

Refutations of “Heterodoxy”: Zoroastrians, New Christians, and Muslims against Manichaeans

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Abstract

The controversies and theological debates between different religions have always been an interesting topic for the scholars of religion. These debates were usually carried out in two ways: orally, in a meeting dedicated to these debates, or in writing.

One of the religious traditions criticized since its emergence and against which many refutations were written in the early Islamic centuries is “heterodoxy.” Before Islam, this term was applied to Manichaeans; however, after Islam, it came to signify any heretic, atheist, or infidel. This extension of semantic inclusion led the followers of various religions, including Christians, Zoroastrians and Muslims, to work against the heterodox and write refutations to criticize their thoughts and beliefs. This article seeks to study and analyze these refutations.

Keywords: refutation, heterodoxy, Manichaeans, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam.

1. Introduction

Writing refutations has been a traditional method used by theologians and clerics to reject the views of other faith traditions. One of the religions that faced a strong opposition from other religions in the pre-Islamic Iran was Manichaeism. In his famous inscription, *Ka'ba-ye Zartusht*, Kartir, the influential priest of the Sassanid court, dubs the

Religious Inquiries, Volume 8, Number 16, December 2019, pp. 127-140

DOI: 10.22034/ri.2019.100718

Received: 29-07-2019; Accepted: 02-11-2019

followers of Mani *zandīg* (heretic) and persecutes them. After Manichaeans, the followers of Mazdak (Mazdakism) were considered heretics as well. Since this term means “moderator and interpreter of religion,” Mazdakis were rightly called by this term, since Mazdak and his followers sought to correct the internal structure of Zoroastrianism by offering a new interpretation rather than by presenting a new religion. Their activities to promote their ideas were confronted by the intense reaction of the followers of other religions in Iran. After Islam, the scope of the heretics’ activities was so large that it forced the Abbasid caliphs to find a remedy. One means employed by the Abbasids to prevent the influence of the heretics—other than suppressing them—was to encourage the scholars to write refutations against the heretics’ ideas. This was not done only by Muslim theologians; rather, theologians and scholars of other religions, such as Zoroastrianism and Christianity, also wrote refutations against the heretics. Writing refutations was initiated before the advent of Islam but reached its peak afterwards. It should be noted, however, that the confrontation between the theologians of different religions and the *zandīgs* (heretics) would happen in two different ways: by writing refutations and through debates in meetings held for this purpose, sometimes in the presence of the caliphs or their governors and encouraged by them.

As was noted, in the early Islamic centuries, besides the Muslims, the Christians and Zoroastrians in the Muslim territories also wrote refutations against Manichaeism. Of course, the works of the Zoroastrians are few and not comparable to the writings of the Christians and Muslims in terms of sophistication and depth. The Christian works, on the other hand, are mostly theoretical, and since they somehow influenced Muslim refutations, we will examine them separately.

2. Christian Refutations of Heterodoxy

Writing refutations against heterodoxy (i.e., Manichaeism) was initiated by Christians. In about 300 CE in Upper Egypt, Alexander of Lycopolis, a Neo-Platonist scholar, wrote the first refutation of heterodoxy. In his well-known treatise, he criticized the teachings of Manichaeans and rejected their ideas scrupulously. Meanwhile, theologians of the ancient churches also felt the danger of Manichaeism and attempted to work against it; *Acta Archelai* by Hegemonius, which constituted the general model for Christian polemicists in the following centuries, was the result of such efforts (Asmussen 1975, 2).

Saint Ephraim/Ephraem Syrus (306-373 CE) also wrote a book on the refutation of Manichaeism and Marcionism. In this work, he called the Manichaean community an "evil society" or *Mānā*. At the same time, Serapion of Thmuis wrote a treatise against Manichaeans and Marcionites; however, he was not well-acquainted with Manichaeism, and his purpose was not a detailed critique of Manichaean theology, but a refutation of that religion (Asmussen 1975, 2).

A few years later, Titus of Bostra wrote four books in Greek against Manichaean teachings, which, according to Photius, angered Addai, the Manichaean disciple (Chavannes and Pelliot 1911, 501).

At the end of the third century, the young Augustine joined Manichaeism and affiliated with the *Niyōśāgān* ("listeners") circle for nine years but then abandoned Manichaeism and became a fierce opponent of it. He wrote several works against Manichaeans, now considered an important source in this regard (Alfaric 1918, 115). In the fifth century, Evodius wrote a treatise against Manichaeism and criticized the Manichaean view on creation. This treatise contains quotations from the treatise *Do bun* (Two Principles) (Asmussen 1975, 4).

In the Umayyad era, the most famous Eastern Christian figure was Saint John of Damascus (d. 749), who had debates with Manichaeans and wrote treatises to reject their ideas. His major work is *Fountain of Knowledge*, which has three sections: a philosophical section, a section on *Herteghes*,¹ and a section on the true faith. The *Herteghe* section, which aims at refuting the ideas of one-hundred heretics, consists of one-hundred chapters; chapter 66 of this section is on Manichaeans, or *Acuasian*² as called by John (Taheri-Araghi 1367-8 Sh, 138). The issues analyzed in this book include God, Christ, the Old Testament, and worshipping the moon and sun, for which he condemns Manichaeans (Taheri-Araghi 1367-8 Sh, 138).

Apart from this book, he has two other treatises against Manichaeism, one of which contains his debates with a Manichaean man, and the other, which is relatively longer, is entitled *A Conversation Against Manichaeans*. In this treatise, after a brief discussion of the nature of truth and falsehood, he engages in a discussion on good and evil. The main topic of the treatise is the issue of duality, but it also includes discussions on other topics such as the Trinity, creation of Satan, problem of evil, practice and intention, and judgment and punishment, and, in the end, it explains monotheism, free will, and punishment from an orthodox point of view (Taheri-Araghi 1367-8 Sh, 140).

Shortly after John of Damascus, in around 175 AH, an Iraqi Nazarene bishop named Theodore bar Kōnai wrote his famous work *Book of Scholia (Ketābā Eskōlyōn)* in Syriac, a part of which was on Manichaeans, rejecting their ideas and actions with a certain bitterness (Jackson 1932, 221-54).

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1. "Herteghe" is a Christian term meaning a belief opposing orthodox principles and teachings. This word and its rare form "erteqhe" and also adjectives "herteghe" and "harateghe" are frequently used in Arabic and Christian texts (Graf 1954, 103)
 2. Attributed to Acuas, a Mesopotamian missionary in the third century AH.

3. Zoroastrians' Refutations of Heterodoxy

The refutations of heterodoxy by Zoroastrians are mostly found in three works: *Mādayān Gujastag Abāliš*, a part of the third book of *Dīnkard*, and the book *Škand gumānīk vičār*.

Mādayān Gujastag Abāliš describes a debate between a Zoroastrian convert to Islam called Abāliš¹ and Ādurfaranbagh Farrōxzādān, a Zoroastrian leader and one of the compilers of *Dīnkard*, in the presence of al-Ma'mūn, the Abbasid Caliph (r. 198-218 AH). In this debate, seven questions are raised to which Ādurfaranbagh responds. These questions are about the principles of Zoroastrianism, such as the issue of duality and monotheism, the two principles of good and evil, and religious beliefs. At the end of the debate, Ādurfaranbagh defeats Abāliš (Barthélemy 1887, 3-4).

The third book of *Dīnkard*, the largest of the existing books of *Dīnkard*, consists of 420 chapters. The first chapter is a brief reply to the questions of heretics. The following chapters criticize different religions; one of the religions heavily criticized by the author is Manichaeism. He also criticizes other religions including Islam, Christianity, and Judaism and rejects their opinions (Gignoux 1996, 285; Demenasce 1993, 553). The book *Škand gumānīk vičār* (The Disillusioning Report) is written by Mardān Farrōx. The author states

1. Abāliš is a heretic who was first a Zoroastrian and called Dād Ōrmazd prior to his conversion. After abandoning Zoroastrianism, he went to Baghdad to debate with Muslim, Jewish, and Christian intellectuals. In the treatise attributed to him, which is in fact a defense of Zoroastrianism, there is no evidence of his conversion to Islam; however, since, on the one hand, according to the treatise, his discussions in Baghdad were with the Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and Muslims and not with Manichaeans, and, on the other hand, the Muslim caliph was pleased when he was convicted, it is more likely that he was a Manichaean, not a Muslim; this is especially true since he was called a zandig (heretic)—a title reserved specifically for Manichaeans. However, like Schaefer, we consider him a liberal skeptic (Schaefer 1930, 86).

that the purpose behind writing the book is his eager search for the truth among the various religions and sects of his era; for this purpose, he traveled to many lands and seas, and eventually compiled his book to solve the issues faced by the seekers of the truth. The book has sixteen chapters and its final chapters, which have a polemical nature, are aimed at refuting Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism (Tafazzoli 1376 Sh, 161-62).

4. Muslims' Refutations of Heterodoxy

In the religious encounters of the early Islamic centuries, Iraq had a special significance. Although Christianity was well established in Egypt and Syria with lots of followers, and Zoroastrianism was still prevalent in Iran, it was in Iraq that religious encounters and fruitful debates were carried out resulting in great works. Besides the fact that the big cities of Basra and Baghdad were centers where Muslim scholars would gather, Iraq was a bridge between the East and the West and had long been a multicultural environment encompassing different religions. Since the beginning of the second century AH, with the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate and *Dār al-khilāfa* (caliphal court) of Baghdad and the immigration of the people of different religions and sects, religious traditions became more diverse. Among the religions centered in Iraq was Manichaeism. Afraid of being killed, tortured, and persecuted, Manichaeans had escaped into far lands, but after the collapse of the Sassanid empire and the end of the domination of Zoroastrian priests, they moved to the homeland of Mani after about four centuries of displacement. Besides the failure of the Zoroastrians, the weakness and failure of the Christians in Egypt and Iraq also brought about a peaceful environment for the followers of Mani. On the other hand, the religious tolerance of the Muslims and the fact that they considered Manichaeans a part of the People of the Book made the Iraqi environment more favorable to Manichaeans (Montazeri 1387, 14).

In certain cities, especially in Baghdad, certain groups of Manichaeans emerged who built temples and began to translate or write their own books in Arabic. Manichaean missionaries also traveled to promote this ascetic, dualistic religion. But this freedom of action did not last more than a few decades, because the Muslims began to defend monotheism against Manichaean propagations and later worked against them in other ways. As a result, no Manichaeans could be found in Muslim lands after the fifth century AH.

In the second century AH, the religious policy of the Abbasids involved consolidating the basis of monotheism; the caliph al-Mahdi, on the one hand, persecuted the dualists and heretics, and on the other hand, urged the theologians to write refutations against the opponents of Islam. Thus, writing refutations reached its peak during this period.

The number of refutations written against Manichaeans was not small, but most of them are no longer extant. In his *al-Fihrist*, Ibn al-Nadīm lists the books entitled *al-Radd 'alā al-zanādiqa* (Refutation against Heretics) written by the theologians of the early Abbasid era, such as Ḍirār ibn 'Amr (d. 190 AH), Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 199 AH), al-Aṣamm (d. 200 AH), Muhammad Layth al-Khaṭīb, and al-Rāwandī. Although no traces have been found of these texts so far, it can be said for sure that in these texts, "*zanādiqa*" referred to Manichaean and dualists (Ibn al-Nadīm 1381 Sh, 224). In the same period, refutations against dualism in particular were written, such as the book *Al-Radd 'alā aṣḥāb al-ithnayn* (Refutation against the Dualists) by Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam, *al-Thanawiyya* (Dualism) by Abū l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf (ca. 135-227 AH), and *Ikhtiṣāṣ madhāhib aṣḥāb al-ithnayn wa al-radd 'alayhim* (On Dualistic Religions and Refuting Them) by Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq (d. 247 AH). Also, Wāṣil ibn 'Aṭā' (80-131 AH) wrote

refutations against the teachings of heretics illustrating his vast knowledge of different beliefs, religions, and doctrines (Murtaḍā 1409 AH, 30). ‘Umar Bāhilī narrates that he saw the first chapter of the book *Alf mas‘ala* (One-Thousand Issues), which Wāsil ibn ‘Atā’ wrote to refute Manichaean beliefs (Murtaḍā 1409 AH, 30). Wāsil’s disciples also contributed to the refutation of such Manichaeans as *Bashār* and Sāliḥ ibn ‘Abd al-Quddūs. Meanwhile, Wāsil also had a different method for fighting against Manichaeans, which effectively thwarted the propagation of their ideas. He did not just sit at his home and write refutations against Manichaeans; rather, he also sent his disciples to various places, especially important centers like Khurāsān, where Manichaeans were active (Isfahāni 1963, 3:43). He himself also traveled to these places to demonstrate a practical example for defaming the enemies and protecting the Muslim community (Mohsen 2006, 265).

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (164-241 AH) also wrote a refutation against heretics, entitled *al-Radd ‘alā al-zanādiqa wa al-Jahmiyya* (Refutation against the Heretics and the Jahmites). Of course, it should be noted that in this book, “heretics” refers to those who mocked the Quran, not heretics in the sense of Manicheans (Ibn Ḥanbal 1399 AH, 5).

Ya‘qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (d. 252/260 AH) also wrote two refutations entitled *Risāla fī al-radd ‘alā al-māniyya fī al-‘ashr masā’il fī mawḍū‘āt al-falak* (A Treatise on Refuting Manichaeism Regarding Ten Issues of the Celestial Nature) and *Fī al-radd al-māniyya* (On the Refutation of Manichaeism), of which no parts have been found. Among the philosophers who wrote refutations against heretics, we should refer to Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (251-313 AH), a well-known philosopher and physician. He was familiar with Manichaean works, especially Mani’s book *Sifr al-asrār* (Book of the

Secrets), which he criticized in one of his works (Badawi 1945, 198-225).

Among other refutations is the book *al-Radd 'alā al-zandīq al-la'īn ibn Muqaffa'* (Refutation of the Damned Heretic Ibn Muqaffa') written by the Zaidi Imam Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm (169-246 AH). This book is a refutation of one of Ibn Muqaffa's (106-142 AH) works in which the attributes of God are mocked and the Prophet (s) is insulted. Imam Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm, who had studied the Arabic Manichaean texts and was thus well-informed about Manichaeism, undertook to criticize and refute it (Ibn Ibrāhīm 1927, 52-53). These criticisms include, among other things, a refutation of the ideas of Ibn Muqaffa' and Manichaeism about light and manifestation of good, as well as answers to Ibn Muqaffa's mockery of God's sitting on the Throne (Ibn Ibrāhīm 1927, 14-19, 35). It should be said that Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm's theological method in this book is influenced by the Mu'tazila (Watt 1973, 164).

Imam Ja'far al-Sādiq (a) also had several debates with the heretics. The time of the Imam was a time of religious diversity and debates, and since Manichaeism was a missionary religion whose followers attempted to refute Islamic beliefs, the Imam criticized their two primordial principles of light and darkness and their merged state (Ṭabarsī 1993, 2:197-205; Ṣadūq 1387 Sh, 245; Majlisī 1403 AH, 47:213-40). For instance, in his debates with Mufaddal ibn 'Umar, Imam al-Sādiq rejected such beliefs of the Dualists and Manichaeans as attributing pestilence, suffering, and illnesses to the principle of darkness and evil (Wajda 1973, 227).

Another category of refutations against the heretics includes heresiographical works. Authors such as Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324 AH) in *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyin* (Words of Muslims), Abū al-Ḥasan

al-Malaṭī (d. 377 AH) in *al-Tanbīh wa al-radd ‘alā ahl al-ahwā‘ wa-l-bida‘* (Alerting and Refuting the Heretics), Abū Maṣṣūr al-Baḡhdādī (d. 429 AH) in *al-Farq bayn al-firaq* (Distinguishing between the Sects), Shahrastānī (d. 548 AH) in *al-Milal wa al-niḥal* (Religions and Denominations), and Nashwān Ḥimyarī (d. 573 AH) in *al-Hūr al-īn* (The Nymph) rejected and argued against the opinions of the heretics (Taheri-Araghi 1367 Sh, 227). Other authors, such as Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403 AH) in *al-Tamhīd* (An Introductory Step), Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333 AH) in *al-Tawḥīd* (Monotheism), and Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456 AH) in *al-Faṣl* (The Chapter), also reported Manichaean beliefs and then criticized them (Bāqillānī 1947, 68-75; Khafīfī 1995, 51-52; Ibn Ḥazm 1978, 1:91-110).

Furthermore, it should be said that these theologians and heresiographers lived at a time when Manichaeans were still active in Iraq and other Muslim lands, and thus the theologians had to learn about them and refute their ideas in order to defend Islam. The main theme of these refutations, the most detailed of which was the work of Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, was to prove monotheism and reject dualism and the belief in the two primordial principles of light and darkness. However, other ideas and actions of Manichaeans were almost neglected.

Since the fifth century AH, Manichaeans were no longer so active and their works also gradually disappeared. However, some theologians still wrote refutations against Manichaeism. This was not a social urgency, but just a sort of obsession to clear the doubts that could affect people’s minds. The refutations that Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597 AH) composed in his *Talbīs Iblīs* (The Deception of the Devil) on the two principles of light and darkness, Shahrastānī’s (d. 548 AH) refutation of the Manichaean dualism in *Nihāyat al-iqdām* (The Most Perfect Measure), and the refutation by Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 478

AH) of the priority of light and darkness in *al-Shāmil* (The Comprehensive) are instances of this sort of refutations (Taheri-Araghi 1387 Sh, 149).

5. Comparison

Comparing different kinds of refutations against the heretics, we come to the following results:

1. The refutations written by the Christians are more frequent than those written by the Muslims.

2. Most Christian refutations have a somewhat harsh tone, but the Muslim authors use a relatively moderate language.

3. In the Muslim refutations, the main subject of criticism is dualism and the two primordial principles of light and darkness and occasionally the problem of evil; however, in the Christian refutations, other subjects, such as the Manichaeon views on Christ, the problem of evil, determinism and free will, cosmology, vegetarianism, and celibacy, are also criticized.

4. In the Christian refutations, Mani is accused of immorality; however, the refutations written by the Muslims are devoid of such accusations (Moor 1975, 4-5, 9-10, 28).

5. The Orthodox and Catholic churches derogatorily called all Christian heretics Manichaeon; in the same way, Muslim theologians also labeled all their opponents Manichaeon (Runciman 1947, 32).

6. Many Muslims studied Marcionism and Bardesanism along with Manichaeism and identified the three with each other; there are precedents for this among the Christians (Montazeri 2012, 25-30).

Conclusion

Since their early days, Manichaeans were criticized by the followers of other religions and regarded as heretics; non-Manichaeans considered Manichaeism dangerous and tried to fight against it by refuting it in debates and written works. This was initiated by Christians, as Manichaeism immensely influenced many Christians and endangered their beliefs. Following Christians, Zoroastrians also wrote refutations against the heretics. Since Manichaeism developed where Zoroastrianism was dominant and was considered an Iranian religion, all Manichaean ideas and beliefs were mistakenly attributed to ancient Iranian religions typified by Zoroastrianism. Therefore, Zoroastrians engaged in polemics against Manichaeans in order to defend their religion. Also, Muslim theologians, who welcomed both theological and intellectual discussions, wrote refutations to prove the falsehood of the beliefs and thoughts of other religions and sects and prevent their spread. This activity culminated during the Abbasid period, which allowed and encouraged such discussions to take place.

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