rooted in various forms of marriage that existed before the appearance of the heresy. Its other tenets included pacifism and vegetarianism. This chapter includes a more general discussion of whether or not ancient communisms in general and this type of Iranian communism in particular could be classified as communism. It also includes some speculations about the possible common Indo-European origins of the idea of rejection of private property and pair bonding, as well as vegetarianism and pacifism on the grounds that they appear in Greek, Indian and Iranian realms.

Chapter 3 is the Khurrami entry in the *Encyclopedia Iranica*. There is much overlap in the content of this chapter with chapter 2 and some materials in chapter 1. After offering a short historical context, the author provides an outline of the main components of the Khurrami belief system, starting with divine incarnation (*holul*), reincarnation (*tanāsokh*), non-violence, pan-psychism and antinomianism when it came to the observance of Islamic law. She ends the entry by introducing various sects that were classified as Khurrami. This chapter is a condensed version of some of the same ideas that appear in her *Nativist Prophets*.

Chapters 4–7 are concerned with the revolt of al-Muqannaʿ (lit. “the veiled one,” d. circa 163/780). Chapter 4 is the *Encyclopedia Iranica* entry for al-Muqannaʿ, and as expected contains a summary of the historical context of the revolt, whose followers were known as al-Mubayyada or Sepidjāmegān (white-clothed ones). Al-Muqannaʿ, also known as Hāshim-e al-Hakim, was purportedly from Balkh but the center of his rebellion was Transoxiana. The revolt resulted in the occupation of several towns in that region and lasted at least fifteen years. Along with the major events of the revolt, great attention is paid here to the description of the belief system of the followers of al-Muqannaʿ and here we encounter some of the tenets of the Khurrami belief, such as incarnation of the divine (*holul*) and reincarnation (*tanāsokh*).

One major contribution of her study of al-Muqannaʿ here and more extensively in *Nativist Prophets* (chapter 6), is the discussion of the influence of Buddhism in the construction of al-Muqannaʿ’ s religious persona and message, the most important of which is the borrowing of attributes from the messianic figure of Maitreya or the future Buddha. The revolt, in her opinion, was not fueled by a desire for Sasanian restorationism; instead its religious ideology was shaped by the syncretic Sogdian religious landscape.

Chapter 5 engages in the textual analysis of fourth/tenth century work composed by an Ismaili missionary called Abu Tammām that contains information on the revolt of al-Muqannaʿ. She breaks down the account into three parts, and concludes that parts I and III were based on written sources while Part II is a single-person account, possibly Abu Tammām’s own observations. Among the new information provided in the source is al-Muqannaʿ’ s messianic role as well as the presence of practices of “women sharing” and non-violence.

Chapters 6 and 7 were co-authored with Masoud Jafari Jazi, and contain a narrative of Ibn Muqannaʿ’ s revolt reconstructed from various versions (both published and unpublished manuscripts) of *Tārikh-e Balʿami* also known as *Tārikhnāma*. The manuscript tradition of this work is prolific, complicated and difficult to categorize. For instance, the published full edition of the text edited by Rowshan is based on the shortest recension of the text and omits many episodes, including the account of al-Muqannaʿ’ s revolt. The authors recognize the impossibility of reconstructing Balʿami’s original text. Instead, they opt for putting together a version of al-Muqannaʿ’ s revolt by consulting thirty-six different manuscripts. The original Persian text and their English translation appear in chapter 6, while the authors’ invaluable commentary on their reconstructed text makes up the content of chapter 7. The new narrative sheds light on a number of issues related to the historical events of

al-Muqanna's revolt such as the time of its inception, the chronology of Samarqand's conquest(s), and the sphere and mode of al-Muqanna's operation, as well as the identity of his followers.

Although this was not the authors' aim, their exercise in reconstructing an episode of Bal'ami's work has illustrated the significance of the manuscript tradition of Bal'ami. As mentioned before, while the account of al-Muqanna's revolt is completely absent from the published version, a plethora of information is available in other recensions of Bal'ami's *Tārikh*. At the same time, the exercise of reconstructing this relatively short episode reveals the difficulties associated with editing a comprehensive version of *Tārikh-e Bal'ami*.

Chapter 8 is an investigation into the belief system of the Transoxanian rebel Jahm b. Safwān (d. 128/746), with an emphasis on establishing the provenance of his doctrine. Jahm and his followers were referred to as *ashāb al-jahl*, where *jahalāt* here seems to be a technical term rather than a simply pejorative one. The common belief among the groups whose doctrine is described as *al-jahālat* is their view concerning the relationship between perception and reality, holding that nothing exists unless it is perceived, and it only exists while it is perceived. Hence the world as we perceive is devoid of the only truth or *haqiqa*. In relation to this truth/God/*haqiqa*, all the input from our sense are mere imagination or *wahm*.

Crone rejects the suggestion by several scholars that this belief could be interpreted as Neoplatonist (Richard Frank and van Ess), and instead, following the suggestion of Fritz Zimmermann, looks to Indian systems for the roots of Jahm's doctrine. Crone establishes the existence of a similar philosophical doctrine in Mahāyāna Buddhism, and discusses at least two schools within Mahāyāna which held similar views regarding the nature of perception and reality. Jahm was born in Balkh, a center of Buddhism at the time, and Crone suggests that he may even have been born into a Buddhist family. She concludes by emphasizing that Jahmism was not Neoplatonist but rather a "Buddhist doctrine filtered through Iranian thought" (p. 210). Crone's shift from Neoplatonism to the Indian system is relevant when considering the existence of Indian thought especially in the eastern Iranian sphere. In case of Jahm and Buddhism, Crone has sufficiently demonstrated its plausibility. More importantly, this argument opens up the possibility of including various, less explored (non-Greek or Greek-inspired) facets of thought and philosophy. But as Crone herself admits, more scholarship, perhaps with expertise on Indian philosophy/Buddhism, is required to establish the precise doctrine and the possible Bactrian and Sogdian links that played a role in its transmission to the Jahmites. After all, the idea of the relativity of sense perception and its relationship to truth is a subject to which many Indian philosophical schools and sects returned, adding their own nuances and interpretations.

Chapter 9 explores the relationship between Buddhism as the pre-Zoroastrian religion of Iran, which Crone refers to as "ancient Iranian paganism." The starting point of this chapter is a rather curious assertion by the tenth/eleventh century polymath Biruni in his book on India: he claims that prior to the arrival of Zoroaster the entire region from Khurasan to Fars and beyond to Iraq and Mosul were followers of the religion of Shamaniyya, i.e. Buddhism. The chapter attempts to answer the

question of how and why Biruni could have thought that the entire Iranian cultural territory could have once been Buddhist by proposing what Biruni and his contemporaries defined as Sumaniyya. Crone then turns to other authors such as Hamza al-Isfahani (wrote 359/961), Khawarazmi (wrote between 367/977 and 372/982), Ibn Kalbi (d. 204/819) and Mas'udi (d. 345/956), to see how each described the pre-Zoroastrian religion and its various sects such as the Sumaniyya, the Chaldeans and the Sabians. The origin of these religions seems to have been tied to the figure of Budhāsef/Buddha, and while in some accounts he is seen as an Indian prophet, in others he is referred to as the founder of the Sabain religion, whose description matches the Haranian religion and has nothing to do with Buddhism. She concludes that the Sumaniyya/Shamaniyya mentioned by Biruni and others was the pre-Zoroastrian Iranian paganism, which survived after the appearance of Zoroaster and was influenced by various religions and ideologies including Buddhism.

One curious detail that appears consistently in various accounts is the placing of the advent of Budhāsef (Buddha) in the reign of the mythological king Tahmures who, according to the Shāhnāme tradition's periodization, belongs to the Pishdādi dynasty, and it is Tahmures who is also credited with having instituted fasting. According to Crone, the placing of Budhāsef in the reign of Tahmures took place in eastern Iran, as did the blending of Buddhism and Iranian paganism. The Buddhist in eastern Iran added Budhāsef into the Pishdādi period in order to give him "native credentials." It must be noted, however, that having Budhāsef appear in the time of Tahmures is about granting him a sense of "historicity": if he was thought to be a historical figure, there must have been a time in which he appeared. The organization of time, for the pre-Islamic period, was according to the periodization of the Shāhnāme tradition. The choice of Tahmures' reign is significant in more ways than one, and one of the obvious reasons is that it puts the appearance of Budāsef near the beginning of time and a very long time before the appearance of Zoroaster. Crone makes an error in identifying Budhāsef with Bewarasp. She states that the sources confuse Budhāsef and Bewarasp, but in fact the confusion cannot be attributed to the sources. She quotes Denkart stating that Bēwrasp (Avestan: Azdahāg) was an evil king who misled mankind into idolatry. Bēwrasp is obviously another name for Zakhāk, and while he is also accused of idolatry and bad religion, he is a distinct character from Budhāsef. Bewarasp is simply the Iranian name for Zakhāk according to some accounts (lit. owner of 10,000 horses). Therefore, there is no confusion or conflation on the part of the sources, but the merging seems to have been the result of Crone's erroneous reading of the names. It must also be noted that she makes another mistake of calling Goshtāsp a Pishdādi king, whereas in the periodization of the Shāhnāme tradition, Goshtāsp belongs to the Kayānid dynasty and confusing this periodization does undermine her next argument.

Crone suggests that the accounts of Zoroaster's arrival in various sources indicates that Zoroaster's religion was established by force. This, in Crone's view, is a reflection of what she calls Sasanian *jihad* against the Buddhists. In other words, she claims that the supposed violent Sasanian suppression of Buddhism is attributed to Goshtāsp, the patron of Zoroaster in the Iranian national history (i.e. the Shāhnāme tradition).

This assertion is barely tenable for a number of reasons. First, her reading of the accounts themselves is problematic and takes the spread of Zoroastrianism out of context, not paying attention to the multi-layered ancient sources upon which the medieval sources drew. The sources are particularly complicated and oftentimes contradictory for this episode of the Shāhnāme tradition because of its significance. Second, there is no archaeological evidence of a large-scale destruction of Buddhist monasteries and temples. She does cite archaeological reports, which indicate that Buddhist monasteries declined at Tirmiz in the later third and fourth centuries, but a general and sudden destruction of Buddhist monuments is not attested by archaeological evidence. More recent excavations at the Fayaztepe in Tirmiz substantiate the seventh century Chinese pilgrim's observation that the region had a flourishing Buddhist monastic culture.² Beyond Tirmiz, in the case of Marv, various functioning Buddhist monuments were excavated. As a matter of fact, the only identifiable religious monuments in the old city of Marv were a stupa and monastery. The monastery's origin has been dated variously from the first century BCE to the fourth century, with the latest coin find belonging to Khosrow I (531–79). In addition to this monastery, there were two stupas dated to the sixth/seventh centuries outside of the city walls. Contrary to what the author claims, Marv seems to have witnessed a flourishing of Buddhist culture in the fifth century. It is certain that by the time the Arab armies arrived in the city, Marv had a significant Buddhist community.³ The case for Sasanian kings waging *jihad* against the Buddhists therefore is not attested by archaeological finds and nor can it be justified by her interpretation of the Shāhnāme tradition's accounts of the advent of Zoroaster.

Chapter 9, co-authored with Luke Treadwell, contains a partial translation and commentary of a fifth/eleventh century book of advice for kings written by Tha'ālibi (d. 429/1038). Crone and Treadwell translated and compared the part in *Ādāb al-mulūk* that relates to the conversion of the Sāmānid king Nasr II b. Ahmad (al-Sa'id) (r. 301–31/914–43). The other two extant accounts that report on the same events are those of Ibn Nadim and Nizām al-Mulk. The comparison of the accounts reveals many interesting details that could be of value for both the history of the region in general and the development of Ismailism in particular. It is through the commentary and the comparison that we learn for instance that the Ismailis' appeal to the Sāmānid court was far from negligible and the Sāmānid elite in various capacities and ranks were subject to Ismaili proselytization. More significantly perhaps, we learn through Tha'ālibi's text that the Ismaili movement led by al-Nasafi, which had exerted influence at the Sāmānid court, was distinct in origin and orientation from the Fatimid mission.

Chapters 10 and 11 take us to the realm of medieval philosophy, as Crone examines Fārābī's (circa 870–950 CE) definitions of "*imamic*" constitution and the evolution of his thought regarding the so-called imperfect constitutions. In chapter 10, she examines a well-known but controversial passage attributed to Fārābī, which appears in Ibn

²See Annaev, "History and Culture of the Buddhist Monuments of Bactria-Tokharistan."

³See Hermann, "Early and Medieval Merv."

Rushd's (1126–89 CE) commentary on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. The chapter is an attempt to offer an explanation for the seeming discrepancy within the passage. Chapter 11 traces the trajectory of the development of al-Fārābī's "imperfect constitutions." The term constitution, or regime, as it is used interchangeably, at least in the case of Fārābī, does not necessarily refer to a polity, but rather beliefs and practices that are shared by a group. Following a chronological order, the author describes Fārābī's definition of these imperfect constitutions and attempts to contextualize them. She concludes that Fārābī, while initially attempted to assimilate Aristotle's and Plato's views on the subject matter, went on to develop a sophisticated scheme of his own. He revised and reformulated his views and as result he sometimes contradicted himself or ran into problems he could not solve. Crone attributes Fārābī's prolific thought on the imperfect constitutions to his alienation from his own society: he lived under rulers he disliked, and was highly critical of the contemporary social structure in which there was an increasing competition for wealth and power.

Chapter 13 is concerned with the idea of pre-existence as found mainly in the Zoroastrian religious discourse, and its influence in early Islamic society. Pre-existence of humans, namely the idea that they existed as divine beings in some other realm, was a familiar idea since antiquity. Versions of it were propounded by Plato and the Gnostics as well as Jews and Christians. The reasons why humans acquired gross bodies and came into the material world is the point of divergence. While the Gnostics saw the acquisition of bodies as a work of malign forces, Christians saw it as the end result of humans' own attraction to matter. In other words, humans, according to the former were helpless victims of evil forces, while according to the latter they were sinners. Zoroastrianism has an entirely different explanation: humans or rather their souls or *fravahrs* were given the choice to remain in the immortal realm of the divine world, but they chose to acquire bodies in order to participate in the cosmic battle against the evil forces. Humans take on this responsibility fully aware of the hardship it entails. Having explained the difference, which had been established previously by Bailey, Crone traces this Zoroastrian myth in the works of an ex-Christian Mu'tazilite and the Jews of Mesopotamia and Iran. In order to do so, first she engages in a detailed discussion of the various meanings of *fravabr/fravashi*. Then, when engaging in the discussion of the ex-Christian Mu'tazilites (Ibn Khābit, Ibn Mānush and others), she identifies the strands of thought which came from different religious traditions and how they interacted with each other to form each specific elaboration of pre-existence. The Mu'tazilite Sufis carried the teachings of their ancestral background regarding pre-existence, but in no way did they see it as incompatible with the teachings of Islam. Instead they opted for reading these teachings back into the Qur'an and hadith, as Crone puts it. Similarly, in the case of the Mesopotamian and Iranian Jews, when it comes to their versions of pre-existence, the footprint of the Zoroastrian myth of *fravahrs* is discernible. Crone concludes the chapter by stressing that Zoroastrianism, rather than a marginal doctrine, was a full participant in significant debates of late antiquity, and some of its contributions to the debate, such as its myth of pre-existence, had an impact in the development of western thought.

The volume demonstrates the impressive breadth of Professor Crone's interest as well as the depth of her knowledge. Her engagement with her material and modern scholarship is remarkable, as is her ability to question established paradigms. Here in this volume we see the application of such an approach resulting in opening up of new horizons, and less frequently to the formulation of ideas and postulates that may be provocative and controversial. But this risk goes with the territory, and Patricia Crone, from *Hagarism* to *Nativist Prophets*, did not shy away from taking such a risk, leaving us with a corpus of scholarship that is thought-provoking, sometimes controversial, but most significantly pathbreaking and innovative.

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