The Formation of Islam

Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The millenium or so before the rise of Islam in the early seventh century CE was a period of enormously rich social and cultural development in the lands that form the subject of this book. So much is probably true of any thousand-year interval of human history, but this particular epoch was of special importance in that it saw the crystallization of the religious traditions which have survived into the modern era, and which formed the backdrop to the emergence of the new religion which traces its origins to the preaching of Muhammad in western Arabia.

Marshall Hodgson, in his monumental history of *The Venture of Islam*, identified the period between 800 and 200 BCE, which the German philosopher Karl Jaspers had referred to as the "Axial Age," as decisive in creating the world out of which Islam eventually emerged.[1] Throughout the Eurasian landmass, the Axial Age saw the coalescence of a number of distinct cultures, regionally-based but linked by both trading networks and a common core of principles: the Graeco-Roman or Mediterranean, the Indian, the Chinese. This was an era of leading religious figures and of the production of foundational religious texts in all of these regions: the teaching of Lao-Tzu, Buddha, the Greek philosophers, the Hebrew prophets, and the compilation of the Upanishads in India. From the standpoint of the religious traditions which are studied in this book, the year 200 BCE may be somewhat arbitrary, since the subsequent centuries were, at least in the Near East, equally decisive regarding the articulation of identifiable religious traditions. Indeed, it was the period between 200 BCE and 600 CE – the later portion of what is usually called the "Hellenistic period" and the centuries which comprise the era known as "late antiquity" – which saw the spread of those cultural and religious patterns which are loosely identified as Hellenism; their impact on virtually all social strata throughout the Near East; the fuller articulation of rabbinic Judaism in the academies of Mesopotamia; and of course the career of Jesus and the subsequent emergence of a distinctive Christian faith.

If the millenium or so prior to the rise of Islam had an "axial" character, so too, in a geographic sense, did the region of the Near East. General histories of the Near

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[1] Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, in 3 volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1.111f.

East or of the world commonly speak of the Fertile Crescent, that arc of territory stretching from the Nile River in Egypt to the Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq, as a "crossroads," as the meeting point of three continents, but the characterization is no less true for its overuse. The cultures produced in this region, and in those territories around its periphery (including Anatolia, the peninsula of Arabia, and Iran as far as the Oxus River) which played such critical roles in its historical development, mingled productively if not always entirely freely. Despite their latent hostility to the "barbarians," many Greeks believed that much of their civilization had been borrowed from the East, and even if Athena was not exactly "black" (in the somewhat polemical phrase of a controversial study), it is true that Greek culture owed a considerable debt to the peoples of the east Mediterranean littoral – for example, to the Phoenicians for their alphabet.[2] The conquests of Alexander the Great, and the subsequent penetration of Hellenism into Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, and even lands further to the east, "pulled Hellenism's center of gravity sharply eastward."[3]

The crossroads was not without its obstacles. In the centuries before the rise of Islam, the Near East was dominated by two rival states. The Byzantine Empire, with its capital in Constantinople, *was* the old Roman Empire, or what was left of it. Across its eastern border, in the eastern half of the Fertile Crescent and in the lands beyond, lay the empire of the Sasanians, an Iranian dynasty which had come to power in the third century. The two states were bitter rivals, and for much of late antiquity were at war. Their political rivalry, however, did not completely preclude meaningful cultural contact. The Sasanians, even at the height of their conflict with Rome in the sixth century, relentlessly borrowed from Byzantine culture everything from bath-houses to systems of taxation, and the shah Khusrau I Anushirvan (r. 531–579) gleefully welcomed the pagan Greek philosophers whom the Roman emperor Justinian had expelled from their Academy in Athens.[4] Looking back from the vantage point of the Muslim conquests, rather than from the imperial capitals of the two empires, it is equally important to stress not just the Fertile Crescent's character as a crossroads, but also its political vulnerability to powers on its periphery, its historical role as a "vortex that pulls inward and fuses what lies around it."[5] In the millenium or so before the rise of Islam, the region was usually dominated by states based just beyond its physical boundaries, including the Roman and Sasanian empires. The conquests of the Muslim Arabs, who in the seventh century burst into the Fertile Crescent from the remote and inhospitable desert peninsula to the south, represent simply one more example of far older historical patterns.

[2] Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, volume 1: *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U.P., 1987).

[3] Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 61–2.

[4] Patricia Crone, "Kavād's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt," *Iran: Journal of the British Institute for Persian Studies* 29 (1991), 30; Averil Cameron, *Agathias* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 101; Richard Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1963), 218.

[5] A point made brilliantly by Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 17–18.

Central to the character of Near Eastern society in these centuries was the rise of an urban, mercantile economy. Of course, no pre-modern society reached anything close to the levels of urbanization in our industrial and post-industrial world, and it is worth remembering at the outset that many of the religious developments described in this book reached the ninety percent or more of the population which was rural in attenuated and problematic form. Nonetheless, cities there were, cities which were frequently dominated by merchants and others involved in a commercial economy, and often it was in them, or in response to their needs and uncertainties, that the religious developments which survived and which seemed important to later generations took shape. It was in this period, for example, that the use of currency became a widespread phenomenon, and it is surely not coincidental that two of the more memorable episodes from the accounts of Jesus' life – his encounter with the moneychangers in the Jerusalem temple, and his remark about rendering unto Caesar that which was Caesar's – involved coins.

The urban commercial economy had a decisive impact on religious developments of the era. In the first place, the existence of regional and trans-regional trading networks discouraged cultural and religious parochialism. They helped to make possible, for example, the emergence of traditions which claimed adherents beyond any one city or locality: the household god, or the tutelary god of a city, gradually was eclipsed by (or identified with) deities with a more catholic appeal. Similarly, they encouraged the spread of religious ideas from one place to another. It comes as no surprise that the missionary activities of several of the religions of late antiquity – Manichaeism, for example, and later Islam – were closely associated with merchants. Secondly, and more importantly, urban commercial economies tended to make social inequities more conspicuous and brought social injustices into sharper relief. It was to such problems, made worse by the permanently shifting character of urban life, that many of the new religions addressed themselves.

Although he seems to have glossed over some of the more nuanced questions regarding economic structures and social class, Hodgson drew in a general way upon the sociological analysis of Max Weber; and – if we allow ourselves at the outset to paint with a rather broad brush – it will serve us as well, in part because it informs some of the most basic questions about the origins and character of Islam.[6] Despite the significant differences between the religions of Buddha, the rabbis, and others, they shared many characteristics. Arising against the background of injustice, inequality, and social dislocation, they pointedly spoke to

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[6] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), esp. Chaps. 6 and 7. Note that Weber drew a distinction between the religious orientation of "commercial" and "capitalist" classes, defining capitalism as "capital continuously and rationally employed in a productive enterprise for the acquisition of profit" (92–3); it was the latter which were especially troubled by social injustice and inequity, and so were attuned to religions of a profoundly ethical (and frequently prophetic) character. His analysis (and that of Hodgson), however, included many merchants under the "capitalist" heading.

the individual conscience, and so had a "confessional" character. Produced by increasingly literate societies, they were frequently affirmed by scriptures, both those for which a divine origin was claimed (the Torah, say, or the Koran) and those of a more exegetical character (the Talmud), as well as those of a more indeterminate nature (the Zoroastrian *Avestan* texts and the surviving commentaries in which they are embedded). A corollary is that, however spontaneous their origins (and frequently they originated as reactions against established traditions), they tended to adopt increasingly systematic form, whether the formal hieratic institutions of the Christian church, or the rabbis' more decentralized and "democratic" structures of authority.[7] Despite radically different solutions to the problems raised by an unjust world, they increasingly looked to a life after death, or to some eschatological future, as the locus of justice and salvation. This was true even of a religion such as Judaism, which, succumbing to the powerful gravitational pull of late antique Hellenism, moved beyond the this-worldly focus of its core Biblical texts.

Two general trends among the religions of the end of the classical and the late antique worlds deserve special mention. First, they tended to be closely associated with states and empires.[8] The most obvious example is Christianity, whose identification with the Roman Empire began under the emperor Constantine (d. 337) and was complete before the reign of his sixth-century successor Justinian. The attachment of Rome's great historical rival, the Sasanian Empire of Iran, to Zoroastrianism developed at an uneven pace, but by the sixth and seventh centuries was substantially complete, and the almost complete collapse of the Zoroastrian community in the centuries following the Islamic conquests was due in part to the destruction of the state structure which had supported it. Islam itself from the beginning represented a close if problematic fusion of political and religious authority, in which condition it once again constituted less a rupture with the Christian Roman past than a continuation of one of the major themes of late antiquity, an opportunity, as it were, to do Constantine one better.[9] Here again, for all its peculiarity, Judaism was not altogether different. Isolated Jewish kingdoms or principalities emerged in various times and places – in Armenia, Chalcis, Cappadocia, Iturea, and Abilene in the first century CE; among the Himyarites, in southern Arabia, during the sixth century; or among the Khazars of Central Asia in the eighth – and the Jewish revolts in Palestine in 66 and 132 CE represented a striking amalgamation of political and religious authority.[10] If the other great religion to emerge from the late antique Near East, Manichaeism, failed to

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[7] Cf. Peter Brown, "The Religious Crisis of the Third Century A.D.," in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 83.

[8] On this, see now Garth Fowden's magisterial study, *Empire to Commonwealth*.

[9] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 152f, drawing closely on Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[10] Jacob Neusner, "The Conversion of Adiabene to Judaism: A New Perspective," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964), 61. On the Jewish kingdom in southern Arabia, see Gordon Darnell Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia from Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia, South

establish a lasting relationship with one of the states of the region, it was not for lack of trying.

A second point concerns the universalist character and claims of the religions of late antiquity. The adherents of the religions of late antiquity – or at least those adherents who took their religion seriously – increasingly associated their faith with a truth which applied to all the world, and not just to a particular people or place. Surely one of the features of Christianity which appealed to Constantine and his successors was its universalism, for it allowed the emperor to present himself as the representative or instrument of a God who stood over all of humankind, a God who could reveal to Constantine his sign and commend it to him as the banner under which to carry out his military campaigns.[11] This union of Roman state and Christian religion, which reached fruition in the early Byzantine state, in fact built upon a connection between religious truth and political power which was implicit in the cult of the emperor as it developed during the centuries immediately preceding Constantine's conversion.[12] The ideal of an association of universalist faith and triumphal state percolated widely through late Roman society. In a famous passage from his Christian cosmography, an early sixth-century Alexandrian merchant named Cosmas glossed a verse from the Book of Daniel which he took to refer to the rough coincidence of the establishment of the Roman Empire and the birth of Christ.

> For while Christ was yet in the womb, the Roman empire received its power from God as the servant of the dispensation which Christ introduced, since at that very time the accession was proclaimed of the unending line of the Augusti by whose command a census was made which embraced the whole world. … The empire of the Romans thus participates in the dignity of the Kingdom of the Lord Christ, seeing that it transcends, as far as can be in this state of existence, every other power, and will remain unconquered until the final consummation.[13]

And once again, the rise and success of Islam followed rather than digressed from older patterns. It is doubtful that Islam began as anything more than the monotheistic religion of the Arabs. Of course it did eventually become universalist; the existence and permanence of a territorially enormous and explicitly Muslim state probably made that transformation inevitable.

The social dimension was equally significant, as merchants crossing international borders cultivated a truly ecumenical outlook. But more importantly, monotheism itself must have contributed to the phenomenon of universalism, since

Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 38f; on the Khazars, see *EI*², art. "Khazar" (by W. Barthold and P. B. Golden); on the Palestinian revolts, see Fergus Millar, "Empire, Community and Culture in the Roman Near East: Greeks, Syrians, Jews and Arabs," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38 (1987), 143–64, esp. 147–8.

[11] The universalist claims of Christianity underlie a very interesting letter of Constantine's to the Persian emperor Shapur, expressing horror at Zoroastrian ritual and commending Iranian Christians to the shah's care. See Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 636–7.

[12] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, esp. 38, 81–2, 87–8.

[13] Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography*, trans. J. W. McCrindle (London: Hakluyt Society, 1897), 70–1.

the belief in a single god by definition constitutes a narrowing of the scope of what constitutes truth.[14] Polytheistic religious systems by their very nature acknowledge a multiplicity of paths to truth, or salvation, or whatever is the goal of the religious enterprise. The belief in a single god, by contrast, can easily become an assertion that that deity can be understood and approached in only one way. And monotheism, or at least a tendency toward belief in a single god, permeated the late antique world, by no means exclusively in its Jewish or Christian form. The various local and national religions, even the colorful and exuberant polytheism of Egypt, were not immune to the force of the monotheistic ideal.

> O God most glorious, called by many a name,
> Nature's great King, through endless years the same;
> Omnipotence, who by thy just decree
> Controllest all, hail, Zeus, for unto thee
> Behooves thy creatures in all lands to call,

begins the famous "Hymn to Zeus" of the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes (d. 232 BCE).[15] In the Graeco-Roman world, it was the philosophers whose monotheism was most noticeable, but even explicitly polytheistic texts, such as the poems of Homer, and the cultic polytheism of which they formed the basis, do not preclude a more inclusive understanding of divinity in which localized and anthropomorphic gods were merely particular and imperfect manifestations of a single divine power.[16] The situation in Arabia in this period was extremely complex, but even there, on the remote periphery of the Mediterranean world, various monotheisms were known in the years before the beginning of Muhammad's ministry.

From monotheism, it is but a short step to an explicit, and potentially militant, universalism. The example of Judaism in this regard is somewhat problematic, since Jewish monotheism was coupled with the association of Judaism with a particular ethnic group. Even so, there was a strong universalizing streak in the Judaism of late antiquity. One should not overstress the simplistic contrast between the tolerant polytheism of the classical Mediterranean world and the more repressive orthodoxies of the monotheistic faiths. On the other hand, the confessional religions of late antiquity were by nature increasingly exclusive: adherence to one automatically excluded identification with another, even if, as we shall see, it was not always possible or easy to draw fine lines between one

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[14] Cf. the remarks of Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, "Religious Contacts in Byzantine Palestine," *Numen* 36 (1989), 16–42, esp. 23, and Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 106–7.

[15] *Essential Works of Stoicism*, ed. Moses Hadas (New York: Bantam, 1965), 51.

[16] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 38–41; Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 52; H. Idris Bell, *Cults and Creeds in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1953), 1–24, esp. 7–16; E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 116–18; John Peter Kenney, "Monotheistic and Polytheistic Elements in Classical Mediterranean Spirituality," in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 269–92, esp. 273.

tradition and the next. (This leaves open, furthermore, the analytically separate issue of religious syncretism.)

Confessions which exclude others are a necessary ingredient of a world of distinct religious identities and of competing faiths. And the world we are investigating was, as much as anything else, a world of missionaries, proselytization, and religious competition. Conversion and initiation – more generally, the making of *individual choices* on matters of religion – were common themes in the religious literature of the age, from Apuleius's fictional account of the experiences of an initiate into the cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis, to St. Augustine's auto-biographical narrative of his own conversion to catholic Christianity and a life of religious discipline. The dominant factor in the religious turmoil of late antiquity was the rise of Christianity, and the competition between Christianity and paganism was largely of Christian manufacture.[17] But the period was more generally an "age of anxiety."[18] In a work such as Augustine's *Confessions* we can trace the psychological dimensions of the religious stress characteristic of the age. In what follows we will try to elucidate briefly the identities and parameters of the traditions involved in the religious competition of late antiquity.

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[17] Glen Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 5–6.

[18] E. R. Dodds used the phrase to describe the third century, but it is just as descriptive of the ensuing centuries. And cf. Brown, *Religion and Society*, 80: "The 'Age of Anxiety' became, increasingly, the age of converts."

The religions of late antiquity

Judaism

The religion of the people of Israel played a critical role in the religious matrix of late antiquity. Jews constituted a significant minority of the population in many Mediterranean towns, and Judaism had an impact on the religious lives of many non-Jews as well. It was out of Judaism that Christianity first arose, and at least partly through a bitter dispute with its mother faith that the new religion defined itself. As we shall see, the relationship between Judaism and Islam was just as close. Nor were the older pagan traditions immune from the influence of the first of the major monotheistic faiths. Nonetheless, reconstructing the history of Judaism in the Near East in the centuries before and after the rise of Islam is difficult, given the nature of the surviving historical record; much of the story has to be pieced together from sources hostile to the Jews and their faith.

The God of Israel was known throughout the Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds, thanks to the widespread dispersal of his worshipers. In part their dispersion resulted from the successive deportations of Jews from Palestine, under the Assyrians and Babylonians and, in the wake of the Bar Kochba rebellion in the second century CE, the Romans. By the rise of Islam, for example, the Jewish community of Babylonia was well over one thousand years old. But there was also considerable voluntary migration, especially to flourishing cities such as Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in northern Syria. In the early first century BCE, the Sibylline oracle had commented that Jews could be found throughout the known world, an observation repeated in a somewhat boastful letter of King Herod Agrippa to the Roman emperor Caligula. Jerusalem, he declared, is

> the mother city, not of one country Judaea but of most of the others in virtue of the colonies sent out at divers times to the neighbouring lands of Egypt, Phoenicia, Syria, the part of Syria called the Hollow and the rest as well and the lands lying far apart, Pamphylia, Cilicia, most of Asia up to Bithynia and the corners of Pontus, similarly also into Europe, Thessaly, Boeotia, Macedonia, Aetolia, Attica, Argos, Corinth, and most of the best parts of Peloponnese. And not only are the mainlands full of Jewish colonies but also the most highly esteemed of the islands Euboea, Cyprus and Crete. I say nothing of the countries beyond the Euphrates, for except for a small part they all, Babylon

and of the other satrapies those where the land within their confines is highly fertile, have Jewish inhabitants.[1]

Several of these far-flung Jewish communities deserve a closer look. Jews had settled, of course in Palestine, but also throughout the Graeco-Roman world, as the apostle Paul well knew. One of the most important Jewish communities in the Mediterranean region was found in Egypt. A permanent Jewish presence in Egypt dated back to at least the sixth century BCE, with the establishment of a mercenary garrison on the Elephantine island near modern Aswan. The Jewish community in Egypt was extremely diverse. Many of the Jews of Egypt were, or had as their forebears, soldiers, as the settlement of Jewish military colonies continued throughout the Ptolemaic period. By the early first century CE, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo estimated the total Jewish population of Egypt at one million; Jews were found in all the major towns, in the Delta, the Thebaid, and the Fayyum. Communities of Samaritans, too, could be found scattered through the country, from the mid-third century BCE through at least the end of the Islamic Middle Period. Above all, Jews were found in Alexandria, the capital of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, in which they formed a distinct and self-regulating community.[2]

Herod Agrippa's apparent pride in his people reflected an extroverted enthusiasm which the Jews of the Mediterranean world shared with the adherents of other religions in the Hellenistic period. In light of what came later, it is worth recalling that many Jews participated freely in the religious dialogue and experimentation which characterized the centuries just before and at the start of the Common Era. Hellenism was a powerful cultural current, one which pulled many Jews into its wake. Many Jews had become speakers of Greek – hence the need for the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, produced in that most Hellenistic of cities, Alexandria, in the third century BCE. Moreover, the intellectuals among them (such as the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo) engaged in sustained exchange with their pagan colleagues, an exchange through which the Jews sought to explain and justify their traditions and their faith. No less a figure than the patriarch of the Palestinian Jewish community maintained a friendly correspondence with the pagan rhetor Libanius in Antioch in the fourth century. Their exchange concerned, in part, the patriarch's son, who had been a student of one of Libanius' pupils, but had failed to complete his studies. No

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[1] Philo, *The Embassy to Gaius*, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962) (Loeb Classical Library, Philo, vol. 10), 143; cited in Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. – A.D. 135)*, new edition by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Martin Goodman (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 3:4–5. On the dispersal of the Jews generally, see Schürer, 3:1–86.

[2] On the Jewish community of Egypt, see Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, 3:38–60; H. Idris Bell, *Cults and Creeds of Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Liverpool, 1953), 25–49; J. M. Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt: From Ramses II to Emperor Hadrian* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 161–225.

matter, the pagan counseled his Jewish friend: "perhaps it will be profitable for him to see many cities – as it was for Odysseus."[3]

There was already a pronounced element of "judeophobia" in the attitudes of many pagans to their Jewish neighbors and their exclusive, monotheistic faith. The tensions were in part theological. Many pagans could not fathom or appreciate the resolutely aniconic character of the Jewish understanding of God, which made it difficult to fit him into the flexible and expandable pantheon of recognized deities. (Some tried nonetheless: Plutarch, for example, identified Yahweh with the Greek god Dionysos.) But the tensions also had a social dimension. Some non-Jews, for example, were perplexed by particular Jewish practices, such as circumcision and their refusal to work on the Sabbath, by which the Jews self-consciously set themselves apart from their neighbors. These tensions and mis-understandings led to accusations that the Jews harbored a deeply-rooted indifference, or even hostility, to non-Jews, and at times to outbursts of anti-Jewish violence.[4]

Despite an underlying level of hostility among both pagans and, increasingly, Christians, Judaism had its appeal for Gentiles, and not only in its Christian form. The Jewish historian Josephus reports that the empress Poppaea, second wife of Nero, felt the attraction of Judaism, and interceded with her husband on its behalf.[5] Jewish monotheism was compelling, the Jewish moral law commanded respect and admiration, and Jewish theology and ritual stressed the expiation for sin which spoke directly to the religious psyche of late antiquity (and which also contributed to the popularity of the various "mystery" cults). Given the sheer size of the Jewish population and its presence throughout the Mediterranean world, Judaism had distinct political advantages, too, another point worth remembering in light of later conditions. This was particularly true in southwest Asia, given the presence there of Palestine and of the significant Jewish population in Babylonia: the conversion of the ruling family of Adiabene in northern Mesopotamia in the first century can be understood at least in part as an attempt to capitalize on the political advantages of being Jewish.[6]

This last point raises the vexing problem of conversion to Judaism, Jewish proselytization, and the broader issue of Jewish universalism. It is probably best to begin by stepping behind the more sharply-delineated religious boundaries of later centuries, and remembering that Judaism as we know it was, like the other

[3] Wayne A. Meeks and Robert L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1978) (Society of Biblical Literature: Sources for Biblical Study, no. 13), 11–12.

[4] See Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes Towards Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[5] Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, 3:78; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.196, trans. Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965) (Loeb Classical Library), 9:493; idem, *Vita* 16, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1926) (Loeb Classical Library), 1:9.

[6] Jacob Neusner, "The Conversion of Adiabene to Judaism: A New Perspective," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964), 60–66.

religious traditions which emerged from late antiquity, still in the process of formation. Beyond the particularism of the notion of a people specially chosen by God, there was a strong universalizing streak in Jewish literature and thought, represented most obviously in biblical passages such as those of the "Second" Isaiah about the Jewish people constituting a "light to the nations." Not all Jews responded favorably to this theme, but among more Hellenized Jews, such as Philo, it was strong, and contributed to the dialogue in which he and others engaged with their pagan neighbors. It is doubtful that Judaism in the Hellenistic and late antique periods produced as active a missionary movement as did, say, Christianity, but proselytization was known and approved, even by some of the rabbis whose opinions are expressed in the Talmud, at least through the fourth century CE.[7] The degree of conversion varied considerably. Full conversion, including (for males) circumcision, was possible and not unusual, although some of the rabbis accorded converts a kind of second class status, and late Roman legislation, such as that outlawing the circumcision of Gentiles, sporadically limited proselytes' opportunities, at least when enforced.[8] But other Gentiles attached themselves to Judaism and to Jewish communities in less categorical fashion, for example, by substituting a purifactory bath for the more off-putting act of circumcision. There has been considerable debate about the meaning of the term "God-fearers," which ancient sources and inscriptions use to refer to groups of Gentiles who attached themselves to synagogues, and who followed some Jewish customs but not all of the law; but whether or not the term was a technical one and the God-fearers formed a distinct grade of Judaizing Gentiles, it indicates both the appeal of Judaism to non-Jews and a significant level of inter-communal exchange of beliefs, values, and practices.[9]

Josephus described Syria as that region of the ancient world in which Jews constituted the largest proportion of the population. But by the fourth century, the cultural and probably the demographic center of Judaism lay to the east, in Mesopotamia. The Jewish community there was old, dating back to the Achaemenid empire, but it grew substantially in late antiquity, in part because the Sasanian emperors encouraged Jewish immigration from the rival (and considerably more hostile) Roman Empire, and in part through a process of conversion among the native Aramaean population with whom the Jews shared a common vernacular. Estimates for the size of the Jewish population in Iraq have

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[7] On late Jewish proselytization, see Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 270–305, and Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 383–415.

[8] On conversion, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew," *Harvard Theological Review* 82 (1989), 13–33; idem, "The Rabbinic Conversion Ceremony," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 41 (1990), 177–203; Martin Goodman, "Proselytzing in Rabbinic Judaism," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40 (1989), 175–85. On fourth- and fifth-century Roman legislation aimed at preventing conversion to Judaism, see Simon, *Verus Israel*, 291–3.

[9] On this subject, see Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, 3.150–76 (by Fergus Millar); Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 65–72; Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 288–415.

ranged from 500,000 in the third century to as much as two million in the year 500, although the number of Jews probably declined somewhat in ensuing decades as the pace of conversion to Christianity grew.[10] The population of a city such as Mahoza was so thoroughly Jewish that the rabbis debated whether the very gates of the city did not require a mezuzah (a small case containing parchment on which was written short Biblical quotations, which Jews traditionally fixed to the doorposts of houses). The size and prestige of the Babylonian community grew at the direct expense of the Jewish community of Palestine. That latter community suffered of course in the wake of the Bar Kochba rebellion, when Jews were forbidden to live within the city of Jerusalem, a prohibition periodically renewed by the Roman emperors, and also from the sharp rise of antisemitic feeling in the later Roman Empire. Rabbi Judah bar Ezekiel confirmed the eminence and authority of the Babylonian community in declaring, "Whosoever emigrates from Babylonia to Palestine breaks a positive biblical commandment, because it is written 'they shall be carried to Babylon, and there shall they be until the day that I remember them, saith the Lord' [Jer. 27.22]."[11]

Viewed with the advantage of historical hindsight, Rabbi Judah's confidence was not misplaced. The experience of Mesopotamian Jews in the centuries before Islam was in fact critical, both for the articulation of Judaism as it has been known since (as it was largely in the rabbinical academies of Iraq that Jewish law took shape), and also in defining the social and political structures which characterized the Near Eastern Jewish experience into the modern period. Under the Sasanian rulers, Jews were afforded a high degree of communal autonomy, an arrangement which in many ways foreshadowed the regime of self-contained communities, rooted in religious identity, which helped to shape the social structure of medieval Islamic cities. At the rise of the Sasanian empire, the community was led by the exilarch, a member of a family claiming Davidic descent. Operating as a sort of "Jewish vassal prince," the exilarch represented the community before the Sasanian emperor, who allowed him to levy taxes, police the community, administer justice, and even, on occasion, raise troops to serve in the imperial army. His authority was shared, however, with the rabbis, who first came to Mesopotamia from Palestine in the wake of the Bar Kochba revolt. Their authority was based, not on descent, but on the claim that they possessed and transmitted an oral law, parallel to the written law, which they traced back to Moses. By the fourth and fifth centuries, the rabbis had created an institutional structure for instruction and learning through which their interpretation of Jewish law came to be dominant, not just in Iraq, but among Jews throughout the diaspora. And by at least the end of the sixth century, the leaders of those schools, the geonim, had

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[10] On the size of the Jewish population in Iraq, see Jacob Neusner, *Talmudic Judaism in Sasanian Babylonia* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 95; Michael G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 306–8.

[11] Cited in Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952–) 2:204–5, 208.

emerged as authoritative spokesmen on questions regarding law, the questions which marked the Jews off as a people and gave them a separate identity.

There is a curious tension in the nature of authority within the Sasanian Jewish community, an authority which was both secular and religious but which could never thoroughly dominate either the sacred or profane sphere of peoples' lives – a tension which in fact was characteristic of medieval Near Eastern institutions of power. The exilarch, for example, functioned at times almost as a courtier of the Sasanian emperor, yet his authority rested in the final analysis on the claim of Davidic descent. Similarly, the rabbis' role as authoritative interpreters of the law had a political dimension which eventually brought them into conflict with the exilarch. The dimensions of that conflict are not entirely clear, but it resulted in the eclipse of the office of the exilarch by the end of the Sasanian period, the rabbis, led by the geonim, emerging as both authoritative interpreters of the law and representatives of the Jewish community.[12] (The denouement of this drama was played out, as we shall see, under the caliph al-Mansur in the late eighth century.)

And the rabbis' victory was decisive, both for the internal character of the Jewish community and for its relations with the broader society of which it formed a part. The Jewish community of Iraq was socially diverse, consisting of townsmen and scholars but overwhelmingly of laborers, peasants, and slaves, and as such knew considerable interaction with the non-Jewish communities of the country. Interaction bred cultural influence – Iranian influence, for example, can be traced in Jewish mysticism and in the magic which came increasingly to be associated with Jews – and social interpenetration, such as intermarriage and conversion. Only in such an open world can the considerable growth in the size of the Jewish community in late antiquity be understood. But the rabbis brought a more refined definition of what it meant to be Jewish, one that required the setting of sharper communal boundaries. It was they, with their concerns about the law and ritual purity, who discouraged contact between Jews and non-Jews, who grew skeptical of conversion to Judaism, and who frowned upon intermarriage.[13] Their victory and their concerns were signs of the times. Their anxieties about the social mixing of adherents of different religious communities were shared by the Zoroastrian priests who grew increasingly identified with the Sasanian state, and reflected the more general process by which religious identities in late antiquity crystallized around a few major traditions.[14]

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[12] On the exilarch, the rabbinate, and on the structure of the Jewish community in Mesopotamia in general, see Jacob Neusner, "Jews in Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3: *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 909–23; Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 306–31; Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2.196–8.

[13] Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 312–14. The Talmud, however, does not speak with a unified voice. Some rabbis remained warmly disposed to proselytization. See Simon, *Verus Israel*, 274–8.

[14] A process which Baron referred to as "closing the ranks." See *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2.129–71.

The most important aspect of that process is that it was a process, a process which occupied the whole of the late antique period, and one which was certainly incomplete, for Judaism as well as for other religions, in the early seventh century. Above all, the process grew out of a dialectic involving the various faith traditions, as each attempted to define itself more sharply against the others. The process was probably sharpest in the territories of the newly Christianized Roman Empire. Under the Ptolemaic and Seleucid emperors and their pagan Roman successors, Jews had been afforded a fair degree of freedom in the practice of their religion. There were exceptions, of course, such as the efforts of the Seleucid Antiochus Epiphanes to suppress Judaism (which efforts sparked the Maccabaean revolt in the second century BCE), or the reprisals carried out by the Romans in response to the rebellions in Palestine in 66–70 and 132–135 CE, which resulted in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the banishing of Jews from that city. Spontaneous outbursts of violence against the Jews, conducted not by state authorities but by urban mobs, betray an underlying strain of hostility to Judaism, probably reflecting an impatience with Jewish exceptionalism (as in practices like circumcision, or in the Jewish refusal to participate in the civic cults), which hostility must be set against the philo-semitic feelings of others attracted to Jewish monotheism and doctrines of redemption. But on an official level at least, the Jews formed a relatively favored community. They were, for example, by and large not required to participate in the imperial cult. One mark of their status resides in occasional instances in which Christians suffering from one of the outbreaks of Roman persecution converted to Judaism in order to protect themselves.[15] Even in Palestine, which was quite naturally the center of much opposition to the Roman political order, Judaism remained licit and active, at least outside of Jerusalem.[16]

Under such conditions, religious exchange could take place at a variety of levels. Some Jews, for example, continued actively to proselytize as late as the fourth century, despite the growing strength of Christianity and also the sharpened hostility of the rabbis, one of whom declared that "a gentile who studies the Torah deserves capital punishment."[17] Christians and Jews (as well as pagans) shared what has been called a "religious *koiné*," that is to say, similar patterns of religious belief and behavior, especially but not exclusively on the level of "popular religion": magic, and the belief in spiritual beings, angels, and demons.[18] Christians continued to visit synagogues, or gather for prayer and scripture readings on the Jewish sabbath, or be buried in Jewish cemeteries, despite the efforts of the early church councils to draw sharper lines between Christians and Jews. Communities of Jewish-Christians survived for decades, even centuries,

[15] Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, 3.125.

[16] Stroumsa, "Religious Contacts in Byzantine Palestine," 24; Saul Lieberman, "Palestine in the Third and Fourth Centuries," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 36 (1945–6), 329–70. On the relatively privileged position of Jews more generally, see Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, 3.114–25.

[17] Cited in Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2.148.

[18] Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, "Religious Contacts in Byzantine Palestine," *Numen* 36 (1989), 16–42, esp. 21.

after a distinctive Christian church and faith had emerged. They puzzled many, including the patriarch Cyril of Jerusalem. In a sermon in 348, he remarked that these individuals worshiped Jesus Christ, yet refused the name "Christian" and insisted upon calling themselves "Jews."[19]

But despite the exchange, boundaries between the communities were beginning to harden. Even their apparent sharing of a common scripture served to drive Christians and Jews apart, since the theology underlying the Christian identification of the "old" and "new" testaments was irrelevant, even antithetical, to the rabbinical understanding of a dual scripture, written and oral, both revealed at Sinai and possessed in their entirety only by the rabbis.[20] To some degree, the rabbis welcomed and contributed to this process of separation and distinction, for it meshed with their efforts to refine the law and solidify their control over the Jewish community. But even more important was the attitude of the Roman state. Constantine's conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century did not transform the empire overnight into an instrument of Christianization, but it did set in motion the gradual merger of the interests of the Roman state and the Christian faith (or at least certain elements and traditions within the Christian church). By 380, the emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the official religion of the empire. The organized pagan cults were the first to feel the impact of this identification of church and state, but increasingly the Jews, too, felt its onerous weight. In 409 and 438, Jews who attempted to convert Christians were declared subject to capital punishment. The state began to interfere in the practice of Jewish law, subjecting Jews to Roman law in matters such as marriage and inheritance, thereby undermining the juridical foundations of Jewish identity and the autonomy which the Jews had enjoyed under pagan Rome. The assault on Judaism aimed at its bedrock: under Justinian, the state even tried to regulate ritual in the Jewish synagogue, by stipulating which versions of scripture could be read, and over the sixth century instances of forced baptism increased. These developments were the social manifestations of a changing theological climate, in which religions claimed for themselves authority to define the parameters of truth, parameters which applied to and circumscribed the lives of all. Judaism, given its proximity to the origins and basis of Christianity, was especially problematic for Christian theologians and rulers, whose efforts to separate and control the Jews perhaps reflected what Sigmund Freud called the "narcissism of minor difference." Hence Justinian's efforts to force Jews to postpone their observance of the Passover, so that Judaizing Christians might be prevented from celebrating Easter on the Jewish holiday. And hence the term "Jew" became in Christian polemic one of abuse, applied by Christians to all – pagans and Christian sectarians as well as Jews – who deviated from the norm.[21]

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[19] Stroumsa, "Religious Contacts in Byzantine Palestine," 28.

[20] Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 128–45.

[21] On the sharpening of communal boundaries and the worsening position of the Jews, see Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2.129–214, and 3.3–18; Peter Brown, *The World of Late*

Most accounts of the Jews under Sasanian rule have assumed that they fared considerably better than their co-religionists to the west. Peter Brown, for example, has piquantly observed that "[a]t a time when the emperor Justinian was laying down which version of the Scriptures the Jews should be allowed to read in the synagogues of his empire, the rabbis of Ctesiphon were free to conduct a vigorous polemic against the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Virgin Birth."[22] Several of the Sasanian monarchs acquired reputations as friends of the Jews, reputations which have left traces in the Talmud. The Jews of Mesopotamia, for example, endeared themselves to Shapur II (309–79) by their refusal to cooperate with the Roman emperor Julian during his invasion of the Sasanian Empire. Yazdigird I (399–420) is reputed to have been on familiar terms with the Jews and even with their scriptures, although the story that he had a Jewish wife may be apocryphal.[23] As Judaism was increasingly defined as hostile to Christianity and to the Roman state, Jews could even identify their interests with those of Rome's great historical rival, the Sasanian Empire, as we shall see.

But the Jews of Mesopotamia also experienced the sharpening of communal boundaries in the centuries before the rise of Islam. In both tenor and substance, Judaism differed profoundly from the Zoroastrianism which grew more closely identified with the Sasanian state. On certain matters of ritual touching intimate areas of human life and expectations, divergence in practice could create real feelings of uneasiness or even revulsion: marriage, for example (in particular the Zoroastrian acceptance of consanguinous unions), or death rites (Jewish in-humation, which seemed to Zoroastrians to defile the earth, versus the Zoroastrian practice of exposing the dead to the elements, which could be construed as threatening the prospects for bodily resurrection).[24] Tensions of this sort may have lain behind outbreaks of violence such as one that occurred in Isfahan in the second half of the fifth century, in which, following a slanderous accusation that the Jews had attacked two Zoroastrian priests, half the Jewish population of the city was massacred and its children turned over as slaves to serve the fire-temples. But the more important nexus for the worsening of the position of Jews in the Sasanian Empire was a political one. Here again, it is important to stress that Jews did not always act as a politically passive minority. They were caught up in some way in the confused events associated with the Mazdakite movement in the Sasanian empire in the late fifth and early sixth centuries (on which, see below); their involvement issued at one point in a rebellion led by the exilarch Mar Zutra II, who established for seven years an independent Jewish state in Mahoza, until it was overrun by the Iranians and Mar Zutra captured and beheaded. During another

Antiquity, AD 150–750 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 172–187; Stroumsa, "Religious Contacts in Byzantine Palestine," passim; J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 345–8; Andrew Sharf, *Byzantine Jewry from Justinian to the Fourth Crusade* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 19–41.

[22] Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 165.

[23] Neusner, "Jews in Iran," 915.

[24] Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 296.

rebellion later in the sixth century, some communities of Jews backed the losing claimant to the Sasanian throne, which again led to pogroms. At any rate, by the end of the Sasanian period, the Jews of Mesopotamia had known massacres and meddling in their internal affairs by the imperial authorities; the office of the exilarch had been periodically suppressed, and the academies which were so central to Jewish religious life had been temporarily closed.[25]

Christianity

The development which contributed most to the process by which the religions of late antiquity defined themselves more sharply was the rise of Christianity. As a historical matter, it would be meaningless to say that Christianity *caused* the process; but that process involved a dialogue, and most of the participants in that dialogue were Christian. The dialogue was not always a friendly one – quite the contrary. One of the characteristic features of the religious literature of late antiquity is its highly polemical nature. Polemics helped the traditions to define themselves, but also betrayed the underlying uncertainties and competition which fueled them in the first place.[26]

Judaism, as we have seen, was increasingly a target of Christian polemic, as the young religion sought to differentiate itself from its parent. No doubt Jews participated in the exchange, but it is significant that surviving examples of Jewish-Christian polemic come exclusively from the Christian side. Christians continued to feel a need to stake out an independent identity well into the common era. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch around the turn of the first century, composed letters condemning, not Jewish Christians, but Gentile Christians who adopted Jewish practices. His concerns match those of John Chrysostom, prelate of Antioch some three centuries later. Chrysostom's sermons suggest that many Christians in Antioch harbored an infatuation with Judaism, reflected in Christian participation in Jewish festivals, and attendance at synagogues. The preacher claimed even to know at least one Antiochan Christian who identified himself as such, but who had submitted to circumcision.[27] It is easy to condemn the rhetorical violence of Chrysostom's sermons for their use of what we would now identify as antisemitic images – he labels Jews, for instance, as "Christ-killers" – but they should also be read as reflecting the profound anxieties generated by a drawn-out process through which the separate identities of the different faiths were confirmed.

[25] On the worsening condition of the Jews in Mesopotamia and other Iranian territories, see Geo Widengren, "The Status of the Jews in the Sasanian Empire," *Iranica Antiqua* 1 (1961), 117–62.

[26] Averil Cameron, "The Eastern Provinces in the Seventh Century A.D.: Hellenism and the Emergence of Islam," *Hellenismos: Quelques Jalons pour une Histoire de l'Identité Grecque*, ed. S. Said (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 287–313, esp. 307.

[27] Meeks and Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch*, 20, 30–4; and cf. Robert Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

Paganism too felt the sting of Christian attack. Pagans had not always treated Christians kindly, as the many martyrs might attest. And pagans too participated in the war of words between the faiths. To cite just one instance, one which may have been known to the emperor Constantine: Hierocles, one of the emperor Diocletian's chief lieutenants during the persecutions of the early fourth century, authored a treatise denigrating Christ and denouncing the Christian belief in his divinity, a treatise which prompted an extended reply from the church historian (and later Constantine's adviser) Eusebius.[28] But Christian memory may have over-stressed the extent and significance of pagan persecution.[29] Certainly once the Roman emperors adopted Christianity, as a practical matter pagans were no longer in a position to cause serious disruption to Christian life and worship, the brief campaign of the pagan emperor Julian against Christianity in the mid-fourth century notwithstanding.

On the contrary, after the early fourth century, it was Christians who persecuted pagans. Constantine's conversion did not lead to the sudden eclipse of paganism, but it did ratchet up the rhetoric of Christian hostility. Constantine's own religious policy presents a somewhat contradictory mien, and historians have come to radically different conclusions about the degree of his personal and political commitment to Christianity. A judicious reading of the evidence may suggest that, while Constantine's conversion was sincere, the overriding goal of his religious policy was to promote peace within the empire, a peace to heal the wounds left by the persecution instigated by his pagan predecessor, Diocletian, and a peace built around a tolerant consensus of all those (pagans included) who acknowledged a supreme god under whose auspices Constantine ruled.[30] Constantine closed a number of pagan temples, but he also at one point exiled the staunchly orthodox bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (albeit for reasons having nothing to do with theology). On the other hand, he himself publically referred to paganism as an "error," and to ritual sacrifice as a "foul pollution," and had his agents break up pagan statues and expose the rubbish with which they were filled.[31] Intentionally or not, his words and actions inspired others, especially bishops and monks, to take up the cudgel, verbal and literal, which they did with increasing vigor. After a period of improved fortunes for pagans under Julian (r. 361–3) and in the years immediately following his death, the pace and tenor of Christian assaults on pagan cults and temples picked up. Imperial legislation called for the closure and

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[28] H. A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine: A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 68. Eusebius' treatise is included at the end of the Loeb volume of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F. C. Conybeare in two volumes (London: William Heinemann, 1912), 2.484–605.

[29] See, for example, Peter Brown's comments on W. H. C. Frend's study, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), in "Approaches to the Religious Crisis of the Third Century A.D.," in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 86–7.

[30] Drake, *In Praise of Constantine*, 61–74. Robin Lane Fox, by contrast, stresses Constantine's commitment to the new faith and his particular concern with *Christian* unity: *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 609–62.

[31] Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 666, 673.

dismantling of specific shrines and, in 435, for their general destruction; but it was bishops and, especially in rural areas, unruly monks who led the charge, often in advance of the law. The destruction of the famous Serapeum in Alexandria in 391, for example, was instigated by the city's bishop. By the early fifth century, the movement was in full swing. Bishops seized the moment and, capitalizing on the anxieties stirred up by the violence they had provoked, frequently made certain that attacks on temples were followed by the formal mass conversion of the pagans who had worshiped in them. For example Porphyry, bishop of Gaza from 395 to 420, having overseen the destruction of a pagan temple, welcomed the mass conversion of the terrified pagans, over-riding the objections of fellow churchmen that the converts were driven by fear rather than conviction.[32]

This last point is especially significant. The growing level of Christian hostility is surprising, as late antique paganism shared much with the new religion of Christianity, both on an intellectual level (pagan theology having grown in-creasingly monotheistic) and on that of popular belief and practice. The emphasis on conversion suggests once again the growing importance to the men and women of late antiquity of formal expressions of religious identity. In that may lie Christianity's greatest legacy to the world which, in the seventh century, Islam inherited.

Christians raised more insistently than others the question of religious identity. "I cannot call myself anything else than what I am," said the young North African martyr Perpetua (d. ca. 203), "a Christian."[33] It is deeply ironical, therefore, that the question of Christian identity should have proved so troublesome to the Christians themselves.[34] Of all the major religions to have emerged from late antiquity, Christianity had the misfortune to be the one which placed the greatest emphasis on doctrine and theology. The principal issues, concerning the nature of Christ, ironically began to emerge just at the moment of Christianity's triumph through the conversion of Constantine, in the form of the Arian controversy. They continued to plague the church through the rise of Islam, and probably contributed to the frustrations felt by Muhammad and his followers at the apparent doctrinal disorder of and internecine squabbling within the Christian community. That the apparent triumph of a monotheistic religion should be accompanied by increasingly bitter debates over doctrinal issues may not be coincidental. As one historian has recently observed, "where polytheism diffuses divinity and defuses

[32] Mark the Deacon, *Vie de Porphyre, Évêque de Gaza*, trans. Henri Grégoire and M.-A. Kugener (Paris: Société d'Éditions "Les Belles Lettres", 1930), 72–4; Garth Fowden, "Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire A.D. 320–435," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 29 (1978), 53–78.

[33] *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, ed. James W. Halporn (Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania: Thomas Library, 1984), 3.2; Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 70.

[34] Judith Herrin points out that most histories of early Christianity adopt, intentionally or otherwise, the viewpoint of the "orthodox" church which ultimately triumphed, at least in the West. Doing so can obscure "the tentative and hesitant, divisive and competitive aspects of early Christian communities, their idiosyncracies in practice and belief, in short, the relative lack of uniformity." *The Formation of Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 54–5f.

the consequences, if not always the intensity, of debate about its nature by providing a range of options, monotheism tends to focus divinity and ignite debates by forcing all the faithful, with their potentially infinite varieties of religious thought and behavior, into the same mold, which sooner or later must break."[35] This is not the place for anything more than a limited assault on the dizzying edifice of the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. The social and historical significance of those controversies, however, is another matter.[36]

To consider the impact of the Christological controversies on Christian identity and the nexus of political and religious authority in the centuries before Islam, let us look in closer detail at the situation in Egypt.[37] By the end of the second century, Christianity was gaining ground throughout the country. A number of factors contributed to its appeal to the population, including several doctrinal parallels with the late pagan cults patronized both by native Egyptians and by Greeks and Romans resident in the country, such as their emphasis on redemption and sacramental mysteries, and perhaps especially the traditional Egyptian preoccupation with immortality (as in, for example, the popular cult of Osiris, god of the Nile and king of the dead). By the fourth century, the church was well-established, with a network of churches down to the village level, and a growing body of Christian literature written in or translated into Coptic, the language of the native population. At the time of the conversion of Constantine, perhaps half the inhabitants of Egypt professed Christianity; by the early fifth century, the figure probably reached eighty percent.[38] Egyptian Christianity had a tremendous impact on the faith beyond the Nile valley, most obviously in monasticism, whose roots lie in the Christian ascetics (such as the hermit Antony) who fled to the Egyptian desert and in the coenobitic movement associated with figures such as Pachomius.[39] But Egyptian influence was more subtle, as well. The ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431 declared Mary the *Theotokos*, the "God-Bearer," and in doing so, it "ratified the fervor of the Copts, who had worshiped her as such."[40] Egyptians were by no means alone in their feelings for Mary, of course. On the other hand, it may be worthy of note that one of the earliest Church fathers to enunciate a doctrine of Mary as Theotokos was Athanasius, and that the major proponent of

[35] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 106–7.

[36] The Christological controversies are treated in any number of doctrinal histories of the early church. Among the best are Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), and W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1984). A non-Chalcedonian point of view is given in Aziz S. Atiya's *History of Eastern Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), although this work is somewhat sentimental and uncritical.

[37] On early Christianity in Egypt, see C. Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 CE* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), and the still serviceable work of H. Idris Bell, *Cults and Creeds in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), 78–105.

[38] Roger S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 278–81.

[39] The best study of early monasticism is still Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism Under the Christian Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966).

[40] Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 143.

the doctrine at Ephesus was Cyril; both Athanasius and Cyril were patriarchs of Alexandria. Moreover, what became the principal medieval image of Mary – suckling the infant Jesus – can be traced back iconographically to Egyptian depictions of the goddess Isis nursing her infant son Horus.[41]

Ultimately, of course, the controversy over Mary as Theotokos was a Christological issue, and foreshadowed a larger crisis which plagued the Church as a result of the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The Council's declaration that Christ was both perfect God and perfect man, made known to us in two natures, angered those who came to be known as Monophysites, who insisted on the full mystical union of God and man in a single nature in the person of Christ. Many Egyptians passionately embraced the Monophysite position, as did the churches of Armenia and Ethiopia, and most of the Christians of Syria. Consequently, the aftermath of the conciliar decision was a permanent doctrinal rupture between most Christians of those regions and those adhering to the orthodox or "Melkite" (imperial) church. But there was a more explicit political dimension as well, since the Council also made it clear that Constantinople was to be regarded as the premier Christian city of the eastern Empire, to the detriment of the authority of the patriarchal sees of Antioch and, especially, Alexandria.

What did this all mean? There has been much debate concerning this issue, particularly over whether the doctrinal rupture between Chalcedonians and Monophysites in any way undermined the unity and strength of the Christian empire, and so paved the way for the Muslims' success in the seventh century. Assertions that the emergence of a distinctively Monophysite Coptic church "must be regarded as the outward expression of the growing nationalist trends" in Egypt seem, at best, anachronistic.[42] Doctrinal tensions between Chalcedonians and Monophysites did not imply an intractable hostility between Greek-speaking, imperial Chalcedonian Christians on the one hand, and Coptic-speaking, Monophysite Egyptian Christians on the other. Several historians have persuasively argued that the cultural overtones and political implications of the theological division should be minimized: that by the end of late antiquity, there was in fact a close symbiosis of (and not an atavistic struggle between) Greek and Coptic cultures in Egypt, and that Monophysite anger at the Chalcedonian creed did not imply that Egyptian Christians were hostile to the empire itself.[43]

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[41] Ibid. On the controversy surrounding the conciliar declaration of Mary as Theotokos, see Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 101–11; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 55–65.

[42] Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity*, 69. Atiya's florid rhetoric sometimes rises to comical heights, as in his assertion (77) that Cyrus, Patriarch of Alexandria at the time of the Muslim conquests, was a "Melkite colonialist" whose "national origin was doubtful" and who was "one of the most hateful tyrants in Egyptian history. He used the Cross as an iron mace to club native resistance."

[43] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 100–37, esp. 127; Glen Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 67.

On the other hand, it is surely significant that by the end of the fifth century, the majority of Christians in Egypt, Syria, and (for different reasons) Iraq adhered to doctrines which put them at odds with those espoused by the church associated with imperial authority. Their frustration and anger with the imperial church had a profound impact on the Christian identity of those who professed a Monophysite creed. The Melkite patriarch of Alexandria in the wake of Chalcedon, who adhered to the Council's Christological declarations, discovered as much when he was torn apart by a mob of Egyptians in 457. More importantly, the schism resulted in the emergence in both Egypt and Syria of rival networks of bishops, priests and churches, one loyal to the Chalcedonian formulations generally supported (although in varying degrees, and not without efforts to heal the breach) by the emperors, another to the Monophysite creed. And Monophysite frustrations did not dissipate quickly. It would be misleading to suggest that local Syrian and Egyptian Christians systematically betrayed the Christian Roman state to the Arab invaders. On the other hand, the hostility which sometimes characterized their relations with Melkite authorities probably helped to sap the vigor of Roman efforts to resist the Arabs in Syria and Egypt. That, at least, was the suggestion of John, a Coptic bishop in Upper Egypt in the late seventh century, who identified the anger of the Coptic inhabitants of some Egyptian towns towards the Roman emperor Heraclius, "because of the persecution wherewith he had visited all the land of Egypt in regard to the orthodox faith," as having contributed to the Arabs' victory.[44]

The situation faced by Christians in Iraq and the other provinces of the Sasanian empire was completely different.[45] Christianity first penetrated the area to the east of Syria through the sizeable Jewish communities of Mesopotamia. By the third century it was well established and organized, and began to attract the attention of the Zoroastrian priesthood which was growing closer to the Sasanian state. Christianity continued to grow down to and even into the Islamic period, at the expense of Jews, pagans, and Zoroastrians; by the late sixth century, it constituted probably the single largest confessional community in Iraq. There are parallels between its organization and relation to the state and those of the Mesopotamian Jews, parallels which assume a special importance when viewed from the vantage point of the later Islamic period. The experience of both Jews and Christians in the Sasanian empire demonstrates that, in this world of diverse faiths, an individual's social and even political identity derived primarily from his or her religious

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[44] John of Nikiu, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*, trans. R. H. Charles (London: Williams and Norgate, 1916), 184; cf. Walter Kaegi, "Egypt on the Eve of the Muslim Conquest," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1: *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. Carl Petry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 34–61, esp. 45–6; and idem, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 265–9.

[45] On Christianity in Iraq and in the Sasanian Empire, see J. P. Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 924–48; Sebastian Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," in *Religion and National Identity*, ed. Stuart Mews (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982) (Studies in Church History, 18), 1–19; Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 332–83; and, more carefully, Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity*, 237–66.

community, foreshadowing the situation in the Islamic Middle Ages.[46] As with the Jewish leadership, the church "became an agent of the state to secure the loyalty of its Christian subjects": the church led Christians in prayer for the king, and might even excommunicate Christians who rebelled against the state, in exchange for which the ecclesiastical hierarchy expected the state's assistance in enforcing its will on members of its own community. The Sasanian emperors were not, of course, Christian. Like their Christian Roman counterparts, however, they might intervene in church affairs, to convene a council of Christian bishops, for example, or to secure the election of some particular candidate as *catholicos*.[47]

The social and political condition of Christians in the Sasanian empire was even more complex than that of their co-religionists to the west. Christians shared with Jews an underlying aversion to a number of Zoroastrian beliefs or practices – the worship of fire, for example, or consanguinous marriages – and the Zoroastrian priesthood (itself shocked by Christian ideals such as virginity) periodically unleashed waves of persecution of Christians. One of the worst outbreaks occurred during the reign of Shapur II, which produced the horrors recorded in the Syriac "Lives of the Martyrs." On the other hand, Christianity was never formally proscribed by the emperors. Christians served the Sasanians in the army and in the bureaucracy, sometimes in quite senior positions. Thus Christians found themselves owing allegiance to both Christ and the shah, and "under normal conditions there was not any clash of loyalties since membership of the 'People of God' and of the Persian state belonged to separate modes of existence."[48] After the fourth century, troubles arose primarily during periods of conflict and tension with the Christian Roman Empire. So, for example, a treaty with the Roman empire in 561 provided that Christians were to be left alone, allowed to worship freely and construct churches. Under Khusrau Parviz, who regained his throne as a result of Byzantine intervention and who was married to two Christian women, the condition of Christians improved further, but then deteriorated sharply during the cataclysmic war which engulfed the two states in the early seventh century.

The Christological controversies which plagued Roman Christianity also had an impact in the Sasanian world. The majority of Sasanian Christians followed what came to be identified as the Nestorian position, one distinct from the Chalcedonian and hostile to the Monophysite. According to Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople who gave his name to the sect, Christ was the locus of two entirely independent natures, the divine and the human: so, for example, while Mary might be considered the mother of Christ, she could in no way be labeled Theotokos, "God-Bearer." But Monophysites, linked to the Jacobite church of Syria, also had a strong and distinct presence in Mesopotamia. The situation was further confused by the presence of significant communities of Melkite Christians, many of them the product of deportations carried out by the Sasanians from

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[46] A point made by both Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire," and Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*.
[47] Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire," 4–5; Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 334–41 (the quotation is taken from p. 334).
[48] Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire," 14.

territories conquered from Rome or from border areas during the course of their periodic wars, although since the state itself was not Christian, no sect could effectively enforce a claim to representing "orthodoxy."[49] As in Syria and Egypt, the most important consequence of the theological disputes was the emergence of separate and distinct ecclesiastical networks and structures, churches, monasteries, and schools. This fueled sectarian competition, especially between Nestorians and Monophysites. Significantly, the competition grew sharper in the early years of the seventh century, just before the Arab invasions, as churches and monasteries purged their ranks of nonconforming members. Some Iraqi Christians later concluded that the sectarian strife contributed to the ease with which the Muslims took the country, or, in more theological language, that God permitted the Arabs to triumph as a punishment for Christian disunity.[50] On the other hand, the competition also provided a catalyst for vigorous proselytization. Nestorian Christianity in particular proved to be a dynamic force in the religious history of the early medieval period, its missionaries active throughout Central Asia and as far as China at least until the Mongol conquests in the thirteenth century.[51] But the Nestorians failed to establish a permanent relationship with a major political entity, and so in the long run succumbed to the dynamic mix of political and religious authority represented by Islam.[52]

Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism

Inhabitants of the Sasanian empire, even more than those of the Roman, lived in a world of astonishing religious variety in the centuries before the rise of Islam. Judaism and Christianity, as we have already seen, staked out a significant presence in the Sasanian realm, largely but not exclusively in its Mesopotamian provinces. Pagans of various stripes could be found virtually everywhere. Iran's geographic location was a critical factor in giving shape to the religious mix. Lying just beyond the easternmost Roman provinces, it provided a natural refuge for Jews fleeing Roman persecution; and Jews, in their wake, brought Christianity. Further east, Iran borders on the culturally and religiously diverse world of India, and even apart from any prehistoric connections between the Indo-European settlers of the two regions, commercial and strategic imperatives drew them together, particularly under the Sasanians, who cultivated mercantile links to the sub-continent.[53] As a result, Buddhism made its presence felt in late antique Iran, particularly in its easternmost provinces, and through Iran was known to

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[49] On the Melkite church in the Sasanian empire, see J. Nasrallah, "L'Église melchite en Iraq, en Perse et dans l'Asie centrale," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 25 (1975), 135–73 and 29 (1976), 16–33.

[50] A. Mingana, *Sources Syriaques*, 2 vols. (Mosul: Imprimerie des Pères Dominicaines, 1907), 2:172–4; Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 375–80; Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 946–7.

[51] Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 162; Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity*, 257–66.

[52] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 122–3.

[53] André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 1.45–64, esp. 48–53.

Manichaeans and others in the Fertile Crescent.[54] When he sought to leave a record in stone of the religious rivals he had fought and vanquished, the zealous third-century Zoroastrian priest Karter listed Jews, shamans, Christians, Manichaeans, and Brahmans.[55]

But the principal religion within the Sasanian realm, because of its roots in Iranian culture and history and because of its intimate connection to the Sasanian state, was Zoroastrianism. Late antique Zoroastrianism, even more than Judaism and Christianity, is difficult to define in any precise and categorical fashion. A distinctive Zoroastrian faith was beginning to emerge in late antiquity, but the process was not complete, even by the time of the Arab invasions. Part of the problem is textual: it is not easy to assign precise dates to the principal Zoroastrian texts, and in any case they tend to incorporate much older material. A more funda-mental problem is that Zoroastrian doctrine took shape only slowly, sometimes in response to the theological assertions of other religious traditions. Separate polytheistic, monotheistic, and especially dualist strands can be identified within the broader Zoroastrian tradition. The polytheism of ancient Iranian religion probably continued as the norm for many of the common people, although the priests tended to redefine the multitudinous deities as angelic beings subordinate to the great god Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd). By contrast, another strand within the Zoroastrian tradition in the Sasanian period subordinated both Ahura Mazda and the personification of the evil principle, Ahriman, to an impersonal god of infinite time and space, Zurvan.[56] Dualism, however, the understanding of the cosmic order as the product of a struggle between good and evil deities, was the domin-ant theological tendency. Zoroastrian dualism was distinguished from that of Manichaeism by its insistence upon the genesis of the world, or at least most of it (minus things like reptiles, snakes, and the seven planets), at the hands of the good, rather than the evil, deity.

In Iran no less than in the Roman empire, the characteristic process of religious definition in late antiquity was a product of intense competition and not-always-friendly dialogue. Monotheistic passages in Zoroastrian texts may have served as an apologetic response to Jewish and Christian polemic.[57] But in Iran, Manichaeism provided perhaps the most serious threat. Karter's persecution of non-Zoroastrians was very likely inspired in part by the favor shown to the new religion by the king Shapur I (r. ca. 241–273). Shapur was generally tolerant, at one point issuing an edict that "Magi [i.e., Zoroastrians], Zandiks (Manichaeans),

[54] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 82–4; M. Tardieu, "La diffusion du Bouddhisme dans l'empire Kouchan, l'Iran et la Chine, d'après un kephalaoin manichéen inédit," *Studia Iranica* 17 (1988), 153–82.

[55] Compare Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire," 6, with Martin Sprengling, *Third Century Iran: Sapor and Kartir* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1953), 41–2, 51, 58.

[56] See Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 286–9; J. Duchesne-Guillemin, "Zoroastrian Religion," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. Ehsan Yarshataer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 866–908; R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1961), 175–264.

[57] Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 287.

Jews, Christians and all men of whatever religion should be left undisturbed and at peace in their belief."[58] The number of Christians especially increased dramatically during his reign.[59] But Manichaeism was tempting to the shah, who met the prophet Mani, gave him license to preach within his realm, and, according to some, may have considered adopting Manichaeism as the official religion of the state. The precise date of the compilation and redaction of the Zoroastrian texts known collectively as the *Avesta* has been much discussed, but they may have taken shape as a direct response of the Zoroastrian priesthood to the challenge posed by Mani and his revelations.[60]

The situation in the Sasanian empire differed somewhat from that in the Roman because Zoroastrianism retained certain traits of a national, i.e., a peculiarly Iranian, religion. There were some non-Iranian converts to Zoroastrianism, even among the tribes of the Arab peninsula. In an ethnically mixed area such as Iraq, however, Zoroastrianism was primarily the religion of the ruling elite, Iranians belonging to the upper classes and serving the Sasanian state.[61] There is little sign among Zoroastrians of active and general proselytization, as practiced by Christians, Jews, and Manichaeans, at least among the non-Iranians of the empire.[62] On the other hand, even the Iranian population included a growing number of converts to Christianity, especially toward the end of the Sasanian period, a phenomenon which may at times have strained relations between the state and the Christian churches.

This is not to say that there was no universalist dimension to Zoroastrian religious life; but what universalism there was derived directly, and to a greater degree than in the case of Rome and Christianity, from the explicit connection between religion and the state.[63] As we have seen, the commitment of the Sasanian emperors to Zoroastrianism was not an uncontested given. As late as the mid-fifth century, Yazdigird II (r. 438–457) made a close study of all the faiths of his subjects, although in the end he remained faithful to Zoroastrianism. But over time, the tendency was toward a union of the outlook and interests of the state and the Zoroastrian hierarchy. The tenth-century Muslim historian Masʿudi quotes Ardashir, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, as saying that "religion and kingship are two brothers, and neither can dispense with the other. Religion is the

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[58] Cited in Duchesne-Guillemin, "Zoroastrian Religion," 879.

[59] M.-L. Chaumont, "Les sassanides et la christianisation de l'Empire iranien au 3ᵉ siècle," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 165 (1964), 165–202.

[60] H. S. Nyberg, "Sassanid Mazdaism According to Moslem Sources," *Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute* 39 (1958), 1–63, esp. 17–32; cf. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 81. Others have credited competition with Islam for encouraging the compilation of definitive Zoroastrian texts. François Nau, "Étude historique sur la transmission de l'Avesta et sur l'époque probable de sa dernière redaction," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 95 (1927), 149–99.

[61] Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 296–7; on converts to Zoroastrianism, see the sources cited on p. 280.

[62] Nyberg, "Sassanid Mazdaism," 11. One exception was an effort to convert the population of Armenia, although this probably had principally to do with strategic considerations, Christian Armenia lying on the border between the Sasanian and Roman empires. Zaehner, *Dawn and Twilight*, 187–8.

[63] A point made by Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 24–36.

foundation of kingship and kingship protects religion."[64] Khusrau Anushirvan was remembered by the Zoroastrian priests as having "put into practice the teachings of the word of the religion and the worship and rites of the gods," and as having challenged the enemies of the orthodox faith.[65] The close connection between religious and political authority in late antique Zoroastrianism is important for its foreshadowing of later developments in Islam. The Sasanian monarch, according to Zoroastrian precepts developed and articulated during this period, was held to be supreme in all affairs, both religious and secular. He "served as the divinely ordained link between man the microcosm and god the macrocosm. Only through the king did the people have access to religion, god, and salvation." Apparently the Zoroastrian priests had to deal with kings whose commitment to the faith was less than perfect, and so they developed a doctrine by which it became a religious duty to contradict a heretical ruler and to overthrow those who threatened the "good religion" with their transgressions. But such errancies aside, Zoroastrian doctrine affirmed the union of kingship and religion, and so enjoined universal obedience to the sacralized monarch.[66]

The importance of the monarch in Zoroastrian thought derived in large part from his role as the lynchpin of an elaborate and (at least in theory) rigid social hierarchy, which itself was believed to reflect the structure of the cosmos. The fundamental distinction within Iranian society was that between nobles, who were exempted from certain taxes and forbidden to marry outside their caste, and commoners. The Zoroastrian literature, however, articulated a much more complicated and baroque social vision, in which humanity was divided among four social strata, variously defined but commonly consisting of priests, the military, cultivators, and artisans. This quadripartite model, the creation of which was ascribed in Zoroastrian legend to the primal and archetypal ruler Jamshid, and which almost certainly had an ancient connection to similar models prominent in Indian thought, formed the ideological foundation of the Sasanian state. The monarch had the responsibility to defend the system and to preserve the integrity of each caste so that, through a "circle of equity" in which each stratum supported the work of the others, both cosmos and society could survive and function. On a practical level, the system obviously served those at the top, in particular the religious hierarchy, who supervised a complex ecclesiastical structure and vast endowments; one leading and sympathetic modern student of Zoroastrianism has referred to late Sasanian society as "priest-ridden."[67]

Zoroastrian thought did not, however, lack a profound egalitarian undercurrent,

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[64] Duchesne-Guillemin, "Zoroastrian Religion," 877; R. C. Zaehner, *The Teachings of the Magi* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956), 85.

[65] From the *Denkart*, as cited by R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 53.

[66] Jamsheed Choksy, "Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 2 (1988), 35–52; the quotation is taken from p. 37.

[67] Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 140–44. See also the excellent summary of socio-religious thought and practice in the Sasanian period in Louise Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 66–90.

one which perhaps emerged in reaction to the dominant ideology of social division. This undercurrent, which can be traced back at least to a third-century Zoroastrian religious teacher named Zaradusht, surfaced periodically in the late Sasanian period, most notably under the shah Kavad (r. 488–496 and 498–531) and through a revolt led by a certain Mazdak around the time of the succession of Khusrau Anushirvan to the throne in 531. The exact connection between "Kavad's heresy and Mazdak's revolt," and between them and Zaradusht's teaching, has been the subject of much discussion.[68] Zaradusht had apparently identified the private possession of property and women as the root of social injustice and disharmony, and so preached a doctrine of communal access to them. Kavad sought to undermine the purity of lineage, and thus the status and power of the nobility, by insisting upon universal access to women; while Mazdak led a peasant revolt which demanded universal access too, or at least the radical redistribution of, both women and wealth. The efforts of both men failed. Kavad was deposed by his nobles, and Mazdak's rebellion was suppressed by Khusrau around the time of his accession to the throne, for which service to the "good religion" he was given the title Anushirvan, "Immortal Soul." It is difficult to be certain about the details and inter-relationship of the doctrines espoused by Zaradusht, Kavad, and Mazdak, since information about them is drawn almost entirely from sources hostile to them. But individually and collectively they represented a challenge to the dominant Iranian social order and its religious foundation, a challenge which emerged from within Zoroastrianism itself. More importantly, from our perspective, the challenge had a lasting legacy on religious developments in the medieval Near East, since much of the doctrine of Mazdak reappeared among certain sectarian groups in Iran during the first several centuries of the Muslim era.[69]

Mazdak and his creed remind us of the tense but exciting religious atmosphere which existed under the Sasanian emperors, and the same is true of Manichaeism. The prophet Mani himself was born into a family attracted to the Jewish-Christian baptist sects which proliferated in the Fertile Crescent in the first centuries of the Common Era. After receiving a series of revelations from a celestial being as a young man, Mani began to preach a new religion – his "hope," as he called it. His doctrine bore a superficial resemblance to Christianity – Jesus, for example, plays a prominent role in the Manichaean myth – but Mani also drew upon certain Indian ideas (such as metempsychosis) and especially Iranian dualism. The elaborate mythology developed by Mani in his writings posited a universe produced by the conflict between two primal forces, light and darkness, truth and falsehood, expressed sometimes in Christian language as God the Father and the devil, and sometimes in Zoroastrian terms as Zurvan and Ahriman. Physical existence in this

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[68] Most recently in a stimulating article by Patricia Crone, "Kavād's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt," *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 29 (1991), 21–42.

[69] On Mazdakism generally, see Crone, "Kavād's Heresy," and Ehsan Yarshater, "Mazdakism," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. Ehsan Yarshataer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 991–1024.

mythology is conceived as a state of suffering, as the divine sparks present in the progeny of Adam await their separation from dark matter. So Manichaeism developed a gnostic doctrine through which knowledge of the true human condition, and a consequent avoidance of procreation, paved the path to final redemption.[70]

Beyond the baroque and compelling richness of Manichaean doctrine and mythology, several aspects of Mani's preaching and its outcome demand our attention. In the first place, Mani's religious activities took place in a specifically Iranian context. He preached before the emperor Shapur on a number of occasions, dedicated a book to him, and, according to legend, converted the shah's brother. At the Sasanian court, he encountered and came into conflict with the Zoroastrian priest Karter. The two shared the ambition of harnessing the power of the state to their respective religions. In time, however, it was Karter who prevailed: in 276, under the emperor Bahram, Mani was arrested at Karter's urging, and eventually died in prison.

On the other hand, Mani and his followers aimed from the beginning at an even larger target. Of all the religions of late antiquity, Manichaeism was the most explicitly universalist, Islam not excepted. Its universalism is already apparent in the prophet's self-conscious syncretism. "Wisdom and deeds have always from time to time been brought to mankind by the messengers of God," proclaimed Mani. "So in one age they have been brought by the messenger called Buddha to India, in another by Zaradust [Zoroaster] to Persia, in another by Jesus to the West. Thereupon this revelation has come down and this prophecy has appeared in the form of myself, Mani, the envoy of the true God in the Land of Babylon." Mani proclaimed his message as the culmination of all previous revelations from God. "As a river joins another river to form a strong current, so the old books are added together in my Scriptures; and they have formed a great Wisdom, such as has not existed in previous generations." Manichaean missionaries propagated their doctrines well beyond the borders of the Iranian empire. Its appeal may be measured by the varied languages in which translations of Manichaean texts have survived, including Coptic, Turkish, and Chinese. In the Roman Empire, as is well known, Manichaeism was a potent force, which at one point held a powerful attraction for St Augustine. The bishop of Hippo later waged a polemical battle against the faith, as did the third-century pagan philosopher Alexander of

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[70] For general studies of Mani and Manichaeism, see Geo Widengren, "Manichaeism and Its Iranian Background," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 965–90; idem, *Mani and Manichaeism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965); Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994); idem, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, 2nd edition (Tubingen: J. C. P. Mohr, 1992). For useful summaries of Manichaean doctrine, see Widengren, "Manichaeism and Its Iranian Background," 972–84; Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, second edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 206–37; Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, in 3 volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 2.384–95.

Lycopolis.[71] Its missionaries were active in Central Asia well into the Middle Ages, and for a time in the late eighth and early ninth centuries Mani's faith was adopted as the official religion of the Uighur Turks.

In the end, however, despite its universalism and its appeal, Manichaeism failed. In part it did so because it never permanently attached itself to any of the principal empires which dominated the Near East from late antiquity into the modern period.[72] The stringent demands which Manichaeism imposed on its followers may also have limited its appeal. Manichaean communities were divided into two groups, the "elect" and the "hearers." The former lived extremely circum-scribed lives, sheltered from harmful and soul-entrapping activities such as the eating of meat and, especially, sex and procreation. The "hearers" were not subject to the rigorous asceticism of the "elect." On the other hand, they could not look forward to as perfect or swift a salvation: whereas the elect, according to the Muslim author Ibn al-Nadim, would be returned at death to the "Gardens of Light" from whence they originally came, the "hearers" could expect to remain "in the world like a man who sees horrible things in his dream, plunging into mud and clay," until "his light and spirit are rescued, so that he becomes attached, adhering to the Elect, donning their garments after the long period of his [transitional] uncertainty."[73] In some ways this put the social aspect of Manichaeism at odds with the other universalizing religions of late antiquity, especially Islam, in which the Koranic emphasis on divine mercy provided a path to salvation which even the most humble could follow. On this level, Manichaeism could not compete, and unlike Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, eventually became entirely extinct. On the other hand, its failure was not immediately apparent, even to the Islamic conquerors of the Near East in the seventh and eighth centuries. Manichaeism had an appeal even for some early Muslims, as we shall see. And when early Muslim polemicists defended their radical monotheism in the face of Iranian dualism, it was the compelling mythology and syncretistic doctrine of Mani, rather than the Zoroastrianism associated with the Sasanian state, which occupied most of their attention.[74]

Paganism

Of the religious traditions of late antiquity, paganism was the oldest. The use of the term paganism tends to make the historian uncomfortable, for a number of reasons. In the first place, it is employed to indicate religious beliefs and

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[71] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 46–60; P. W. van der Horst, *An Alexandrian Platonist Against Dualism: Alexander of Lycopolis' Treatise 'Critique of the Doctrines of Manichaeus'* (Leiden: Brill, 1974). On Manichaean universalism, see Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, 164; Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, 86–120; Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 72–6. The first quotation is found in Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, 86, and the second in Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*, 2:387.

[72] This point is made most forcefully by Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 75.

[73] Ibn al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, trans. Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 796.

[74] Crone, "Kavād's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt," 27.

practices of almost unlimited variety, many of them unconnected in any mean-
ingful sense to others also defined as manifestations of paganism. From one
perspective, there was no such thing as paganism, but there were lots of
paganisms, most of them deeply rooted in local and ethnic communities.
Consequently, as one historian has recently and sensibly put it, "to buy into such
a category is to render oneself immediately imprecise."[75] Secondly, the term's
polemical overtones can also mislead us. The word "pagan" itself (originally
indicating a rustic villager, or boor) was a term of abuse which Christians used to
denote those who followed religions other than their own, in particular the ancient
cults which lingered on in rural areas after the cities of the Mediterranean region
had become predominantly Christian. The term "paganism" tends to conjure
images of Greeks performing sacrifices to Athena and Apollo, or Egyptians
worshiping multiple deities in various animal forms; and no doubt polytheism, and
the belief in and the worship of various localized deities, remained one aspect of
the pagan experience throughout the period, especially perhaps among the com-
mon people and in rural settings. But paganism – or more accurately, some of the
paganisms of late antiquity – had moved a good distance from the religion of
Homer and Ramses, and in many respects shared a good deal with the Christian
and Islamic traditions which replaced it.

Despite the imprecision of the term, historians fall back on it, inevitably if
reluctantly, to identify the mass of inter-connected religious traditions and cults
which emerged from the ancient world and which found themselves in competition
with the newly self-conscious communities of Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and,
later, Muslims. In response to the more precise religious identity of, for example,
Christianity, fourth-century pagans such as Libanius and the Roman emperor
Julian understood themselves to represent an alternative – an *older* alternative – to
the new religions. The commitment of late antique and early medieval defenders
of paganism reflected not only a nostalgic longing for a vanishing faith, but a
genuine appreciation for a tradition which, in its breadth, sophistication, and
universalist outlook, laid the groundwork for and in many ways anticipated the
achievements and vision of the new monotheisms. "Who was it that settled the
inhabited world and propagated cities, if not the outstanding men and kings of
paganism?" asked the Sabian Thabit ibn Qurra (d. 901). "Who revealed the arcane
sciences? Who was vouchsafed the epiphany of that godhead who gives oracles
and makes known future events, if not the most famous of the pagans? … They
filled the world with upright conduct and with wisdom, which is the chief part of
virtue. Without the gifts of paganism, the earth would have been empty and
impoverished, enveloped in a great shroud of destitution."[76]

In global terms, it is impossible to deny, first, that paganism was locked in
a struggle with the emerging monotheistic traditions, and second, that paganism
was, in late antiquity, in a secular decline. The signs of competition are rampant:

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[75] David Frankfurter, *Religion in Greco-Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 1999), 33.
[76] Cited by Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 64–5.

in the laws by which Christian Roman emperors sought to marginalize or suppress pagan cults, or in the popular stories of the Christian saints which portray them contesting with "magicians" and "demons" (behind which one can often detect pagan holy men or localized pagan deities). And the decline is measurable, and not merely in the obvious fact that, at some point between the third and seventh centuries, the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Near East formally converted to one of the new faiths. Egypt provides a case in point. An important marker of the decline of paganism there lies in the decay of the active life of the temples and other cultic sites and occasions. Organized paganism in Egypt was in trouble well before the rapid spread of Christianity in the fourth century, and probably contributed to the latter phenomenon, rather than being a product of it. The last attested celebration of the Ameysia, an important festival associated with the goddess Isis, occurred in 257 CE, well before the majority of Egyptians even nominally professed Christianity. Even before this, Egyptian temples had begun to suffer from a decline in the level of financial support from imperial authorities, support which had for centuries been critical to their construction, upkeep, and embellishment. In Egypt, the situation was made worse by the fact that the priests apparently lost their ability to read and write the Egyptian language in its ancient scripts, and so found themselves partially cut off from their pagan religious traditions: other than at the remote temple at Philae in Upper Egypt, there are virtually no hieroglyphic or demotic inscriptions after the mid-third century.[77]

But the story of the struggle and decline of paganism is incomplete, and can obscure a much more nuanced story of religious identity and development. If paganism at some point "died," in the sense that all the inhabitants of Egypt or Syria or wherever came to identify themselves at least formally as Jews, or Christians, or (later) Muslims, the actual death of paganism was a protracted affair – and again, one which was by no means complete at the rise of Islam. Signs of the survival of pagan traditions abound throughout the Near East. At Edessa in Syria, one of the earliest and most important centers of eastern Christianity, a city which the pagan emperor Julian had shunned for its commitment to the Christian faith, pagan rituals and sacrifices were still practiced in the late sixth century.[78] In Iraq, organized pagan cults suffered from the hostility of and active persecution by both Christian bishops and monks and zealous Zoroastrian priests; but the pagans' enemies were still at it when the Muslim Arabs appeared on the scene in the fourth and fifth decades of the seventh century. A Nestorian *catholicos*, shortly after the Muslim conquest (but well before significant numbers of local residents had converted to Islam), complained that there were more pagans than Christians in the

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[77] Roger S. Bagnall, "Combat ou vide: christianisme et paganisme dans l'Égypte romaine tardive," *Ktema* 13 (1988 [1992]), 285–96; idem, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 251, 261–73.

[78] Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 36; J. B. Segal, *Edessa "The Blessed City"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 108; Han J. W. Drijvers, "The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Christian Syria," in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, ed. Nina Garsoian, Thomas Mathews, and Robert Thompson (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 35–43.

district of Beth Aramaye (lower Iraq). Reports of human sacrifices in Iraq should perhaps be approached with some caution, but it is striking that they continue well into the eighth century.[79] In Egypt, too, paganism survived the decline of its temples. There was active resistance to Christianity both among the philosophers in Alexandria, and in the countryside. One historian has described a veritable religious war which traumatized large portions of Upper Egypt in the fifth century, where entire villages remained untouched by Christianity. As late as the early seventh century, bishops could find pagan temples to destroy, and idolaters to baptize.[80] Even in the heartlands of the Byzantine Empire, in northwestern Asia Minor not far from the capital at Constantinople, a Christian missionary in the mid-sixth century claimed to have converted thousands of pagans, and to have destroyed or rededicated their temples. Here as elsewhere, those formally converted to Christianity may have, more or less secretly, preserved their ancient temples and altars, which they might then frequent at night, and there under the cover of darkness replay their pre-Christian rites. According to the Byzantine chronicler Theophanes, when Arab armies besieged the town of Pergamon in 717, its inhabitants in desperation resorted to a magician and his rather startling formula for salvation. At his urging, they "produced a pregnant woman who was about to give birth and cut her up. And after removing her infant and cooking it in a pot, all those who were intending to fight dipped the sleeves of their right arm in this detestable sacrifice." To no avail, recorded the disgusted chronicler; "they were delivered to the enemy." The story may or may not be true, but it is significant that the chronicler could relate it as if it were.[81]

It was not simply a question of paganism surviving in isolated manifestations, as a kind of relic. In the first place, the question of paganism is a reminder that religion and religious identities can be experienced on a variety of levels. The religious identity of a pagan in, say, an Egyptian village may have been related to, and informed by, the dominant myths which have survived in ancient Egyptian literature and the cults of the temples whose finances were increasingly in disarray. But it was also a product of very practical and immediate needs (such as healing, or ensuring a decent crop), and so was served not simply by relatively remote temple priests but by local holy men, local deities, local shrines, local stories, and religious practices defined or administered by local figures – loci of religious

[79] Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 384–400.
[80] Roger Rémondon, "L'Égypte et la suprème résistance au christianisme (Ve–VIIe siècles)," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 51 (1952), 63–78; see also László Kákosy, "Survival of Ancient Egyptian Gods in Coptic and Islamic Egypt," *Coptic Studies: Acts of the Third International Congress of Coptic Studies, Warsaw, 20–25 August, 1984*, ed. Wlodzmierz Godlewski (Warsaw: Éditions Scientifiques de Pologne, 1990), 175–7; and idem, "Das Ende des Heidentums in Ägypten," *Graeco-Coptica: Griechen und Kopten im byzantinischen Ägypten*, ed. Peter Nagel (Halle: Martin-Luther Universität Halle-Wittenberg Wissenschaftliche Beiträge, 1984), 61–76.
[81] *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284–813*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 541; on the situation in western Anatolia more generally, see Frank R. Trombley, "Paganism in the Greek World at the End of Antiquity: The Case of Rural Anatolia and Greece", *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985), 327–52.

authority which could survive the unraveling of the more formal networks associated with temples.[82]

Secondly, pagan practices, values, and expectations insinuated themselves in a variety of ways into the spiritual life and frame of reference of the new religious era. In Egypt, for example, thaumaturgy and oracular functions had always played an important role in local manifestations of paganism. Those traditions and the expectations they encouraged may have shaped the particular form of Coptic Christianity: in Coptic literature, the saints often play the role of healer, seer, or wielder of supernatural powers. A story from the early fifth-century *Lausiac History* by Palladius about a holy man named Makarios is suggestive, in part because it is so typical of accounts in late antique sources. An Egyptian approached a (presumably pagan) sorcerer to enlist his aid in attracting the attention of a woman with whom he was infatuated, or barring that, prevailing upon her husband to throw her out. Through his magical charms, the sorcerer caused the woman to assume the shape of a horse. Her husband, naturally distraught, sought the assistance of the Christian saint. Makarios first expressed a certain impatience with the situation, complaining to the husband that "you are the horses, for you have the eyes of horses. Now she is a woman, not at all changed, except in the eyes of self-deceived men." At the same time, however, Makarios took very practical counter-steps: he "blessed water, poured it on her bare skin from the head downward, and made her appear as a woman," and, by way of prophylaxis, enjoined the woman to attend communion regularly.[83]

As Palladius' story suggests, in the popular mind the competition between Christianity and paganism was largely one of power. But at the deep foundational level of mental structures which manifest themselves as folk belief, change naturally worked more slowly. At this level, pagans shared with Christians, Jews, and others certain assumptions, beliefs about the unseen world, and practices related to those beliefs, which we would recognize as (more or less) "religious": a belief in demons, for example, or in the ability of certain spiritually gifted individuals to confront and control them. In Mesopotamia in the early seventh century, the sister-in-law of a Christian deacon sought the assistance of pagan sorcerers to attract his attention. At their direction, she covered herself with oil, causing "the fire of love for her [to] spread in him like the fire of a blazing furnace," which passion was extinguished only through the deacon's anointing with a countervailing oil at the hands of a holy man.[84] The "sphere of magic" did not appear, to the men and women of late antiquity, to be clearly distinct from the

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[82] This is the compelling argument of Frankfurter, *Religion in Greco-Roman Egypt*.

[83] Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, trans. Robert T. Meyer (New York: Newman Press, 1964), 56–7; cf. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 273–5; Frankfurter, *Religion in Greco-Roman Egypt*, passim, esp. 184–95; Françoise Dunand, "Miracles et guérisons en Égypte tardive," in *Mélanges Étienne Bernand*, ed. Nicole Fick and Jean-Claude Carrière (Besançon: Université de Besançon, 1991), 235–50, on the functional similarity of medical cures produced by pagan gods and Christian holy men, despite certain differences in the structures through which the faithful begged a cure.

[84] Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 389; E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Histories of Rabban Hôrmîzd the Persian and Rabban Bar-ʿIdtâ*, 2 vols. (London: Luzac and Co., 1902), 2:266–7.

"sphere of religion," even if Jewish rabbis and Christian priests did sometimes view magicians and their trade with distrust and horror.[85] And religious authorities were right, in a sense, to be concerned: the magic common among Christians, Jews and others owed much to the pagan religions of the ancient world, for their gods and goddesses often survived as the demons or spirits whose activities the magicians sought to counter or control. For example, a number of Jewish incantation bowls from Mesopotamia have survived which sought to counter-act the evil influence of demons identified as, among others, Ishtar – the name of the prominent ancient goddess of the region.[86] And the astrological preoccupation of ancient Mesopotamian religion of course had an extended afterlife among medieval Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Despite the rise in the level of rhetorical hostility and its accompanying violence, and despite a corresponding emphasis on formal professions of faith – developments which left a profound mark on the world Islam inherited – a dialogue between the religious traditions persisted through the end of late antiquity. Paganism participated fully in that dialogue, and through it contributed in substantial and subtle ways to the religious life of those who came later. The flexibility and syncretistic potential of Mediterranean paganism are well known, and need no comment here. But other religions, such as Christianity, were also more porous than bishops and others might insist. In some instances, paganism found its channel to the future in the form of Hellenism. Much recent scholarship has tended to minimize the gap in the late antique Near East separating Hellenized cities from the non-Greek (Syriac, for instance, or Coptic) countryside, and has stressed the extent to which Hellenism penetrated all layers of society and provided a common cultural vernacular.[87] The connection between paganism and Hellenism is reflected in the fact that *hellenismos* can mean, in late antique texts, "paganism" itself – a point of which the pagan emperor Julian delighted in reminding Greek-speaking Christians.[88] And so the religious differences between, say, paganism and Christianity were muted by certain astonishing resemblances. Christians had a trinity, but so too did some pagans, such as those in the Hawran in Syria who worshiped a trio of gods, one of which was known by a name which meant "God-man."[89] Holiness, a numinous quality distinguishing certain individuals from the ordinary run of humankind, was a characteristic of Christian

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[85] For an excellent discussion of the intersection of Judaism and magic in late antiquity, see Judah Goldin, "The Magic of Magic and Superstition," in *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 115–47.

[86] Neusner, *History of the Jews in Babylonia*, 5:215–43, esp. 231; Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 384, 387.

[87] On this point, see especially Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, and Cameron, "The Eastern Provinces in the Seventh Century A.D." Bowersock, for example, says that Hellenism was "a means for a more articulate and a more universally comprehensible expression of local traditions" (9).

[88] Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 9–11.

[89] G. W. Bowersock, "An Arabian Trinity," *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986), 17–21; idem, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 17–19. "The significance of a god-man deity in an indigenous cult of Semitic paganism," observes Bowersock, "scarcely needs underscoring."

saints, but also of some late antique philosophers, at least as they were remembered by their disciples.[90] Influence flowed in both directions. An epic fifth-century Egyptian poem about Dionysos recounts that "Bacchus our lord shed tears, so that he might bring an end to the tears of mortals," a line which "could never have been written in a Greek pagan poem before the Christian era."[91] On the other hand, Christian tomb frescoes with scenes drawn from Greek mythology, or an encomium to the very Christian emperor Theodosius II comparing him to Achilles, Agamemnon, and Odysseus, bespeak Christian artists, authors, and audiences thoroughly comfortable with the cultural legacy of the pagan past.[92] The precise direction of the influence is not necessarily important; what is important is that the extended religious conversation of late antiquity engaged a variety of religious traditions, and that for all that it came under siege, paganism had not yet spoken its final word.

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[90] Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 15–17; Garth Fowden, "The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982), 33–59.

[91] Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 44. The poem is the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnos of Panopolis, trans. W. H. D. Pouse, in 3 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1940) (Loeb Classical Library), 12.171.

[92] Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 64–5.