

The Myth of Zoroastrian Intolerance

Violence and the Terms of Christian Inclusion

THE LEGACY OF KERDIR

A single religious authority has shaped our understanding of how Zoroastrians regarded the adherents and institutions of other religions. The mowbed Kerdīr who served three successive kings of kings in the third century—Shapur I (r. 241–70), Ohrmazd I (r. 270–71), and Wahram I (r. 271–74)—was the only priest in the Sasanian period prolifically to have produced inscriptions.¹ On the stone walls of the so-called Kaaba of Zoroaster, alongside an inscription of Shapur I and beneath relief sculptures of early Sasanian rulers, he recounted his career as the supervisor of the institutionalization of Zoroastrianism throughout the nascent empire. This inscription was duplicated on the neighboring reliefs of Naqsh-e Rostam and on the image of Wahram I at Sar Mashad, where Kerdīr appears alongside the king of kings as a partner in rule. According to the mowbed's account of his own activities, he erected fire temples everywhere from the heart of Iran in Babylonia to its limits in Peshawar. He organized the performance of the Yasna and instructed believers in the principles of the Good Religion. He also claimed to have suppressed the other religions in Iranian territory: "The Zoroastrian religion [*dēn mazdēsñ*] and the priests held great authority in the empire [*šahr*]. The gods, water, fire, and domestic animals received satisfaction, and Ahreman and the demons received blows and suffering. The doctrine [*kēš*] of Ahreman and the demons was expelled from the empire and became unbelief. The Jews, Buddhists, Brahmins, Nazarenes, Christians, Baptizers, and Manichaeans were struck in the empire. Idols were destroyed, and the residences of demons were eliminated and became the place and seat of the gods."² On the basis of this account, historians have argued that Kerdīr oversaw a persecution of the named

groups, inaugurating a project whose aim was the elimination of religious others, toward which subsequent Zoroastrian religious authorities worked until the end of the empire.³ If such was the goal, the flourishing of Jewish and Christian communities from the third century through the seventh suggests that they made little headway against these groups.⁴ The prophet Mani was slain at the behest of the court for rivaling the ritual power and cosmological knowledge of Zoroastrians, but there is no persuasive evidence for action against Christians or Jews during the era of his tenure.⁵ Nevertheless, histories of Zoroastrian interactions with Christians, Jews, and others in the Sasanian period often begin with, and rely on, Kerdir's self-representation as a paradigmatic example of how his fellow religious authorities, whether in the third century or the sixth, treated or wished to treat rival religious groups. He has provided the archetype of the persecutory Zoroastrian.

What follows here questions whether Zoroastrian religious authorities were inherently persecutory, beginning with the most articulate member of their ranks. At first glance, Kerdir's inscription seems to lump together "the doctrine of Ahreman," idolatry, and the deviant religions as equivalently evil institutions that Zoroastrians should work to eliminate. Closer inspection, however, suggests important distinctions among these institutions that could have provided a basis for preserving certain religious groups within a Zoroastrian empire. Ahreman's *kēš*, a term that could designate a doctrine or a sectarian group, was to be expelled.⁶ Idols and idolatrous places of worship were to be destroyed. The deviant religions were, by contrast, simply to be "struck" (*zadan*). This verb has been interpreted as implying destructive actions with a view to elimination. But a struck object is neither destroyed nor eliminated. It is, rather, subdued. Blows are instruments of discipline and subordination instead of destruction. Regardless of whether the mowbed realized the claims he pronounced in his inscriptions, he envisioned the suppression of religious others rather than their elimination, their subordination to the institutions of the Good Religion, which was to reign supreme in an *Ērānšahr* embodying its cosmological ambitions. Christians, Jews, and others were to be disciplined, where supposed demon worshipers and idolaters were to be destroyed. It was this task of subordination that the mowbed set for himself. His primary goal was to place the Good Religion on solid institutional foundations in an era when the ideology of Iran was merely an idea, without fire temples, ritual performances, or laws as its anchors in space and society. He thus not only established such institutions but also propagated the superiority of the religion as the foundation of the new empire in inscriptions and rock reliefs. The reference to religious others in the inscriptions rhetorically defined the superior position of the Good Religion in relation to its known rivals at the same time as fire temples, a class of religious professionals, and laws were being created. The undertaking of actions of physical or symbolic, such as violence against Christians, Jews, or others, was not necessarily an essential feature of the project of Kerdir and his successors.

The fine distinctions in Kerdir's verbs prefigure the views of later Zoroastrian religious authorities who allowed for the inclusion of subordinated religions in the empire. The third-century mowbed has too often been seen in isolation, largely on account of his industrious self-promotion. Scholars have generally privileged his voice as representative of Zoroastrian religious professionals since his inscriptions are the only extensive contemporary literary sources for their thought. But, for the reasons we have considered in the introduction, the views of Zoroastrian exegetes, scholars, and jurists that have been preserved in the ninth-century collections of Middle Persian literature should not be dismissed. They include voluminous discussions of the problem of the place of religious others in a Zoroastrian empire, with which Kerdir was perhaps the first to wrestle in writing. In her study of "tolerance and intolerance in Zoroastrianism," Mary Boyce juxtaposed the mowbed's claim of having struck Christians and others to the statements of Sasanian kings of kings and scholars hostile toward non-Zoroastrian groups, providing a catalog of intolerant views which argued that the supposedly destructive fantasies of Kerdir proliferated in the following centuries.⁷ What such studies of Zoroastrian thought and practice have overlooked are statements in the selfsame texts expressing a positive regard for the *agdên*, "those of bad religion," within the empire. Zoroastrian discussions of bad religions as social and political problems were grounded in the concerns of late Sasanian scholars over the capacities of humans to contribute to the cosmological struggle that the kings of kings superintended in league with Ohrmazd. These scholars were not inclined to the simplistic, binary thinking and inveterate antipathy toward religious others that the label *intolerant*, often applied to them, evokes. The third-century mowbed's differentiation of bad religions into separate categories meriting distinct actions and approaches finds resonance in these later texts that evaluated religious others in terms of a hierarchy of better and worse rather than a binary of good versus evil. Their novel perspective on the religious landscape of late antiquity merits exploration.

Alongside the inscription of Kerdir and the more militant voices among the Zoroastrian scholars, historians have placed another, more voluminous corpus of sources: East Syrian histories of martyrs. As we saw in the introduction, there are nearly sixty accounts composed in the Sasanian era of Christians killed at the hands of Zoroastrian religious authorities in the fourth through early seventh centuries. These describe periods of persecution, *radupaye* in Syriac, both before and after the recognition of the Church of the East in 410. Shapur II was believed to have persecuted Christians relentlessly from 340 to 379, the so-called Great Persecution that was paradigmatic for the framing of subsequent outbreaks of violence as time-bound, systematic *radupaye*. The reigns of Yazdgird I, Wahram V, Yazdgird II, Peroz, Husraw I, and Husraw II were each reported to have contained periods of persecution against the Church of the East, even though its rapidly developing institutions continued to expand unabated. The catalyst for violence was, in the

hagiographical representations, the unwavering hostility of Zoroastrian religious authorities toward Christians. In the accounts of persecution, mowbed torment and kill Christians with bloodthirsty glee, devising ever more elaborate modes of torture and execution to inflict as much pain as possible on the persecuted. If their willingness to slay Christians and destroy churches was constant, their influence at the court of the king of kings was supposed to have fluctuated. Kings of kings who heeded the religious authorities persecuted Christians, while those with the will to ignore their demands did not. This framework for understanding and representing interactions between Zoroastrian religious authorities and Christian communities, ultimately derived from East Syrian self-representations, remains the historiographical consensus.⁸

Periods of persecution, fluctuating relations between kings of kings and mowbed, and intolerant Zoroastrians are stock themes of historical writing on the Sasanian period that have been perpetuated in the absence of critical studies on the East Syrian and Armenian hagiographical sources on which these accounts are based.⁹ The Christian representation of Zoroastrians, in other words, has triumphed in the modern imagination of the past, regardless of whether East Syrian authors achieved the social and political ambitions they set for themselves in late antiquity. The introduction has highlighted the consistency of the Sasanian commitment to Zoroastrianism anchored in the idea of Iran. This chapter seeks to replace the commonplace of Zoroastrian intolerance around which historians have so frequently organized their analyses of Iranian society in late antiquity with a model of the differentiated, hierarchical inclusion of religious others rooted in Zoroastrian cosmological thought. It lays the foundations for the subsequent chapters, which examine the particular contexts in which Christians and Zoroastrians negotiated the terms of the former's inclusion in the empire. Concepts of tolerance and intolerance, redolent with notions of liberal political virtue, are unhelpful instruments for the analysis of ancient societies, not least because they fail to capture ancient understandings of religious difference and their corresponding practices.¹⁰ The image of the intolerant mowbed has obscured Zoroastrian concepts and practices of inclusion and exclusion that evolved in tandem with the empire. Dispensing with the language of tolerance allows for the analysis of the culturally and historically specific ways in which hierarchically organized groups, themselves shape-shifting entities, regulated their interactions with one another in theory and practice. Symbolic and physical acts of violence were instruments of organization and regulation in ancient political cultures, and decoding their significance can as often reveal the dynamics of cooperation as of conflict.¹¹

To reconstruct the institutions, including norms and practices, through which Zoroastrians structured their interactions with religious others, this chapter pursues two distinct objectives. First, we recover the cosmological perspective of Zoroastrian religious authorities on the culturally diverse population of Iran,

which gave rise to a range of accounts of the place of bad religions in the social and political order. Rather than seek, or even imagine, the systematic exclusion of religious others, priestly scholars developed techniques for their regulation and disciplining, with the goal of ensuring that they did not jeopardize the operation of the institutions of the Good Religion. If ancient Zoroastrians are best known for their dualism, their concepts of mixture, intermingling, and hierarchical order will emerge as equally salient in Iranian political culture. Second, a strong correlation between such theoretical discussions and the political practice of the Iranian court will be demonstrated on the basis of a comprehensive and critical reexamination of the East Syrian hagiographical sources. East Syrian authors composed their works for polemical purposes, to construct communities defined through their experience of violence at the hands of their religious adversaries—Jews, Manichaeans, and especially Zoroastrians. They also drew from Roman martyrologies to compose the representations of Zoroastrian religious authorities and kings of kings as persecutors. Their accounts of how Zoroastrian authorities thought or behaved cannot be accepted as historical. The following sections, therefore, look beyond the stereotyped and polemical passages of the East Syrian hagiographical works to context-specific details concerning the actions of imperial authorities, such as names, dates, precise locations, and historically verifiable or plausible acts of mowbed or kings of kings. This reading of the corpus of East Syrian hagiography reveals the consistent, rather than fluctuating, use of violence against religious others by the Iranian court in particular circumstances as a means of establishing norms of interaction between Christian and Zoroastrian elites. These lines of research converge to show how the Zoroastrian institutions of the empire facilitated the expansion of Christian and Jewish communities throughout its history. Zoroastrians in late antiquity should be known for having practiced differentiated, hierarchical inclusion rather than intolerance.

A STATE OF MIXTURE

To understand how Zoroastrian elites regarded the human populations of their empire, we need to begin with the primordial creation, accounts of which established models for political action.¹² Ohrmazd brought the physical world into being as a vehicle with which to defeat Ahreman.¹³ His creation was to pass through three successive three-thousand-year stages, according to the most prevalent schema, in order for the cosmological triumph to be achieved.¹⁴ This beneficent deity initially created the heavens, water, earth, and fire as well as the primordial plant, animal, and human as wholly good material elements that would serve him in the impending struggle with his evil counterpart.¹⁵ After three thousand years, Ahreman created material elements of his own—darkness and *xrafstar*, wicked animals—and penetrated the good creation with demonic powers, precipitating an era of

confrontation between good and evil supernatural forces acting through their respective good and evil creations.¹⁶ This age of struggle constituted the three-thousand-year period of human history in which Zoroastrians found themselves in late antiquity.¹⁷ The arrival of a savior figure, the Sōšyāns, was to mark the end of the age, indeed the end of history, and the beginning of a world restored to its state of primordial perfection, the *frašgird*. The intervening period of human political history was known as the “state of mixture” (*gumēzišn*).¹⁸ During the mixed age, Ohrmazd and his supernatural allies waged war against Ahreman by means of good creations, enlisting the stars against demonic planets, crafting mountains to make waters flow into pure, life-giving reservoirs, and revealing religion and its rites to humanity. Every component of the material world of necessity participated in the cosmic struggle. But humans played a special, even determinative, role. As fundamentally good creations, they contributed to Ohrmazd’s restorative work by means of their mere existence, like flora and beneficent fauna. The revelation of Zoroastrianism, however, gave humanity a package of rituals and actions through which men and women could not only support the efforts of the good deity but also accelerate the gradual victory of good over evil, tipping the balance in the interim in favor of Ohrmazd even as humans continued to await the *frašgird*. It was the capacity to choose whether or not to serve the forces of good that distinguished humans from other corporeal creatures in the state of mixture.

The implications of this understanding of the nature of the world and humanity for the politics and society of the Iranian Empire cannot be underestimated. The empire was conceived as a vehicle—akin to Ohrmazd’s original creation—for organizing collective actions to maximize the contribution of humanity to the cosmological struggle. Through the erection of fire temples for the performance of the Yasna, the extension of arable lands for the cultivation of plants, and the creation of legal institutions to heighten human fertility, Ērānšahr anchored what was a global restorative project in the territories that the Sasanians ruled. The responsibility for organizing and operating these cosmological institutions rested with a privileged, comparatively narrow group of men: those descended from the first man, Gayōmard, via the primordial kings through the Kayanian dynasty, which accepted and propagated the teachings and rituals of Zoroaster into the present—that is, the Sasanians and allied aristocratic houses that constituted the *ēr*, the “Iranians.”¹⁹ To be Iranian was first and foremost to possess an ethical disposition transmitted via a lineage that positioned one as an ally of Ohrmazd more efficacious in facilitating the cosmological struggle than any other kind of human. This branch of humanity enjoyed such superior ethical qualities as loyalty, righteousness, and nobility that rendered theirs a “lineage of leaders” (*dahibedān tōhmag*).²⁰

The *ēr* were also those who had full knowledge of the religion that Zoroaster had revealed. According to accounts circulating in the Sasanian period, Ohrmazd created his messenger (*paygāmbār*) as a means of communicating the instruments

through which humans could act, think, and organize themselves in ways most conducive to assisting him in the cosmic struggle. As the seventh book of the *Dēnkard* summarizes Zoroaster's contribution, "From the all-knowing creator Ohrmazd he received utterly complete—and even oral—knowledge of the theory and practice of the priestly, warrior, agricultural, and artisanal classes. At the command of the creator he also brought the entire Mazda-worshipping religion [*dēn mazdēst*] to the king Kay Wishtasp, . . . enlightening with the greatest light the wise men in the clime [*kišwar*] of the most exalted, the gods' ruler, [and] spreading [the religion] in the seven climes."²¹ It was the Kayanians of Airyana Vaējah—the successors and allies of the mythical King Wishtasp, who had supported Zoroaster—who received the fullness of religion and directed its distribution to the other six *kišwar* on earth. The extent to which other lands and peoples gained possession of the Good Religion, whether fully or fragmentarily, depended upon the Iranians to whom Zoroaster had entrusted its principles and practices. The connection between Iranianness (*ērīh*) and Zoroastrianism was basic to the self-understanding of the *wehdēn* (adherents of the Good Religion) in late antiquity. Zoroastrian scholars routinely equated the two, using the adjectives *ēr* and *wehdēn* as virtual synonyms.²² And although ancient scholars emphasized the ethical content of *ērīh*, its foundations always resided in lineage, in genealogical relationships with the *ēr* of Zoroaster's mythical homeland.²³ The flexible nature of Iranian mythical histories, as we will see in chapter 4, allowed for persons of diverse backgrounds to construct such relationships with the Iranians, if not to become *ēr* themselves, although there is no documented case of a convert to Zoroastrianism articulating such an identity. It was unthinkable, on the other hand, for an Iranian to abandon the Good Religion or for an *agdēn* to lay claim to the adjective *ēr*.²⁴ If the injunction to propagate the religion beyond the *kišwar* of Iran shows that Zoroastrianism was hardly conceived as exclusive to Iranians, the privileged position of Iranians possessing superior knowledge of religion was unassailable.

Iranians, however, were not without their imperfections. As the efficacy of the Good Religion depended on practice rather than mere belief, the possession of *ērīh* implied certain ethical obligations, which Iranians invariably fell short of fulfilling.²⁵ The capacity of Iranians for inaction or even wicked action in the service of Ahreman could destabilize the boundaries between the *ēr* and the *anēr* (non-Iranians). As one of the scholars quoted in the sixth book of the *Dēnkard* pointedly stated, "There is no person in whose substance these things are not found: knavery, the condition of a whore, sorcery, and non-Iranian behavior [*anērīh*]."²⁶ Juxtaposing non-Iranianness to some of the most monstrous sins underlined how dimly scholars, in comparison with their superiors, viewed *anēr*, while admitting some overlap in their capacities for ethical practice. Cosmologically efficacious practices were, moreover, available even to non-Iranian *agdēn*. The same text that recounts Zoroaster's revelation of religion to the Kayanians also mentions the activities of

earlier *waxšwar*, “spirit-bearers,” who brought individual components of religion to humans. These unnamed agents of Ohrmazd introduced various beneficial practices to humanity. In particular, they taught cultivation, husbandry, and craftsmanship to the first couple and ancestors of all humans, Mašyā and Mašyānē.²⁷ All of this couple’s descendants retained these capacities even as they strayed, like their primogenitors, into demon worship or other destructive activities.²⁸ Thus, according to some scholars, the perfection of the frašgird was the common inheritance of humanity, and Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians alike would ultimately enter paradise.²⁹ Although Zoroastrians developed decidedly hostile views toward non-Iranians and non-Zoroastrians, the notion that *waxšwar* preceding Zoroaster had granted, in the words of Albert de Jong, “most aspects of human culture and civilization, including the germs of what it means to be pious and righteous, as the inheritance of all humans” provided the ideological foundation for acknowledging the potential contributions of *agdēn* to the Iranian Empire.³⁰

BAD RELIGIONS

If humans found themselves collectively in a state of mixture, there was only one Good Religion that could bring the world to a state of perfection. Every other system of ritual and belief was “bad religion,” *agdēnih*, whose institutions were irredeemably deficient and potentially maleficent. The concept derived from the Avestan *aka-daēnā**, “evil piety” or, in the understanding of Sasanian scholars who took *daēnā* to designate a belief system, “evil religion.”³¹ The Middle Persian term *agdēn* became common in the discourse of Zoroastrian scholars in the Sasanian period as a blanket designation for non-Zoroastrians, collapsing the distinctions among Christianity, Judaism, and other religions into a single binary opposition between the single Good Religion and the various bad ones. *Agdēn* and *anēr* became as synonymous as *wehdēn* and *ēr*. In part on account of *agdēn*’s seemingly straightforward Avestan etymology, the use of the term has been taken to indicate the vehement antipathy of Zoroastrian authorities toward religious others. The dualism of Zoroastrian cosmology seems, in the categories of *wehdēn/ēr* and *agdēn/anēr*, to have provided a blueprint for dividing humanity into two distinct groups, one allied with Ohrmazd, the other with Ahreman.³² As with other evil creatures, this interpretation implies, Zoroastrians would ideally have violently expunged their empire of bad religions and their adherents if political and economic constraints had not forced them to practice what Christopher MacEvitt has termed “rough tolerance” in describing the conduct of Christian crusaders in the twelfth-century Levant.³³ This representation of Zoroastrian concepts of religious difference ignores the nuanced discussions of *agdēn* found in the literary sources that priestly and courtly elites produced. The idea of bad religion was the beginning, not the end, of scholarly discourse on the relationship between the *wehdēn*

and the great mass of humans who stood outside the imperial religion yet within Iran. The religions lumped together under the rubric of *agdēnih* were in fact distinguished into more or less deficient varieties, only a select few of which merited eradication and/or expulsion. Ancient scholars went so far as to suggest that in the state of mixture, adherents of bad religions could make valuable contributions to the cosmological struggle. Zoroastrians did not practice a rough tolerance of non-Zoroastrians in the manner of crusader Christians, who tolerated heretical Christians, Jews, and Muslims in their territories but would have preferred forcibly to convert them. Rather, Zoroastrians possessed ideological, cosmological foundations for enlisting the adherents of some bad religions, such as Christians and Jews, into their imperial project.³⁴

The presence of *agdēn* in Iranian territories and societies had the potential to disrupt the Zoroastrian social order in one particularly important domain: purity.³⁵ The evil forces of Ahreman, in Zoroastrian thought and practice, operated through physical manifestations, such as drought, winter, locusts, corpses, disease, and menstruation.³⁶ If the material world was in a state of mixture of rival powers and creations, one of the tasks of the *wehdēn* was to disaggregate these entities, to carve out spaces purged of evil that could provide a platform for combat against the material and spiritual agents of Ahreman. This took the form of rites of purification that protected the good elements—the human body, water, earth, fire, and so forth—from evil forces.³⁷ The constant maintenance of the purity of the body and the natural environment was the task not only of the priests but of individual believers. Of greatest concern for the social history of Iran was the treatment of bodies, especially after death. As the demon *Nasuš* was believed to have inflicted corpses, the dead became repositories of evil and had to be kept distant from living bodies, water, and earth. The exposure of corpses, which dogs and vultures, both beneficent creatures with special powers against the demon *Nasuš*, picked clean, was characteristic of Zoroastrian societies from the Achaemenian period onward.³⁸ The dry bones of the dead were placed in ossuaries, *astōdān*, which have been attested archaeologically throughout Iran and Central Asia.³⁹

Neither Christians nor Jews were customarily or theologically inclined to expose their dead or to inter them in ossuaries rather than the ground. Yet there are examples of Christians embracing Zoroastrian practices of interment, if not exposure. A rock-cut *astōdān* on the Kuh-e Rahmat between Istakhr and Persepolis displays a Christian cross on its entrance, indicating that an *agdēn* was interred alongside his Zoroastrian counterparts.⁴⁰ East Syrian hagiographical texts, moreover, describe Christians waiting until “the flesh had fallen from the bones” before interment and preventing blood and flesh from mixing with the earth.⁴¹ Even so, inhumation was a common practice, archaeologically documented in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf, and apparently the norm among Christians and Jews.⁴² The treatment of the dead was therefore a possible zone of conflict between

wehdēn and agdēn, which Christian and Jewish authors frequently emphasized in their polemical representations of the authorities of the Good Religion.⁴³ Their reports that Zoroastrians often forcibly exhumed bodies that Christians and Jews had buried have contributed to the image of the persecutory mowbed.⁴⁴

Sasanian scholars, however, debated the problem of agdēn bodies in ways that reveal more complex approaches toward religious others. Although historians have assumed the burials of Christians and Jews to have been a great offense to Zoroastrians, the *Widēwdād*, the Avestan treatise on purity and purification, states that the corpses of agdēn pollute the earth no more than those of deceased wicked creatures, that is, not in any measurable way that would be of concern to the religious authorities.⁴⁵ A ninth-century text, the *Gizistag Abāliš*, explains that demons afflict the deceased bodies of good, not evil, persons, making the corpses of anēr insignificant as sources of pollution.⁴⁶ The idea that Zoroastrian authorities intervened in the practices of religious others to coerce them to adhere to Zoroastrian principles overestimates their interest in communities whose contributions to Iran were more practical than religious. Some Zoroastrian scholars, discussed below, considered agdēn capable of performing cosmologically beneficial work, but no known exegete thought their bodies or spirits could attain the perfection that came with *wehdēnīh* (the Good Religion). The question of which deceased bodies caused pollution was an occasion for debating larger problems concerning the place of agdēn in a Zoroastrian society. The Middle Persian commentators of the *Widēwdād* in the Sasanian period elaborated on the passage concerning agdēn corpses to argue that anēr, whether alive or dead, could not pollute ēr.⁴⁷ The reasons for this claim varied in remarkable ways. The exegete and jurist Sōšāns, well known for strident views, considered non-Zoroastrians ontologically evil, incapable of pollution because they stood outside the wax and wane of good and evil forces in which wehdēn waged the cosmic struggle.⁴⁸ As Yaakov Elman has argued, Sōšāns represented the extreme end of the spectrum of Zoroastrian views concerning religious others. At the other end was the scholar Gōgušnasp, who argued that “we may become polluted by their [corpses], because men of any religious law [*dād*] may become righteous [*ahlaw*].”⁴⁹ According to Gōgušnasp, agdēn could act righteously, and their good deeds exposed them to demonic forces. Ironically, the arguments of the scholar with the most sympathetic views logically required non-Zoroastrians to adhere to Zoroastrian practices of purity, and the most antagonistic scholar regarded the burial of agdēn as entirely unproblematic. The significance of these views resides less in their implications for the treatment of the dead than in their explicit unveiling of a spectrum of approaches toward religious others among the authoritative scholars of the late Sasanian period.

If the bodies of agdēn were not as threatening to the social order as has been assumed, the institutions of the different religions present in Iranian territory were evaluated on their own terms. Not all religions were equally bad. The treatment of

idolatry under the Sasanians shows how Zoroastrian authorities distinguished among *agdēn*.⁵⁰ At the outset of this chapter, we encountered a crucial distinction in the inscriptions of Kerdīr. Christians, Jews, and other monotheistic religious groups were only to be “struck,” while the institutions of idolaters and demon worshipers were to be eliminated to make way for Zoroastrian shrines. Their idols (*uzdēs*) were to be broken, their temples destroyed. Regardless of whether the mowbed undertook these actions in the third century, the twofold program he announced of subordinating monotheists and eradicating the institutions of idolatry well captured the approach of Zoroastrian religious authorities toward bad religions throughout the Sasanian era. Literary and legal sources attest to attempts to destroy supposed sites of idol worship from the reign of Ardāshir I onward. Idols, their temples, and their worshipers had, in Zoroastrian thought, the capacity directly to unleash the powers of Ahreman in the world, making their destruction a characteristic of legitimate kingship.⁵¹ Iranian and Armenian historiographical traditions recall the first king of kings, whose history was paradigmatic for subsequent rulers, as having uprooted idolatrous temples together with their priests.⁵² The *Hazār Dādestān*, an early seventh-century collection of Zoroastrian judicial decisions, explicitly describes the process of destroying a temple of idols and establishing a fire temple in its place. A certain Pusanweh “tore down” a “house of idols” (*uzdēs kadag*) in a case concerned with legal authority over fire temples.⁵³ The incidental nature of the reference suggests that such destruction of idolatrous shrines was entirely unremarkable and so obviously legally justified that this aspect of the case was unworthy of comment. This legal sanction might even have provided support for Christians who uprooted idolatrous temples, a phenomenon documented in northern Mesopotamia.⁵⁴ If magic bowls and other sources reveal the continued veneration of a great many gods and demons in domestic contexts, the institutionalized worship of Mesopotamian and Hellenistic deities ceased in the early Sasanian centuries, whether on account of active destruction of their temples or the gradual draining of their treasuries.⁵⁵ The worship of the Assyrian gods at Karka d-Beit Slok in the sixth century took place privately, even clandestinely.⁵⁶ The antagonism of imperial authorities toward idolatry, moreover, helps to explain the absence of Buddhist communities in northeastern Iran even though they flourished just beyond the frontiers.⁵⁷ The identification of Buddhists as idolaters—indeed, *but-parast*, or “Buddha worshiper,” became a standard term for *idolater* in New Persian—prevented them from earning the recognition that Christian and Jewish communities enjoyed.⁵⁸ There were, in sum, not merely bad religions but also worse religions, whose institutions Iranian authorities endeavored to eliminate from their empire.

The contrast with the experience of the Church of the East is striking. Not only were churches, saint’s shrines, and monasteries constructed without attracting the intervention of Zoroastrian authorities throughout the territories of the empire,

but the kings of kings often contributed funds to Christian infrastructural projects. East Syrian hagiographers frequently claimed in formulaic terms that Zoroastrians dismantled their churches and shrines, without specifying the sites and dates at which such acts were supposed to have occurred. The one concrete example, which appears in the *Martyrdom of Peroz*, describes the destruction, at a moment of renewed warfare with Rome, of a church that a Roman emperor had had built at Seleucia-Ctesiphon.⁵⁹ If other churches were assailed in the course of the tumultuous political relations of East Syrian bishops with the Iranian court, such actions had little impact on the ongoing proliferation of Christian buildings in the cities and regions of Iran, even at highly visible, politically potent sites, such as Weh-Ardashir or the tells of Arbela and Karka d-Beit Slok. Had Zoroastrian authorities wished to keep the construction of churches in check, there would have been more instances in the East Syrian sources of constraints imposed and fewer, or at least more modestly sited, Christian structures. In the entire corpus of Zoroastrian literature, there is not a single injunction to destroy the institutions of Christians, Jews, or other monotheists along the lines of the cases of the eradication of idol worship. As we will see, Christian churches that displaced fire temples were an altogether different matter, requiring Zoroastrian authorities to realign the proper spatial relationship between the two religions. In keeping with the distinction of Kerdir, Christians and other groups with the capacity for beneficent action were to be suppressed, in the literal sense of “subdued,” while idolaters were to be expunged on account of their irredeemable propensity for maleficence.

Idolaters were not the only category of human without a place in Iran. The voices of Zoroastrian authorities became markedly shrill when treating deviance within their ranks. Labeled *ahlamōg* or *zandīg*, those who practiced rituals and/or interpreted the Zand—hence *zandīg*—in ways that the authorities deemed transgressive of established norms excluded themselves not only from the institutions of the Good Religion but from the empire.⁶⁰ If religious deviance and bad religion were sometimes juxtaposed as equivalent evils, approaches to the latter were considerably more violent.⁶¹ Deviance in ritual and doctrine surpassed apostasy as a social and political evil in undermining the foundations of the imperial religion. In the *Sīrat Ānūšīrwān*, an autobiographical work establishing paradigms for his successors to follow, Husraw I wrote of having a group of aristocratic deviants at Rayy executed as soon as he learned of their existence.⁶² Another group of deviants, whom the editor of the text argues were Manichaeans, were expelled from Iranian territory.⁶³ Royal anxieties about the possibility of religious deviants disrupting the political order were hardly baseless. In the early sixth century, the *zandīg* Mazdak developed the teachings of a third-century scholar known as Zardusht into a platform for thoroughgoing rebellion against the Sasanians. In Husraw I’s forcible repression of the movement, thousands of its followers were reportedly executed.⁶⁴ Although idolaters and deviants seem to have been at opposite

ends of the spectrum, the latter regarded as wayward Zoroastrians, the former as adherents of Ahreman, there was an underlying similarity in Zoroastrian understandings of the two categories. Both compromised the Good Religion from the inside. Whether for real or imagined reasons, Zoroastrian religious authorities feared that wehdēn would be drawn to worship demons, as we will see in the next chapter. At the foundation of the empire, Ardashir I was believed to have destroyed not only centers of idol worship but also fire temples that the Parthians had established, on account of the divergence of their rituals and customs from the new Sasanian norms.⁶⁵ From the third century, demon worship, idolatry, and deviance were potential rivals to the priestly authorities of the Good Religion. In spite of East Syrian representations of mowbed seeking the destruction of their communities, the Christian threat to Zoroastrian institutions never attained the same immediacy in the eyes of the imperial religious authorities, in either the third century or the sixth.

Zoroastrian religious authorities thus made important distinctions among different varieties of agdēn. Some were inherently allied with evil forces and therefore impermissible in a Zoroastrian society, namely idolatry and deviance. Others were composite entities, neither wholly good nor wholly evil, capable of contributing materially or spiritually to an Iranian Empire, namely Christianity and Judaism. In place of the binary division of humanity into good and evil populations that has hitherto prevailed in historical discussions of Zoroastrian interactions with religious others, a concept drawn from the writings of Sasanian scholars is more helpful for understanding their approaches toward Christians, Jews, and others: hierarchy.⁶⁶ As the previous section has shown, the idea of Iran implied not a binary but a hierarchical conception of humanity. The *Mēnōg ī Xrad* says that humans are to be measured according to a certain scale: “How many kinds [*sardag*] of human are there? There are three kinds of human. One is human [*mardōm*], the other half human [*nēm mardōm*], and another half demon [*nēm dēw*].” The fully fledged human was, predictably, a believer in the Good Religion, without any tendency toward deviance (*jud ristagīh*). The demonic human pursued only self-interested evil. The half human, however, was a curiously amalgamated creature who could not be neatly categorized as either good or evil: “The half human is one who performs material and spiritual things according to his own thinking, arrogantly and disobediently [*xwad-dōšagīhā*]. Actions and deeds [*kār u kirbag*] proceed from him in accordance with both the will of Ohrmazd and the will of Ahreman.”⁶⁷ Half humans, in other words, undertook good and evil work, on account of their ignorance of the perfect knowledge of the Good Religion, which would have rendered their thoughts, words, and actions entirely beneficent. The terms *kār* and *kirbag* evoke the entire edifice of Zoroastrian ethics, which was predicated on the notion that humans could help to restore the cosmos to a primordial state of perfection through their work, their *xwēškārīh*. The empire organized the collective efforts of

wehdēn to maximize beneficent cosmological labor, a project that, in the interim mixed state of the world, required them to cooperate with agdēn. In this process, the so-called half humans could make potentially positive contributions, unlike their half demon counterparts.

Internal Zoroastrian debates concerning the extent to which the half humans who constituted the great bulk of the population of the empire performed good work on its behalf have been left largely undocumented. There are, however, clear signs that such discussions frequently took place. The imagined scholarly interlocutor of the *Mēnōg ī Xrad* asks, “Which sects [*kēš*], laws [*dād*], and beliefs [*wurrōyišnīh*] are harmful to the well-being of the gods and are not good?”⁶⁸ *Kēš* designates, in the inscriptions of Kerdir and elsewhere, agdēn religions. The presupposition of the scholar asking the question is thus that some *kēš* possessed laws and beliefs that were more damaging (*wizēndgar*) to the Good Religion than those of others. The *Pursišnīhā*, a question-and-answer text that was redacted in the early Islamic period and considers queries relevant to Sasanian society, tackles similar issues. Its interrogator asks, “[If] an agdēn is allied with the wehdēn in goodness . . . and helps the wehdēn in matters of prosperity . . . , does he join in the righteousness of good work and deeds [*kār u kirbag*]?” The following question makes explicit what the *kār u kirbag*, which we have so far seen in ambiguous contexts, entailed: “[If] anēr warriors kill other anēr together with the Turks and ourselves and keep destruction from us, do good deeds [*kirbag*] reach their souls for bravery and strength or not?”⁶⁹ These passages make plain that non-Zoroastrians were routinely thought capable of performing meritorious deeds, *kirbag*, through military service or economic activities that enhanced the prosperity of Iran. But the scholars who answered these questions rejected their presumption that agdēn could achieve righteousness or even enter the spiritual realm after death.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, they regarded these queries as sufficiently urgent to write, to compile, and to preserve the questions and responses, providing insights into the range of views that circulated among imperial religious authorities in late antiquity. They are rare examples of Zoroastrian scholars conscious of their dependence on agdēn for the realization of Ērānšahr.

The scholar Gōgušnasp explicitly articulated a conception of the position of religious others in a Zoroastrian society, which underpinned the questions that the editors of the *Mēnōg ī Xrad* and *Pursišnīhā* addressed: “In every law [*dād*] there are righteous people.”⁷¹ Agdēn could, like their wehdēn counterparts, attain righteousness through the performance of good work. They could, by extension, contribute to the empire, in essence a congeries of institutions designed to coordinate the cosmologically beneficent efforts of individuals. Rather than a liability, they were an asset to Iran. We have no way to gauge the prevalence of such a view in relation to others, such as the opinion of Sōšāns that agdēn were incapable of righteousness. For the reconstruction of the actions and approaches of Zoroastrian religious authorities, moreover, a mowbed apparently antagonistic toward

religious others—or a more sympathetic counterpart—cannot be isolated as representative of the class. Neither Sōšāns nor Gōgušnasp encapsulated the range of thought of scholars across four centuries on such a cosmologically complex religious and political problem. There were some who considered agdēn capable of good work, others who considered them capable only of evil. The great majority of Zoroastrian authorities likely creatively combined cosmological paradigms to make judgments of their own that fell somewhere along the spectrum between Sōšāns and Gōgušnasp. Zoroastrian cosmological thought, as the introduction notes, was predicated on myths and rituals that predisposed their interpreters to polyphonic discourse rather than the definition of normative orthodoxies. There were voices within this discourse that agitated for the recognition of the contributions that agdēn could make to the cosmological struggle, others that strenuously contested such claims. Absent were voices requiring the exclusion of bad religions in general from the empire or their segregation within its confines. Particular agdēn and agdēnīh were to be evaluated on their own terms for their respective ethical merits. As sources from both within and without the scholarly discourse show, these processes of judgment favored monotheisms that did not outwardly exhibit features of Ahremanic cults as imagined in the Avesta over polytheisms or deviant movements that openly challenged the Good Religion. The body of thought and ritual that the early Sasanians institutionalized and rendered normative predisposed them as much to include as to exclude particular religious others with respect to their political system.

Yet violence against Christians occurred with the sanction of Zoroastrian religious authorities at court. Recently, Richard Kalmin reinterpreted passages of the Babylonian Talmud previously believed to indicate the persecution of Jewish communities at various points in the history of the Sasanians. The Jews, he shows, were never subject to the persecutory violence that scholars claimed Zoroastrians sometimes exercised against them.⁷² What follows similarly reviews the East Syrian sources in their respective literary contexts to deconstruct narratives of persecution. The hagiographical works, nevertheless, describe specific episodes of violence whose historicity cannot be discounted. Hagiographers creatively adapted their narratives in the pursuit of theological and political agendas, subordinating the events they recorded to the shaping of Christian communities in accordance with the interests of ecclesiastical leaders. But in writing for audiences of East Syrian elites increasingly integrated into courtly and aristocratic circles, they did not invent the basic facts of their accounts, often including details that are seemingly at variance with their overarching representations and thus allow for alternative interpretations. Rather than deny episodes of martyrdom their historicity, the following three sections seek to understand acts of violence by the Iranian court—insofar as the sources permit historical analysis—in light of the Zoroastrian cosmological discourse of religious difference, with a view to showing how they

served to order hierarchically, and thereby to integrate, Christian elites indispensable to the functioning of the empire. In extreme cases, the sword was used to place limits on Christians who challenged the supremacy of the Good Religion through disobedience to the king of kings, the destruction of fire temples, or proselytism among wehdên. To characterize such violence as persecution is to overlook its ultimately inclusive intentions and effects.

THE “GREAT PERSECUTION”

According to East Syrian hagiographical and historiographical traditions, the Christian populations of the Iranian Empire were subject to systematic persecution from 340 until the death of Shapur II in 379. Upward of forty works describe Zoroastrian religious authorities relentlessly tormenting Christian men and women at every possible opportunity on account of their religious identities.⁷³ Zoroastrian mowbed reportedly aimed to eliminate “the Christian people,” who were a threat to the religion, society, and political structures of Iran, for example in the *Martyrdom of Aqebshma*:

The Christians are destroying our teaching. They are teaching people to serve only one God, not to worship the sun, not to honor fire, to defile the waters with despicable ablutions, not to marry women, not to produce sons or daughters, not to enter battle with the kings, not to kill, to slaughter and eat animals without murmuring [the ritual prayers], and to bury and to conceal the dead in the earth. They say that God created serpents and scorpions together with vermin, not Satan. They impair many of the servants of the king and teach them the sorcery that they call books.⁷⁴

For their evil beliefs and practices, the Christians were to be expunged from the empire. This passage is characteristic of East Syrian hagiographical literature in emphasizing the mowbed rather than the king of kings or the aristocracy as the instigators of persecution.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the outpouring of Zoroastrian hostility toward Christians takes place, in these accounts, at the command of a king of kings, who often directly supervises the torture and execution of the martyrs. These accounts were, after all, generally composed at a comfortable distance from the purportedly persecutory ruler, during the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries, when East Syrian leaders had come to enjoy the patronage of the kings of kings. Despite this gap in both chronology and political context, historians have typically interpreted accounts of violence during the reign of Shapur II as reliably documenting the activities of a Zoroastrian ruler and/or religious authorities hostile toward other religions.⁷⁶ This section questions whether a persecution in fact occurred. To do so, we must define the concept of *persecution* at the outset. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term designates “systematic violent oppression, directed against members . . . of a particular religious group.”⁷⁷ If East

Syrian authors claimed that events fitting such a description happened, the recent historical reconstructions of Karin Mosig-Walburg and Kyle Smith, based on comprehensive surveys of the evidence, suggest otherwise.

Shapur II, in the traditional narrative, initiated a persecution of Christians in response to the conversion of Constantine the Great and the Christianization of the Roman Empire. It was not until the Romans became Christian, Jérôme Labourt and most subsequent historians have asserted, that the Iranian court targeted Christian communities as latent extensions of the Roman state in Iranian territory.⁷⁸ The sources for this claim are twofold: the letter that Eusebius of Caesarea reported Constantine to have sent to the king of kings, and East Syrian hagiographical works in which persecuted Christians are accused of supporting the Romans. According to the *Life of Constantine*, the first Christian emperor appealed to Shapur II circa 324–37 to respect the Christians of Iran, who came under Constantine's purview as the universal sovereign of all Christians.⁷⁹ If the letter reached the Iranian court, a highly uncertain proposition, Shapur II would have perceived its claim as an infringement on his own pretension to universal sovereignty. But the view that the letter inspired the king of kings to take action against the Christians of his empire as agents of Constantine relies on a bishop's rewriting of a Roman imperial epistle to reconstruct the decision-making processes of an Iranian court. It was not until the middle of the fifth century, moreover, that East Syrian authors began to report that Shapur II had accused Christians of harboring Roman loyalties.⁸⁰ These allegations appeared in a specific literary context. Hagiographers who argued that Christians could be loyal servants of the Iranian court as long as their obedience was compatible with their Christianity were the same authors who reported accusations of divided loyalties. The literary topos of a king of kings denouncing a Christian for serving the Romans provided a foil for hagiographers who insisted on the undivided allegiance of East Syrian communities to Iran. These representations also gained plausibility from the fifth-century circumstances in which they were written. As Christians became courtly elites serving as diplomatic intermediaries between the two empires, the question of their loyalty and disloyalty became acute. Only a Christian performing a service on behalf of the king of kings, such as the catholicos Baboi (d. 484), could be seriously accused of treason.⁸¹ In the fourth century, however, Christians could not be identified as agents of Rome. Even if Shapur II received and read a letter from Constantine, the argument that the Iranian court perceived Christianity as a Roman phenomenon overestimates the extent to which the Roman state presented itself in Christian terms.⁸²

The cause of the violence that Christians encountered was a matter of internal politics only indirectly related to the Roman wars. To reconstruct the historical events that were reworked into a narrative of a "Great Persecution," we have to rely on critical studies of the hagiographical accounts that constitute our only

substantive sources, however tendentious. The most detailed, extensive, and influential of these are the *History of Simeon* and the *Martyrdom of Simeon*, both narratives of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon whose martyrdom marked the beginning of the violence. Although historians have tended to use these texts interchangeably as reliable accounts of the events, Gernot Wiessner long ago established that they represent distinct hagiographical traditions compiled in the course of the fifth century, which in turn shaped the great bulk of the other surviving East Syrian narratives of martyrs from the reign of Shapur II.⁸³ The demonstration that the accounts of Simeon were fifth-century productions paved the way for scholarly investigation of their literary importance and their role in Iranian political culture. Wiessner nevertheless also established a foundation for their reliability as historical sources, with the demonstration that the *History of Simeon* and the *Martyrdom of Simeon* share a common source, likely composed in the immediate aftermath of the martyr's death. Details that these two texts share therefore can be accepted as historical.⁸⁴

The *History of Simeon* and the *Martyrdom of Simeon* agree on one essential feature of the violence: its cause. According to the authors of both works, Shapur II had Simeon and his associates executed for refusing to collect taxes on behalf of the court.⁸⁵ From his summer palace in Khuzestan, the king of kings issued a decree to the authorities in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, including the bishop, in the *History of Simeon*: "As soon as you see this command of ours . . . arrest Simeon, the head of the *našraye*, and do not release him until he signs a document and takes it upon himself to collect and give to us a double poll tax and double tribute from all the people of the *našraye* who are in our land . . . and who inhabit the land of our authority. . . . They dwell in our land, yet they are of one mind with Caesar, our enemy. And while we fight, they rest."⁸⁶ This edict, the hagiographers insisted, was the stimulus of the Great Persecution. Although they elaborated on the events to present the king of kings as requiring Simeon and the other martyrs to worship the sun and the Jews as instigators, these were secondary developments epiphenomenal to an attempt to coerce the bishop of the imperial capital to contribute to the fisc. Just as Antiochus IV had plundered the Jews to replenish his treasury during the era of the Maccabean revolt, the *Martyrdom of Simeon* asserted, Shapur II had endeavored to despoil the Christians, whose leader steadfastly resisted.⁸⁷ The account of a king of kings seeking the collaboration of religious authorities in the levying of taxes in preparation for military campaigns is eminently plausible. When the edict was pronounced, Shapur II was in the middle of organizing imperial resources in a bid to reconquer the city of Nisibis, which had been lost to Rome in a humiliating concession in 299.⁸⁸ In the absence of financial instruments that would allow for the large-scale accumulation of capital through state debt, the successful practice of war required substantial cash reserves for the provisioning of men and materials.

Early Sasanian infrastructures of taxation, however, appear to have been underdeveloped. There is, at this stage, little documentation concerning the levying of taxes during the first two centuries of the empire, even if the regular minting of silver drachms throughout its territories shows that the court enjoyed a reliable influx of precious metals.⁸⁹ Early Sasanian efforts to intensify and control the production of high-value commodities in Khuzestan nevertheless suggest that the court sought to transcend the limitations of its fiscal system.⁹⁰ Navigable rivers debouching into the Persian Gulf—an avenue of both interregional and transcontinental trade over which Shapur II asserted Sasanian control—punctuated the fertile plains of the region, making its cities ideal sites for the production of commodities specifically for long-distance exchange.⁹¹ Shapur I and Shapur II constructed new cities in Khuzestan, in particular Beit Lapat/Jundishapur (Middle Persian Weh-Antiyök-Šāpūr) and Karka d-Ledan (Middle Persian Ērānšahr-Šāpūr) respectively, for the resettlement of artisans from the Roman world who specialized in the production of highly trafficked textile and precious metal commodities.⁹² So central was commercial production at Karka d-Ledan to the treasury of Shapur II's court that he established his winter palace in the city, alongside a structure built to house the administration of its artisans.⁹³ In addition to concerted efforts to profit from long-distance trade, East Syrian hagiographers reported that the king of kings attempted to enlist bishops in the fiscal system. The turn to religious authorities as intermediaries with provincial populations or, even more directly, as supervisors of taxation was in keeping with what is known of courtly practice in later periods. Husraw I depended on Zoroastrian religious authorities to enact and enforce his reforms of the fiscal system in the sixth century.⁹⁴ In cities with substantial Christian populations, bishops would have been indispensable ancillary authorities for organizing the levying of taxes. In requesting that Simeon and his episcopal partners contribute to the collection of taxes among their Christian constituencies, Shapur II aimed to draw upon their organizational powers in the two regions economically most important to the court, Mesopotamia and Khuzestan, to maximize royal revenues in anticipation of war with Rome. The royal edict requiring Simeon to collect taxes was an invitation to participate in the extension of imperial fiscal structures rather than an act of persecution.

The refusal of the empire's leading bishop to contribute to the renewal of the fisc, however, constituted an act of contumacy meriting punishment. Simeon reportedly regarded the collection of taxes as outside the scope of his authority as a bishop, in a passage of the *History of Simeon* that communicates his unflinching loyalty to the Sasanian: "I bow to the king of kings, and I honor his commands with all my power, however, concerning that which is required of me in the edict, I believe even you know that it is not my business to demand taxes from the people of Christ, my Lord. Indeed, our authority over them is not in the things which are seen but in those things which are unseen."⁹⁵ The author of the *History of Simeon* drew a

distinction between the worldly authority of the ruler and the spiritual authority of the bishop, which provided an intellectual foundation for Christians in both ecclesiastical and secular offices who served the king of kings in imperial institutions.⁹⁶ The refusal of Simeon to collect taxes created a separate, secular space for the Sasanian state, in which the ecclesiastical leaders of the Christian community could only assume roles if their service complemented their spiritual responsibilities. The importance of this distinction between the secular and the ecclesiastical that the fifth-century author articulated recurs throughout the following chapters. Simeon, in this view, could not collect taxes, because such service impinged on the welfare of Christian communities. But if the separateness of worldly and spiritual spheres became common language in the writings of East Syrian leaders, there was no consensus on the permissibility of participating in the fiscal system. The only bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon to have left behind letters on the mundane affairs of the office presumed facilitating the organization of taxation to have been a fundamental episcopal responsibility. Ishoyahb III, in the middle of the seventh century, even sought to arrogate to himself the privilege of levying the land and poll taxes—precisely the combination rejected in the accounts of Simeon—on the Christians of Iran.⁹⁷ The views of the intervening bishops of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and other cities have not survived. There is, however, an intimation in the *Martyrdom of Simeon* that not all bishops rejected the opportunity to collaborate in the collection of taxes as readily and definitively as Simeon did. Although almost all of the bishops of the other major cities of Khuzestan were executed together with the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the bishop of Karka d-Ledan, the site of Shapur II's palace, was spared.⁹⁸ He was perhaps among the dissenting East Syrian leaders against whom the authors of the *Martyrdom of Simeon* and the *History of Simeon* composed their elaborate, theologically informed expositions of the view that taxation was incompatible with the episcopal office. An alternative conception of the relationship between the worldly and the spiritual need not have been an innovation of Ishoyahb III.

Simeon and allied ecclesiastical leaders perished in the 340s for failing to cooperate in the extension of the fiscal system, not simply for being Christians. Execution was the consequence for disobeying a king of kings, whether the offender was Christian or Zoroastrian, an aristocrat or a commoner. Unlike their Roman peers, Iranian elites regardless of their status or background enjoyed no exemption from corporeal punishment. The violence that followed Simeon's disobedience targeted ecclesiastical leaders associated with the bishop and his circle, with only a handful of documented secular Christian men and women finding themselves accountable for the actions of their leaders. Among the Christians executed in the outskirts of Karka d-Ledan in 344 were the bishops of Beit Lapat and Ohrmazd-Ardashir in Khuzestan and Prat d-Maishan and Karka d-Maishan in Mesopotamia, ninety-seven priests and deacons, two secular elites who associated themselves with the recalcitrant bishops, and an ascetic woman, a *bart qyama*.⁹⁹ More or less reliable

accounts describe the execution during the following three decades of bishops, priests, and ascetics in Seleucia-Ctesiphon and Kashkar in southern Mesopotamia; Arbela, Karka d-Beit Slok, and their hinterlands in northern Mesopotamia; and Khuzestan.¹⁰⁰ In the absence of source-critical studies of these martyrologies of the kind that Wiessner and more recent scholars have performed for the Simeon accounts, the historicity of these martyrdoms after 344 remains uncertain.¹⁰¹ Even a highly optimistic reading of the evidence, however, shows the violence to have been limited and largely restricted to ecclesiastical leaders.¹⁰² Significant in this context is the prominence of *banat qyama*, female ascetics, whose sufferings hagiographers often emphasized as illustrating the vulnerabilities of Christian communities. Although their activities were gradually suppressed in the course of the institutionalization of the Church of the East in the fifth and sixth centuries, ascetic women were organizers of Christian ritual, prayer, and charity in the fourth century.¹⁰³ To Iranian officials, they were representatives of Christian communities as important as the male bishops and priests whose ranks they joined as martyrs. The court of Shapur II might have identified Christianity as a potentially centrifugal force within the empire. But the violence that Iranian elites inflicted on Christians was restricted to its religious leaders who had failed adequately to fulfill the obligations that the court imposed on them. Shapur II punished ecclesiastical leaders for disobedience. Neither he nor his court persecuted Christians as a collective.

The “Great Persecution” was thus a myth. Christians were not systematically persecuted as a recognizable group on account of their religious identity, but rather ecclesiastical leaders were executed for disobedience in their capacity as potential intermediaries of particular provincial populations vis-à-vis the court. Iranian elites identified a generation of ecclesiastical leaders—bishops, priests, and *bnai qyama*—as complicit in the contumacy of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, leading to episodes of violence that might have seemed indiscriminate to contemporary observers and, especially, to later hagiographers. The underlying logic was nevertheless consistent. The killing of Christians under Shapur II was the result of a refused invitation that the court had extended to ecclesiastical leaders to participate more actively in the administration of the empire. It was not the result of the ineluctable hostility of Zoroastrians at court toward religious others. This reinterpretation of the violence of the fourth century allows for a new perspective on the court’s elevation—or indeed creation—of the Church of the East in the early fifth century. The measures of Shapur II and Yazdgird I were of a piece, equally intended to integrate Christians into imperial networks and to discipline Christian communities into a subject position dependent on the king of kings and his court. Accounts of violence against Christians in the fourth century suggest that Christian ecclesiastical leaders, secular elites, and their subordinate communities were becoming visible to a court eager to make sense of the populations and resources under its control with a view to maximizing their exploitation. If the court had to

learn how to negotiate with Christian communal leaders during the decades between 379 and 410, East Syrian leaders had to come to terms with Iranian power within their own framework. The *History of Simeon* outlines the foundations of a rapprochement between bishops and kings of kings with its insistence on the compatibility of worldly and spiritual authorities as long as their distinction remained secure. The execution of ecclesiastical leaders for disobeying Shapur II counterintuitively points to the intimate collaboration of their successors with the Iranian rulers of the fifth, sixth, and early seventh centuries.

PATRONS OR PERSECUTORS?

There was greater continuity in the attitudes of fourth- and fifth-century kings of kings than has been appreciated.¹⁰⁴ The reign of Yazdgird I nevertheless remains a turning point. After his recognition of the Church of the East in 410, churches, martyr's shrines, and eventually monasteries were constructed in prominent places in the Iranian political landscape, notably in the vicinity of the court at Seleucia–Ctesiphon. Yazdgird I openly sanctioned such constructions and even contributed funds to churches whose principal patrons were East Syrian leaders or Roman envoys. The participation of Christians—both secular and ecclesiastical elites—in the administration only intensified, a trend that continued until the end of the empire. The potential pitfalls of holding imperial offices, or simply serving as a humble scribe, were major themes of accounts of fifth-century martyrs. But the transformation of ecclesiastical leaders' roles in imperial politics was more dramatic. Bishops began to serve the kings of kings in a variety of capacities, not least as envoys pursuing Iranian political and economic interests within and especially without the empire.¹⁰⁵ Where Simeon and allied ecclesiastical leaders had strenuously objected to Shapur II's invitation to participate in the imperial administration, fifth-century bishops—and their sixth- and early seventh-century successors—acted as representatives of Iran even while distancing themselves, through hagiographical literature and its attendant institutions, from its religion. It was precisely at a time of convergence of the interests of the Church of the East and the Sasanian dynasty that hagiographers recounting fourth- and fifth-century martyrdoms debated the nature of the relationship between East Syrian leaders and their rulers and produced the first extensive, sometimes even substantive, polemics against Zoroastrianism.¹⁰⁶

Episodes of violence nevertheless punctuated the history of fifth-century political integration. During the final years of the reign of Yazdgird I and the reigns of his successors Wahram V and Yazdgird II, Iranian officials interrogated, imprisoned, and executed Christians at the behest of kings of kings and destroyed some recently erected churches. In contrast with the narratives of the Great Persecution, these were frequently cases of martyred lay persons, officials in the administration whose Christianity seemed to present an obstacle to their imperial loyalty. Recent

studies have characterized these episodes as periods of persecution that kings of kings undertook to appease Zoroastrian religious authorities or to respond to the incursions of Christian Romans.¹⁰⁷ However, as with the circle of Simeon and related martyrs, the specific cases of the individuals killed and their political contexts reveal more of the historical significance of the violence than do the descriptions of general persecution that prevail in historiographies ancient and modern. The number of documented fifth-century martyrs is modest, the reasons for their execution more complex than mere anti-Christian sentiment. The relations of individual Christian elites with the court depended, this section argues, on their political positions and actions rather than the supposedly shifting religious policies of their rulers. However militantly anti-Zoroastrian Roman rhetoric became during the course of Rome's fourth- and fifth-century wars against Iran, internal Iranian developments determined the fate of these martyrs.¹⁰⁸ Instability on the northeastern frontiers played, in any case, a more important role than relations with Rome in shaping the policies of the fifth-century kings vis-à-vis their constituencies. There were two kinds of violence in the fifth century that have been lumped together under the carapace of persecution: the purging of elites in political crises, and the execution of individuals for particular misdeeds that communicated norms for interaction between Christians and Zoroastrians. The former phenomenon was restricted to the middle decades of the fifth century, while the latter shaped the social and political history of Christians throughout the late Sasanian period.

Throughout the fifth century, the Hun kingdoms of the Kidarites (ca. 360–457) and Hephthalites (ca. 457–560) forced Iran to engage in nearly continuous warfare on its northern and northeastern frontiers.¹⁰⁹ The reigns of Wahram V and Yazdgird II, in particular, were dedicated to campaigns to regain control of Bactria that succeeded only in retaining Khurasan. The Central Asian wars provoked an institutional and ideological crisis that eventually resulted in the robust, confident empire of the late Sasanians, but in the middle of the fifth century the very survival of Iran was uncertain. One symptom of the crisis was the unprecedentedly unpredictable violence of the court against elites whose loyalties became suspect. In an unparalleled episode, Wahram V had sixteen scribes apprehended and, according to the *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, required to renounce Christianity on pain of death.¹¹⁰ These were scribes in royal service with access to sensitive information. Although the hagiographer presented the episode as an example of persecution, the execution of scribes and messengers in possession of state secrets was a banal fact of courtly life, not an indication of an imperial anti-Christian policy. That Christians could now become scribes, envoys, and informants exposed them to the risks that accompanied the offices of the court. Accounts of the violence that Christians experienced under Yazdgird II emphasize that the supposed persecution was part of a package of measures intended to discipline imperial aristocracies more generally rather than specifically to target Christians. The *History of Karka d-Beit*

Slok and Its Martyrs recounts the execution of Christians in this northern Mesopotamian city in the 450s. Unlike the ascetics and clerics who perished there in the fourth century, the fifth-century martyrs were uniformly aristocratic landowners, members of the middling ranks of nobility who provided cavalry for Iranian campaigns in the East.¹¹¹ These northern Mesopotamian nobles might have shared the anxieties of their Armenian counterparts about campaigning in the distant, unfamiliar steppe.¹¹² What is clear is that their execution was connected with Yazdgird II's treatment of both Zoroastrian and Christian aristocrats in military and courtly contexts. He revoked privileges of access to the court and castrated men in his field armies to create eunuchs more loyal to the king of kings than to their own houses.¹¹³ The *History of Karka* has preserved an example of Christians experiencing the selective application of violence to uncooperative nobles that was a basic instrument of ensuring aristocratic discipline. As Nina Garsoïan has observed, the violence that Armenians experienced in the aftermath of their rebellion of 451 served to bring the *nakharars* (Armenian nobles) to obedience rather than to convert Armenia to Zoroastrianism.¹¹⁴ The execution of Christian elites, from this perspective, differed little from the savagery that Zoroastrian aristocrats were accustomed to expect from the court. Such violence was effective in disciplining the northern Mesopotamian and Armenian houses, which remained among the most loyal agents of the empire in the following century. These episodes were nevertheless isolated, at least in our hagiographical documentation.

The other recorded cases of exceptional violence in the fifth century established modalities of interaction between Christian and Zoroastrian elites that defined their relations in the following centuries. The recognition of the Church of the East as a royally sanctioned institution of the Iranian Empire raised questions about the relationship between the two religions to which violence, and its literary representation, provided answers. The first question concerned the relationship between their physical infrastructures. To what extent did churches emerge at the expense of fire temples? The presence of churches within the lines of sight of observers of Iranian landscapes could pose, in the eyes of Christians and Zoroastrians alike, a symbolic challenge to the supremacy of the Good Religion, a theme that recurs in chapters 2 and 4. Of greater concern to Iranian authorities, however, were Christians who attempted directly to destabilize Zoroastrian infrastructures, particularly through the destruction of fire temples. The second question concerned conversion. Did the newfound political legitimacy of Christianity permit Zoroastrian elites to participate in its rites and institutions or even to apostatize in its favor? When Yazdgird I gave his sanction to the Church of the East, he appears not to have known much of Christian doctrine or practice, particularly the religion's propensity for proselytism and polemics. Focused like his forerunner Shapur II on the capacity of the episcopal network to contribute to the court's political and economic resources, he was seemingly unaware of the ideological challenges that

Christians could pose to Zoroastrian preeminence. Although militant ascetics disabused him of the illusion of Christian passivity, the problem of how to constrain Christians antagonistic toward Zoroastrianism remained even after he safeguarded the fire temples of the empire from Christian assailants. The imperial religion, in the view of its authorities, could be diminished not only through the outright destruction of its temples but also, more subtly, through attrition. Zoroastrian authorities therefore developed principles and procedures for prosecuting and executing apostates. The problem of conversion—the topic of the next section—remained of acute concern to the court until the end of the dynasty.

The phenomenon of Christians assaulting fire temples first appeared toward the end of Yazdgird I's reign, circa 419–20. The bishop of Ohrmazd-Ardashir in Khuzestan, Abda, in league with a group of Christian clerics and laymen, destroyed a fire temple, and the court accordingly called them to account.¹¹⁵ The king of kings reportedly demanded of the bishop, "Since you are the chief and leader of these men, why do you allow them to despise our kingdom, to transgress against our command, and to act in accordance with their own will? Do you demolish and destroy our houses of worship and the foundations of our fire temples, which we have received from the fathers of our fathers to honor?" The ruler who had elevated bishops to positions as imperial agents now turned to one of their ranks to discipline Christians who had undermined an institution of the state. Abda temporized, but a priest in his retinue took responsibility for the act and justified the destruction of a fire temple as a pious demonstration of the falsehood of Zoroastrianism: "I demolished the foundation and extinguished the fire because it is not a house of God, nor is the fire the daughter of God."¹¹⁶ Destroying a fire temple, the author of the *Martyrdom of Mar Abda* contended, was a means of communicating the triumph of Christianity. Although the conclusion of this East Syrian account has not survived, the nearly contemporaneous work of Theodoret of Cyrrihus (ca. 393–457) reports that the bishop refused to rebuild the shrine and was executed, together with his companions, for destroying a Zoroastrian shrine without making reparations.¹¹⁷ The case of the martyr Narsai was similar.¹¹⁸ After discovering that an aristocrat who had temporarily embraced Christianity and constructed a church had converted it into a fire temple, the ascetic forcefully entered the shrine, extinguished its fire, and removed the accoutrements of Zoroastrian rites.¹¹⁹ Imperial authorities intervened, and the chief mowbed gave Narsai the opportunity to repair the damage: "Promise that you will go and build the hearth as it was and bring in and set up a fire within it. Good will be accomplished through you, and your life will be given to you."¹²⁰ The leading Zoroastrian authority was willing to pardon the ascetic for dismantling a fire temple. Narsai, however, remained uncooperative. Following a brief imprisonment, he was beheaded for the damage done to a fire temple and, symbolically, to the position of the Good Religion as a whole.

These zealous Christians were killed not for failing to contribute to the organization of the empire but for intentionally—and unapologetically—dismantling its infrastructure. In addition to being sites of ritual functions, foundational of imperial authority, fire temples were an indispensable basis for the economic and social power of the aristocratic houses.¹²¹ It was through isolated acts of temple destruction that certain Christians openly challenged Iran's social and political structures, with or without knowledge of how they were embedded in fire temples and their rituals. In so doing, Abda and Narsai imitated the actions of Christian zealots in the Roman world, known to them through reports transmitted either orally or textually, who in the fourth and fifth centuries rendered the destruction of polytheist, Jewish, and other non-Christian places and objects of worship an ascetic practice.¹²² In the hagiographical literature of the era, violence against temples, idols, synagogues, and their respective believers became a mark of ascetic distinction. This vision of Christian holiness resulted in countless hostile acts that have left their imprint on both literary sources and numerous remaining, or archaeologically excavated, polytheist statues and temples.¹²³ Significantly, such religious militance often flourished without the involvement or sanction of Roman officials.¹²⁴ East Syrian martyrs, like the bulk of their Roman counterparts, assailed temples without the support of a state and in the face of significant opposition from their fellow Christians. A number of prominent Roman Christian bishops preached against such violence, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus condemned the actions of Abda on the grounds that the apostle Paul had not destroyed the altars of Athens, even if a Christian contributing to the reconstruction of a fire temple was, for this Roman bishop, unimaginable.¹²⁵ The martyrdoms of Abda and Narsai were written to rebut similar arguments among East Syrian ecclesiastical leaders who found their actions an unwelcome attack on the authority of a king of kings otherwise so favorable to them. This view, not that of the hagiographers, became normative among East Syrians, who henceforth largely abstained from celebrating acts of violence against Zoroastrians or their fire temples.¹²⁶ Their rejection of the paradigms of ascetic violence, at least until after the Islamic conquests, stands in contrast to the Roman world, where they only became more prevalent. If the court of Yazdgird I aimed clearly to communicate to Christians that attacks on Zoroastrian fire temples would be investigated, prosecuted, and punished, the executions of Abda and his retinue and Narsai were effective. East Syrian temple smashing was a short-lived phenomenon. Proselytism, however, was a Christian practice that East Syrian leaders could restrict only with difficulty.

THE LIMITS OF THE GOOD RELIGION: PROSECUTING APOSTASY

Accounts of Zoroastrians who converted to Christianity and were martyred for apostasy proliferated in the fifth, sixth, and early seventh centuries. Indeed, histo-

ries of converts martyred under the Sasanians continued to be produced long after the empire had collapsed, an indication of the importance of such stories for the social and political imaginaries of East Syrian communities. The first apostate martyrs reportedly perished during the reign of Shapur II, but the pursuit and prosecution of apostates appears to have gathered pace under Yazdgird I.¹²⁷ A certain Shapur was perhaps executed for apostasy as early as 417 at royal command, and the so-called ten martyrs of Beit Garmai, who had been adherents of the “religion of the Magians” (*dehlta d-mguše*), were punished at the hands of the mowbed Mihrshapur and the king of kings in 420.¹²⁸ Yazdgird I’s successors Wahram V and Yazdgird II continued to prosecute elite converts, whose stories East Syrian hagiographers chose to propagate as examples of martyrdom. In the sixth century, Husraw I and Husraw II presided over the prosecution and execution of nine particularly well-documented converts. The Sasanians were apparently consistent in their treatment of apostates whose cases were brought to their attention throughout the fifth and sixth centuries.¹²⁹ The regular use of the sword to punish converts has given rise to the widespread assumption that a so-called law of apostasy, according to which apostates were to be killed, governed interactions between Zoroastrians and Christians throughout the empire, at all social levels and in all periods.¹³⁰ The prosecution of apostasy has therefore been taken as an example of the persecutory tendencies of Zoroastrian religious authorities. Although the view that apostates merited death was indeed normative, the application of the principle in practice depended on political circumstances and the development of Zoroastrian jurisprudence. The “law of apostasy” repays a closer examination in light of Zoroastrian theoretical discussions of the treatment of apostates and Christian accounts of particular historical episodes of martyred converts. The execution of apostates served to establish mutually recognizable limits on interreligious encounters that facilitated social and political interaction.

As the martyr acts attest, the problem of conversion first attracted the attention of Zoroastrian authorities in the era of Christian institutional ascendancy. There is no reason to believe, however, that Zoroastrians abandoned their religion in any significant numbers at any point in Sasanian history. The following chapters consider cases of conversion in greater detail. What bears consideration at this stage are the circumstances that compelled leading mowbed to intervene in matters of religious identity in the fifth century. The only episodes of conversion for which fifth-century hagiographers have provided detailed accounts reveal the fluidity of religious boundaries, especially in elite circles. Two martyrs were Christian elites with imperial offices—Peroz and Jacob, both from wealthy, noble houses in Beit Lapat—who had converted to Zoroastrianism from Christianity, only to return to their natal faith.¹³¹ These cases suggest that some Christians adopted Zoroastrian practices, which, in the eyes of the authorities, indicated their membership in the ranks of the wehdēn, while retaining Christian loyalties. Vacillation rather than

straightforward conversion was characteristic of fifth-century encounters of Christianity with Zoroastrianism and vice versa. Zoroastrians in Christian accounts took an interest in a new source of supernatural power, particularly for healing, without undergoing the baptism and catechesis that constitute Christian conversion.¹³²

This was the case of Adurfarrobag, the Zoroastrian aristocrat who built the church later transformed into the fire temple that Narsai destroyed.¹³³ In pursuit of healing for an illness, he discovered a Christian priest, Shapur, who cured him in exchange for a disavowal of the Good Religion. Adurfarrobag built a church out of gratitude, only to remodel the building as a fire temple as soon as the imperial authorities demanded. For the Christian hagiographer, this represented a clear case of apostasy, but from the bare facts of the narrative the Zoroastrian appears not to have regarded the acceptance of healing or the patronage of a church as incompatible with adherence to the Good Religion. Such cases of mutual incomprehension of the nature of the other's religious identity, which facilitated symbiotic relations, were likely legion. The most important aspect of the episode is that the court intervened forcibly to provide clarity, indeed to enforce a boundary between the two religions, which individual Zoroastrians and Christians were inclined to combine in their own religious practice. Chapter 2 further develops these themes from the perspective of a Christian hagiographer working to disentangle specifically Christian and Zoroastrian beliefs while preserving a domain of shared culture, and chapter 3 considers the problem at the level of social practice. The present goal is to examine how imperial authorities endeavored to establish limits on interaction between Christians and Zoroastrians, specifically on the latter's embrace of the former's beliefs and rituals. If cases of outright apostasy were few, the court prosecuted those that came to its attention, in the manner of attacks on temples, as assaults on the imperial religion, whose superior position was to be maintained.

Zoroastrian legal, literary, and political treatises were unanimous in describing apostates who, unlike Adurfarrobag, refused to recant as *margarzān*, "worthy of death." The principle that the rejection of the Good Religion was an offense meriting capital punishment appears to have been ancient, although the fifth-century hagiographical works are the earliest evidence for its application. According to the *Mēnōg ī Xrad*, a work of late Sasanian political advice literature, disciplining apostates was among the basic responsibilities of "good rulership" (*hupādixšāyih*): "If there is someone who separates from the path of the gods [*rāh ī yazadān*], then [the good ruler] should command his restoration to it, seize him, and bring him back to the path of the gods. He should distribute from his wealth shares for the gods, worthy men, good deeds, and the poor and forfeit the body for the soul [*ud tan ruwān rāy be abespārēd*]."¹³⁴ The apostate, in short, was to be expropriated and executed. If the principle is well attested, the treatment of apostates in practice

varied according to political and social circumstances, even in cases where Zoroastrian authorities were directly involved. There are converts to Christianity in East Syrian hagiography who went unpunished.¹³⁵ Even if one takes a minimalist view of rates of conversion, there were likely many more apostates than the paltry number of documented martyrs. Zoroastrian legal texts, moreover, refer to apostates who were known to the authorities but not prosecuted. The *Hērbedestān*, as we will see in the next chapter, discusses the case of an apostate whose son was permitted to participate in the advanced study of the *Yasna*, while the *Hazār Dādestān*, the sole collection of Iranian case law, considers the question of whether an apostate son could inherit from his father without mention of further investigation into the son's religious identity.¹³⁶ There is, we will see, confirmation in East Syrian sources that such situations could arise. Individual apostates were not prosecuted on a regular or consistent basis but rather only in particular circumstances, which require further investigation on the basis of hagiographical accounts of particular cases.

The victims of the "law of apostasy" were uniformly members of aristocratic houses. In the more detailed hagiographical literature of the sixth and early seventh centuries, Zoroastrian authorities initiate proceedings against apostates at the instigation of patrilineal relatives.¹³⁷ There were cases of converts deliberately exposing their apostasy, and one of an apostate who fell victim to a Christian political rival.¹³⁸ But kinsmen most frequently took the initiative to prosecute. Zoroastrian institutions provided the material and symbolic foundations of the aristocratic houses, as chapters 3 and 4 show, and apostasy jeopardized the transmission of their patrilineages and patrimonies. We therefore find East Syrian authors consistently recounting stories of fathers, brothers, and paternal uncles seeking the prosecution and execution of relatives who rejected the Good Religion. Two of these martyrs were from the great house of Mihran, politically the most powerful aristocratic family in the empire in the late Sasanian period. One of their ranks, known as Rabban Mar Saba, converted to Christianity in his youth under the influence of his wet nurse, according to an early seventh-century account of fifth-century events.¹³⁹ Because his father had perished while on campaign on the northeastern frontiers, one of the myriad aristocrats who dedicated his life to military service during the fifth-century crisis, the act of apostasy went unnoticed until the youth was invited to a feast of the Mihranid house. When a paternal uncle discovered that his nephew had apostatized, he threatened to appropriate the patrimony that the convert had inherited, without raising the specter of violence.¹⁴⁰ Gregory the Commander, who was from among "the inhabitants of Rayy, from the lineage of the house of Mihran," was not so fortunate.¹⁴¹ The commander of Iranian field armies in the sixth-century Caucasus, which was a zone of contestation between Iran and Rome, managed to find favor with Husraw I in 534 even after ostentatiously renouncing the imperial religion before other soldiers assembled at

a feast in 518.¹⁴² Voices at court, however, appealed to the king of kings to take action against an apostate from such an important house: "It is a great dishonor for the religion of the Magians that such a great man from the lineage of the house of Mihran, who have always been servants of Ohrmazd, now becomes a servant of Christ."¹⁴³ In response, Husraw I had Gregory dispossessed and imprisoned, but the Mihranids considered such measures inadequate. Mihran, the son of Gregory's paternal uncle, requested that the king of kings punish his cousin for bringing dishonor to "our lineage."¹⁴⁴ Having returned from a victorious campaign against the Hephthalite Huns, Mihran was in a strong position to demand such a favor, and Gregory was executed to vindicate the honor of the house of Mihran.

More modest aristocratic houses also pursued apostates among their ranks for undermining their material and symbolic foundations. Two known cases emerged in northern Mesopotamian milieu where interaristocratic relations between Christians and Zoroastrians were commonplace, making the demarcation of religious boundaries between noble houses of great urgency. In these episodes, intimate relations between the Zoroastrians and Christians gave rise to conversions that threatened the boundaries on which such amiable interactions depended. Shirin (d. 559) was from a Persian-speaking aristocratic house in Karka d-Beit Slok and gained knowledge of Christianity from a Christian wet nurse.¹⁴⁵ She kept her conversion secret for some time, but the manifestation of her apostasy before the household caused her father to invite the Zoroastrian authorities to return her to the Good Religion or to punish her for her offense.¹⁴⁶ Another martyr from Karka d-Beit Slok, Christina, was also from an aristocratic house, that of a *marzbān*, a regional military commander, although the circumstances of her prosecution are unclear in the fragmentary *Martyrdom of Christina*.¹⁴⁷ In the neighboring region of Arbela, a third northern Mesopotamian aristocrat, Mahanosh, apostatized, becoming Ishosabran after marrying a woman who had converted to Christianity.¹⁴⁸ He was not molested until he publicly declared his conversion. His brother then petitioned the Zoroastrian authorities to prosecute the apostate, reportedly to expropriate the estate of his patrilineal relative.¹⁴⁹

Similar in nature were cases of Zoroastrian religious authorities converting, such as Adurohrmazd in the following chapter. These were offenses that compromised the positions not only of the aristocratic houses to which they belonged but also the simultaneously religious and political offices that they occupied. Even in the hagiographical literature, however, there are cases of apostate aristocrats who went unprosecuted, nobles whose conversions became known to Zoroastrian authorities but who escaped punishment.¹⁵⁰ The abovementioned converts, moreover, often continued to flourish in Iranian society and even attained imperial offices and social status while practicing their Christianity in the open for years before encountering the forces that precipitated their punishment.¹⁵¹ Apostates were executed only in precise political circumstances, a theme to which we will

return when considering the early seventh century in chapter 5. The “law of apostasy” was applied only in cases of aristocratic conversion, and the martyrdoms of converts in the sixth and early seventh centuries are further examples of the Iranian court upholding the power of the aristocratic houses that formed the backbone of the empire.

While East Syrian authors were composing these accounts, Zoroastrian jurists at court were debating the use of violence against apostates and developing procedural norms for their treatment. The problem of aristocrats converting to other religions recurs in the political advice literature that emanated from the late Sasanian court. Husraw I claimed to have banished nobles who had embraced and propagated a religion other than Zoroastrianism in the autobiographical account of his rule, the *Sīrat Ānūšīrwān*.¹⁵² Other texts, like the aforementioned *Mēnōg ī Xrad*, concentrate on punitive measures against the bodies of apostates, and the *Letter of Tansar* describes the introduction and innovation of formal procedures for prosecuting cases of apostasy. Composed in the name of a mowbed from the reign of Ardashir I, the *Letter of Tansar* aimed to legitimate the actions of the sixth-century court with recourse to a normative, early Sasanian past.¹⁵³ Among the aspects of the court that certain aristocrats had criticized was its excessive use of violence: “There is much talk about the blood shed by the king, and the people are dismayed.”¹⁵⁴ The *Letter of Tansar* insists that any blood the ruler shed was justifiable within the framework of Iranian cosmology and takes execution for apostasy as an example of the cautious, considered use of the sword:

The king of kings has established a law far better than that of the ancients. For in former days any man who turned from the faith [*dīn*] was swiftly and speedily put to death and punished. The king of kings has ordered that such a man should be imprisoned and that for the space of a year learned men should summon him at frequent intervals and advise him and lay arguments before him and destroy his doubts. If he become penitent and contrite and seek pardon of God, he is set free. If obstinacy and pride hold him back, then he is put to death.¹⁵⁵

According to the *Letter of Tansar*, norms had been established for handling cases of apostasy through a three-stage procedure: the apostate was to be imprisoned, interrogated for one year concerning his beliefs, and executed only if he remained loyal to the new religion. East Syrian accounts confirm that such procedures became normative during the sixth century. Although there are traces of such a process in fifth-century martyrology, these procedures became consistent only in accounts from the sixth and early seventh centuries. What the *Letter of Tansar* indicates is that such norms were introduced in courtly milieux where state violence was subject to debate and criticism. The killing of apostates, often represented as indiscriminate, had to be defended and regulated, and its functions had to be defined carefully.

East Syrian ecclesiastical leaders appear generally to have respected the limit on Zoroastrian relations with Christians that the court established. In works from the latter half of the fifth through the early seventh century, the priest or bishop reluctant to baptize an elite Zoroastrian eager to gain membership in the church is an omnipresent topos. Even the authors who commemorated acts of conversion abstained from composing narratives that celebrated or enjoined proselytizing activities. The principal exception, the *History of Rabban Mar Saba*, was produced at a time of heightened Christian expectations during the reign of Husraw II, which we will consider in chapter 5. Otherwise, the martyrological literature suggests that the avoidance of high-profile cases of apostasy was normative in the very clerical and ascetic circles most dedicated to the propagation of the faith. When the elite Zoroastrian youth Yazdin wished to convert, his Christian foster father—who had introduced him to the church—appealed to him to refrain from seeking baptism. Yazdin fled to the comparatively distant city of Karka d-Beit Slok, where priests ignorant of his background baptized him in the faith and instructed him in its rites and texts.¹⁵⁶ Gregory the Commander had to seek out an ecclesiastical community that was unaware of his status as a martial, Mihranid leader in order to obtain baptism.¹⁵⁷ The bishop of Karka d-Beit Slok, for his part, refused to baptize Shirin.¹⁵⁸ Ishosabran was similarly forced to travel to a monastery far from his village in the region of Arbela to find clerics who would not recognize him as a member of a Zoroastrian aristocratic house. Even at this distant monastery, however, the abbot interrogated him concerning his origins and hesitated to baptize him on discovering his identity. It was only after having a vision of an angel that the abbot agreed to introduce him to the community of believers.¹⁵⁹ The author of the *History of Ishosabran*, Ishoyahb III, intended to justify active proselytism among Zoroastrians circa 640, an indication that East Syrians still regarded the baptism of Zoroastrian elites as exceptional and even impermissible in the years of the empire's fall.¹⁶⁰ These accounts share the presumption that East Syrian leaders considered the conversion of imperial elites ideal in theory but impossible in practice. Even if they harbored the universalist aspirations common to late antique Christianity, East Syrians accepted the restriction on conversion as a means of accommodating their institutions to the realities of Iranian political culture.

If we combine the East Syrian and Zoroastrian evidence, the “law of apostasy” emerges as an instrument for regulating interaction rather than an example of the persecutory tendencies of the Good Religion. On the one hand, Zoroastrian jurists insisted that converts be prosecuted in a systematic way in line with procedures established as normative during the sixth century. In theory, every convert to Christianity was to be returned to the ranks of the wehdën or to perish for the offense of apostasy. On the other hand, the hagiographical descriptions of historical prosecutions demonstrate that the “law of apostasy” was invoked only in cases of elite conversions. Converts were pursued only when their acts of apostasy

openly challenged a social order whose foundations were formed by Zoroastrian institutions. This occurred when apostates were members of aristocratic houses or when their actions were made public within the confines of an imperial institution. There was no systematic enforcement of a law of apostasy within the general population. The regulation of conversion will not, therefore, have restricted the spread of Christianity among the subordinate populations of the empire that were—and continue to be—largely invisible. Because Christian communities restrained their proselytizing activities among elites in accordance with the commands of the kings of kings, the “law of apostasy” served to create a mutually recognized boundary between the two religions that allowed Christians and Zoroastrians to share social and political spaces, practices, and ideas without the risk of one universalizing religion constraining the viability of the other. The execution of a select few apostates established norms that fostered the increasingly intimate interaction of Christians and Zoroastrians that we know characterized fifth- and sixth-century Iranian political culture.

The violence that Christian communities in Iran experienced in the fifth century signaled their integration into imperial politics. As Christians came to occupy strategic positions, whether as scribes for the court or as provincial aristocrats contributing men and material to Sasanian field armies like the nobles of Armenia or northern Mesopotamia, they found themselves subject to the coercive powers of a state that depended upon the shedding of blood to communicate its authority over elites, particularly the great aristocratic houses that—though consistently loyal to the house of Sasan as a lineage—routinely contested royal authority by force, for example through the deposition of kings of kings. Purges, assassinations, and other extrajudicial killings were basic instruments of rule for the Sasanians throughout their history.¹⁶¹ Unlike those of their Roman peers, the bodies of Iranian elites were in no way regarded as inviolable.¹⁶² Zoroastrians were if anything more likely to fall victim to violence than adherents of other religions, simply because the more power they accrued, the more likely they were to threaten royal authority. The difference between Christian and Zoroastrian victims was the former’s access to literary specialists well versed in the arts of martyrology, who could transform executed nobles into valiant aristocratic martyrs, such as those of Karka and Arbela, who are the topic of chapter 4. We therefore possess accounts of Christian aristocrats who perished during the reign of Yazdgird II, while the non-Christians killed, castrated, or imprisoned remained nameless. Although anti-Christian language doubtless colored these executions, they should not be extracted from the political context in which the hagiographers placed them.

Whether in the fourth century or the fifth, Iranian authorities acting within the framework of Zoroastrian cosmology killed neither senselessly nor needlessly but in order to define and communicate the terms of political relations between Christians and Zoroastrians and between elites and the court. Beyond disciplining

elites, violence served to place Christian communities in a subordinate—yet viable—position in relation to the imperial religion, whose supremacy some Christians openly and ostentatiously challenged. The hagiographical works highlight two domains that the state apparatus policed with force: the souls and shrines of Zoroastrians. As long as Christians did not seek to expand their institutions or ranks at the expense of the Good Religion, their ecclesiastical leaders could establish churches, shrines, and bishoprics and secular elites could gain office in the imperial administration and attain aristocratic status. The sources for the ideals and actions of East Syrians in the late Sasanian period suggest that ecclesiastical leaders accepted these limitations as the terms of integration. That secular elites would continue to experience some violence was unavoidable, given its structural position within political relations. And public acts of apostasy in favor of Christianity, however rare, would continue to precipitate conflicts. But within these boundaries, Christian communities consistently grew in the fifth century, in their institutional structures and the social, economic, and political power of their members, a trajectory that did not slow until long after the Islamic conquests. Far from representing an inescapable antagonism between Christianity and Zoroastrianism, acts of violence constituted the foundation for their cooperation and coexistence.

CONCLUSION

The Sasanian dynasty, the leading Iranian aristocratic houses, and the Zoroastrian religious hierarchy worked to create a cosmologically conceived, hierarchically organized social order in the territories of their empire that could incorporate religious others. The anchors of this order were the institutions of the Good Religion—the fire temples, rituals, and corpora of cosmological thought that Kerdīr and his successors established. The supremacy of the Good Religion was therefore to be maintained, with violence if necessary, but religious others were to be included in positions subordinate to *wehdēn* and *ēr*. The East Syrian hagiographical tradition, through the lens of a literary genre dedicated to the commemoration of conflict with religious rivals, counterintuitively attests to the creation of an inclusive empire conceived in the terms of another religion. The most momentous outbreak of violence in the East Syrian literary tradition was the result of an attempt by a king of kings to enlist bishops and other Christian religious authorities in the fiscal system. In the fifth century, the successful integration of Christian bishops and secular elites into imperial structures caused them to encounter the dangers that came with power, as they began to experience the violence that the Iranian court used to discipline its elites. These were episodes that marked the ongoing incorporation of Christians into the networks of the court. Their advance into the ranks of officeholders and aristocrats took place within the framework of

Zoroastrian ideology rather than in spite of a supposed antipathy toward agdēn. There were cosmological reasons that Zoroastrians, whether kings of kings, aristocrats, or mowbed, could invoke to justify the participation of agdēn in the institutions of the military, the fiscal administration, or the court, as well as of aristocratic sociability. They contributed good work, *kirbag*, on account of their access to the civilizational goods available as the common inheritance of humanity or their attainment of ethical righteousness, possibly even through the laws of their respective religions. The concept of intolerance as a heuristic device is therefore not only of dubious value in itself but also inaccurate in its general sense of a propensity toward violence against religious others. Christians were not killed, in any historically verifiable episode, in general persecutions because of their religious identities. They were killed for disobeying the court or for violating mutually recognized norms in particular acts. The absence of persecutory violence, moreover, suggests the importance and influence of Zoroastrian views of the potential merits of agdēn, despite Christian representation to the contrary. Zoroastrian authorities, in theory and practice, recognized the place of Christians and Jews in Iran and regarded their institutions as ancillary to the empire. Their capacity to recognize and emplace religious others distinguished Zoroastrians from their Christian contemporaries in the Roman world.

Christians could flourish within the Zoroastrian ideological and infrastructural framework of the Iranian Empire only as long as they refrained from challenging the superiority of the Good Religion. A proselytizing religion with ambitions to propagate universal truths globally posed significant threats to Zoroastrianism that never entirely disappeared. The court, however, quickly arrested Christian attempts in the fifth century to attack Zoroastrian institutions physically in imitation of their Roman counterparts and to proselytize in elite circles, establishing norms for inter-religious interaction that structured relations between Zoroastrians and Christians in the late Sasanian period. Neither the destruction of fire temples nor the conversion of prominent wehdēn to agdēnīh was acceptable under the Sasanians. These were the terms of inclusion, and Christian ecclesiastical and secular elites overwhelmingly accepted them, precipitating the efflorescence of Christian institutions characteristic of the era. From the East Syrian perspective, the problem of the relationship between the two religions abided. If at the level of practice Christians abstained from eroding the foundations of Zoroastrian institutions, in theory they continued to insist on the superiority of their faith. Christians developed no parallel to the Zoroastrian idea of a hierarchy of religions. There was one true religion and many false ones. Their de facto accommodation of Iranian categories and structures therefore required East Syrian leaders continually to underline for their constituencies the incommensurable superiority of Christianity vis-à-vis the religion to which they were politically subject. This was the polemical project in which every single hagiographical and juridical text that the East Syrians produced was

involved. The following three chapters show how East Syrian religious authorities used texts as instruments for redefining the relationships of their communities with Iranian structures of power while reasserting the distinction between Christianity and Zoroastrianism on which their authority rested. The disentangling of secular and religious spaces within imperial structures that the *History of Simeon* and related texts accomplished was the most important legacy of the “Great Persecution.” The myth of Zoroastrian intolerance was ultimately an instrument of Christian institution building.