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## Some remarks on Christian church in Iran in the 5th century AD

Rulers attitude towards religious minority in a state was always determined by political situation. The situation enforced tolerance or persecution of infidels in exceptional cases.

*Keywords:* Christianity, tolerance, policy, Rome, Iran

The Assyrian Church of the East: W. Baum, S. Brock, J. M. Fiey, W. A. Wigram, D. W. Winkler; Christian minority in Iran: J. P. Asmussen, M. L. Chaumont, Ch. Jullien, F. Jullien, J. Labourt, J. Walker, G. Wiessner; Iran: R. C. Blockley, T. Daryaee, K. Mosig-Walburg <sup>1</sup>.

First rise of Christian communities on the territory of Iran took place in the Parthian period <sup>2</sup>. In the middle of 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD as a result of population deportation from Roman Syria to Iran the number of Christians in the country considerably increased <sup>3</sup>. It seems that during this period Christians were tolerated minority. Admittedly the Mazdean Priest Kartēr inscription saying about struggles with other religions endured however out of separate acts of martyrdom in the Bahrām II (276-293) court there is no evidence on general persecution of Christians <sup>4</sup>. There is an interesting opinion of Eusebius of Caesarea relating to Iranian rulers activities. He wrote that due to deportations Christians avoided persecutions from the Roman emperors side <sup>5</sup>. What is more Hormizd II (302-309) started West campaign under the pretext of Christians defence persecuted by Diocletian (284-305) and Galerius (305-311) <sup>6</sup>.

Religious policy of Constantine I (305-337) influenced the status of Christianity in Iran <sup>7</sup>. The emperor in his letter directed to Šāpūr II (309-379) appeared as guardianship of Christians as well as of Iranian ones <sup>8</sup>. In the year of Constantine death Iranian army invaded north Mesopotamia and Armenia <sup>9</sup>. Christians were accused of Rome supportment during the war. The same time Šāpūr II made decisions stroke on Christians in Iran. One of those decisions was doubling of taxes <sup>10</sup>. After 338, during the great Persecution lasting almost 40 years around 35 thousand people died <sup>11</sup>.

Further persecutions of Christians in Iran took place at the end of Yazdegerd I (399-420) reign. Their initiator was the Mazdean clergy but one have to remember that pretext of the above mentioned persecutions was a fire temple destruction by Abdas bishop of Susa <sup>12</sup>. Persecutions that resulted in Christians escapes from Iran lasted up to 422 when Bahrām V Gōr (420-438) concluded peace treaty with Theodosius II (408-450) <sup>13</sup>.

We can say about specific situation of Christians with reference to Armenia. Admittedly the Armenian church remained dependent on the see of Caesarea in Cappadocia until the reign of King Pap (368-374). Representatives of Armenian clergy participated to the Council of Nicea but they did not observe all council canons (church dignities were inherited what was contradictory to 4<sup>th</sup> Canon which implemented the choice)<sup>14</sup>. After the partition of Armenia in 387 the majority of state was subordinated to Iran<sup>15</sup>. In 428 a king imposed military governing there<sup>16</sup>. In order to unify Armenia and Iran Yazdegerd II (438-457) issued a decree obliging Armenians to converse to the Mazdean religion in 449. The Armenian revolt under the leadership of Vartan Mamikonian began but the lack of help from the Roman emperor and unity of *naxarar* (e.g. *marzbān* Vašāk supported Iran) brought to the Armenian army defeat at Avarayr (451)<sup>17</sup>. Following the rebellion of Iberian ruler Vakhtang I Gorgasar (447-522) supported by Vahan Mamikonian was more tolerant attitude to Christians in Armenia. Death of Pērōz (459-484) in war with the Hephthalites saved the rebellion. New king Balāš (484-488) obliged himself to recognize religious freedom in Armenia (so called The Nvarsak Treaty)<sup>18</sup>.

Christian church in Iran depended on the Patriarch of Antiochia. The fact is confirmed by 2<sup>nd</sup> Canon of the Council of Constantinople dated to 381<sup>19</sup> (the text refers to 6<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Council of Nicaea from 325)<sup>20</sup>. However the language differences (in east part there was mainly Syriac spoken) in an obvious way disturbed church unity. As early as 315 bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon Papa bar ‘Aggai (310-329) was recognized as suzerain of Christians in Iran. Papa having the title the Patriarch (or catholicos) appears in *Synodicon Orientaleas* well as in *the Chronicle of Arbela*<sup>21</sup>. In spite of some doubts the title is used in the professional literature<sup>22</sup>. One cannot say in this case about schism of the church because Papa bar ‘Aggai recognized suzerainty of Antiochian patriarchate<sup>23</sup>.

The key changes took place next century only. They were the results of both the dogmatic dispute within the church as well as political activities of the Iranian and Roman rulers. The king of Iran Jazdagerd I being under influence of the bishop of Maypherqaṭ Marutha<sup>24</sup> agreed on convention of Synod at Ctesiphon in 410. The Synod decided to unite east dioceses into one province under the direct rule of Ishāq, bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon<sup>25</sup>. It also adopted „the doctrinal creed of Nicaea”<sup>26</sup>. One can discuss whether the Canons presented by Marutha were original record of the Nicene Canons or they were so called *Canones arabici* (J. B. Chabot was already written about)<sup>27</sup>. The problem is that Syriac text of the Canons was preserved on West and East Syriac versions. In the first case the Syriac theological elements were united with Nicene ones. The second is the exact translation of Nicene Canons. Even though nobody knows which version

was adopted in 410 there is no doubts they were Nicean Canons<sup>28</sup>. The text of Isho'yahb Synod from 585 confirmed the fact: „*this is the truth belief, .....gave by 318 holy fathers who gathered in Nicea...*”<sup>29</sup>. The west ceremony was also adopted to the liturgy<sup>30</sup>.

In 424 catholicos Dadisho' declared himself equal to patriarchs of Antiochia, Alexandria, Constantinople and Rome<sup>31</sup>. In 484 a schismatic synod under the direction of Barṣawma in Gondēšāpūr (Beth Lapaṭ)<sup>32</sup> forced the Theodorian creed on all Christians in Iran.

It was possible thanks to support of Pērōz who started persecutions of other Christian creeds in the state<sup>33</sup>. Catholicos Babowai sent a letter to the emperor Zeno (474-475/476-491) with a request of intervention. However the letter was intercepted in Nisibis and delivered to Iranian king. Babowai was prisoned and died<sup>34</sup>. Aqāq was elected the new catholicos. At Beth 'Edray Synod he again approved autonomy of Persian church<sup>35</sup>.

The definitive severance with „east” church was a result of rejection of the so-called Nestorian doctrine on the Councils of Ephesus (431)<sup>36</sup> and Chalcedon (451)<sup>37</sup>. An attempt of church unity restoration was made by emperor Zeno who in 482 issued *Henoticon* (Ἐνωτικόν)<sup>38</sup>. It was aimed at bringing to reconciliation with adherents of miaphysitism doctrine<sup>39</sup> through condemning sciences of Eutyches and Nestorius. The only result of the document was the Acacian schism that lasted from 484 to 519<sup>40</sup>. In reply to announcement of Theodorian church separation, Zeno recognized this doctrine as illegal within the Empire and closed the School of Edessa in 488<sup>41</sup>. The Persian School of Nisibis directed by Narsai and Barṣawma became the main theological centre<sup>42</sup>.

Christian communities in Iran already functioned in 1<sup>st</sup> century. To the announcement of the Edict of Milan (313) by Constantine I Christians in Iran were tolerated minority. After the great Persecution (338-379) activities of the bishop of Maypherqaṭ Marutha cooperating with Jazdagerd I brought to the separation of Iranian Christians from the patriarchate of Antiochia. A new church organisation subordinated to bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was established in 410. The dogmatic dispute in the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon as well as determined attitude of Barṣawma supported by Pērōz caused separation of Theodorian church in 484. Evolution of Christian church in Iran was possible thanks to international situation. Kings of Iran struggling with danger from the Hephthalites as well as difficult situation in Armenia were forced to legalize church organization. Attempts to keep Christianity unity made by Zeno brought no expected effects. The Emperor decision about closing the theological school of Edessa was final break of Constantinople with Theodorian church in Iran.

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## Summary

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### **Some remarks on Christian church in Iran in the 5th century AD**

The below deliberations are aimed at description of circumstances of Christian church separation that arose in the Mazdean Iran in 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. The article describes formation of Theodorian church structures in Iran in 5<sup>th</sup> century. Rise of separate Christian church was caused by the dogmatic dispute and political activities of Iranian and Roman rulers.  
*Keywords:* Christianity, tolerance, policy, Rome, Iran