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Review Essay

Navid Fozi, *Reclaiming the Faravahar: Zoroastrian Survival in Contemporary Tehran*. Leiden University Press. 2014. 187pp + notes, bibliography.

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The title *Reclaiming the Faravahar* refers in part, and importantly, to the necklace with the Zoroastrian symbol that Navid Fozi, a self-identified Bahai, purchased as a reclaiming of Iranian identity on his first return to Iran ten years after his exit illegally in 1994, via Pakistan and Austria, to the United States, where he became a citizen. During the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami, he obtained an Iranian passport and returned to Iran to do fieldwork as a graduate student in anthropology (at Wisconsin, then Boston University). Initially he romantically imagined ethnographic fieldwork as a sort of Persian mystic wandering, repeating "over and over" to himself the words of the poet Attar, "you step in the path and ask naught; the path itself tells you how to traverse"(38). He planned to hitchhike from Urumiyeh and find some Sufi *khanaqah-ha* as his fieldsite. This led to arrest and interrogation. The following summer, only slightly the wiser, he headed back to Kurdistan, this time to study the Al-e Haq, but was asked to leave after two months, because, as he was told by the Al-e Haq leader, the "new government people [under Ahmadinejad?] would not cooperate," the people were afraid, and in any case the secret police were about to stop him. Next he headed back to Tehran to assess the feasibility of working with the Bahai community. The leaders approved, but were themselves shortly arrested and remained in prison through the writing of this book. He decided to work with the Zoroastrians in Tehran. This (with further details) forms, if somewhat naïve, a remarkable, courageous, and honest chapter called "The Preterrain of Fieldwork," in which he recounts the constraints on his access also from the Zoroastrian community itself, wary of either Muslims from whom they remain under pressure (in Yazd in the 1970s, Muslims were not welcome in the fire temple) or Bahais as proselytizers who

had split many families, and could bring along unwanted government attention. Indeed, he illustrates Muslim incomprehension of minority sensibilities with a striking example: "My Muslim friends used to tell me that I 'had to go after my informants and *demand* cooperation'" (51, his emphasis).

What Fozi's book accomplishes nonetheless is a partial update to earlier ethnographic accounts by Mary Boyce (1977) in Sharifabad-e Ardakan in 1963-64, my own fieldwork between 1969-72 with periodic visits in 1973-77, and 2005-8 in Yazd and surrounding villages as well as in Bombay and Gujurat; Janet Amighi's (1990) fieldwork in Kerman and Tehran in 1972-73, and an article on shrines by Robert Langer. He is heavily reliant on opinions for ordinary facts from his teacher Jamshid Chosky who has also visited Zorastrians in Iran, but Fozi seems not to know the work of Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina. Still, his book focuses on the context of urban life in Teheran, the political capital where the Islamic Republic of Iran's Council of Guardians has twice disqualified Zoroastrian candidates from serving in Parliament —like other minorities Zoroastrians are constitutionally accorded one representative— where ritual celebrations need to be dampened or even cancelled when they fall during the Shi'ite memorial months of Ramadan and Moharram and the ten days in memory of Ayatulllah Ruhullah Khomeini, and where rituals are detached from the agrarian cycle. The bi-monthly *gahambar*s, for instance, cosmogenic celebratory renewals, served in the Zoroastrian quarter of Yazd and its villages as a mode of food distribution especially to the poor and elderly, as well as a time for the mobeds to ritually produce the *hom* elixir in a *yasna* ceremony which few of the laity attended but which ritually renews the world (Fischer 1990). In today's Tehran, according to Fozi, this is attenuated to public festive gatherings (*jashn*) at three communal centers with bits of Avesta recitation by the mobeds, speeches, tapes of the national anthem and a modern song "I am a Zoroastrian", and videos (e.g. of Persepolis), performances (enactment of Darius I [sic] as liberator of the Jews (p 70) — it was Cyrus, not Darius, albeit Darius generously continued the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and is gratefully so acknowledged in the Hebrew bible. In order to attend, Fozi says, non-Zorastrians must obtain from the community a special permit. This is done to demonstrate to the Islamic authorities

that no proselytizing is involved, that it is at the request of the attendees, not an outreach by the community. For these non-Zoroastrians, and especially for Muslim guests, it is explicitly explained that while the fire is a symbol of divine light and enlightenment, it is not worshipped (*atash-parast*, "fire-worshipper," being an old slur); and that the word *jashn* (celebration) is linked to the *yasna* ritual (and is not a criticism of Shi'ite *taziyeh* or mourning rites). Zoroastrians frequently contrast Shi'ism as a culture of mourning and death with Zoroastrianism as a culture celebrating life (Fischer 1973). The Zoroastrian calendar is cosmogenic, or as Fozi puts it, "infused with religious *divinities* [sic] and their involvement in creation" in contrast to the Shi'ite calendar "filled with commemorations of *worldly* [sic] religious leaders who are instrumental in the divine plan, whose associated ritualistic manifestations invite believers to revive and relive their sufferings" (60). A material-semiotic approach might be a more contemporary recognition of the metaphorics, beauty and productivity of Zoroastrian cosmopoetics (as Gernot Windfuhr might stress, and I agree [Fischer 1973]) than the stale and often denigrating, or archaicizing, nineteenth century Victorian insistence on divinities, angels, and static hypostatizations imposed by Orientalists like Mary Boyce (not that she wasn't a good philologist and fieldworker).

An interesting organizational change that Fozi notes is the introduction of a Mobed's Council as the ritual decision-making body (no one person, even the head of this council can decide alone). This is fascinating in three ways: as a modern democratic move (the reason Fozi suggests); as a parallel to the discussions of the Shi'ite leadership after the death of Ayatullah Bourujerdi in the 1960s which was countered by Khomeini's *velayat-i faqih* doctrine which has separated the now more important revolutionary credentials from the now less regarded religious credentials of *ayatullah al-'usma* (Fischer 1983); and theologically in Zoroastrianism as an extension of always holding a sacred chord or connection between those who approach the sacred (be it the corpse carriers against the forces of pollution, or in high liturgy rituals between the celebrant mobed or *joti* (Av. *zaota*) who recites the Avesta and Pahlavi verses and the *raspi* or assistant mobed (the pair standing in for the original eight mobeds who performed the yasna ceremony according to the text

being recited). Fozi also gives a brief account of the initiation ritual into becoming the lowest level of mobed (*navar,* from Av. *nawa* + *bar*, or "new carrier"). Fozi thinks, citing an anonymous informant, the word is *nozad*, new born, but, while plausible, this seems a layman's guess and misconception. He provides an interesting, if low resolution, picture (p 91) where the white turban or taj of the novitiate looks a bit like that of an Eastern European rabbi, with a padan (face mask against pollution) hanging down from the turban, and the new mobed carrying a "verd" (Av. *vazra*) or metal staff to fight off evil. The navar is escorted by two senior mobeds, one with a wedding style tray of green covered sweets and two mirrors, one for looking into the future and the other for not forgetting the past. (A fuller account of these rites is still best found in J.J. Modi's 1922 *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees*, which has notes on variations from Yazd and Iran and which is quite recognizable through Fozi's abbreviated account.) Fozi thinks the rite dates only from 1963, but it is much older as Modi's text shows.

What remains unclear and worth clarifying is who the current mobeds are, how they are trained, what they know, and what their sources of theological speculation and explanation to their laity are (and how those of the laity, both more and less educated, in their various different ways, might differ). Fozi says several times that more people have begun studying to be a mobed or mobedyar (lay officiants), but he is unsure how many actually become mobeds, and he cites at least one who acknowledges that he is only an Avesta-khan (a reciter) not a scholar. This is the same response to exegetical questions that Dastur Kotwal also gave in his Harvard class on how to perform the yasna: that is, that mobeds have handed down the practice and text, knowing when to recite aloud, when to do so under the breath, but that for explanations one turns to philologists [Fischer 2004]). (For this, Kotwal himself studied with Mary Boyce.) More importantly, for a time mobeds came from India when there was no one to take over in Iran. Thus for a time Yazd's main fire temple was tended by a Parsi mobed. Fozi is so protective of his informants that his three main ones are called only by their roles: high mobed or chair of the Mobed council, mobedyar or former member of parliament (denied re-election by the Islamic Council of Guardians), and 'the poetess'. Only towards the end of the book

(154) do we learn that the first is a physician and can speak Dari (meaning he is from Yazd or Kerman, and not, for instance a Parsi import, Dari being a Middle Persian derived Central Plateau dialect not something specific to Zoroastrians as Fozi thinks), but we do not know if he was trained by the late Dastur Rustam Shahzadi (mentioned on 158, whom I knew, and who also demurred that any mobeds in Iran were trained in exegesis or philology [Fischer 1973]). Likewise we are told at the end of the book that the poetess has a PhD in literature and her poems are famous, but not if famous beyond the community (and if so why not give her credit and give some of her poetry as examples), or how her interpretive schemes are grounded. The reader thus has no way of evaluating the training or cultural contexts that their opinions represent.

In chapters 4-7 Fozi tries to characterize the ways Zoroastrian heritage is alternatively constructed as the basis of Iranian identity and nationalism or as quite different from Shi'ism. Shi'ism, it is often suggested, is Zoroastrianism in Islamic façade (e.g. the taziyeh or mourning rituals may well derive from pre-Islamic rites of Siyavushun). Or, on the other hand, Shi'ism treats Zorastrians as *najes*, "impure", often not even as a people of the book, and even as Fozi cites Khomeini, "Some dishonorable knaves have declared that Zardosht [Zoroaster], the magus and a worshipper of fire, is holy and a worshipper of God. If this dirty fire that has arisen from the temples of Fars is not extinguished, soon the dirt will spread and invite all to join the Gabres [derogatory for Zoroastrians]." (Khomeini, of course, was a practitioner of different discourses in public and for the learned. He was a strict orthodox puritan and anti-sufi exoterically and a dabbler in mysticism esoterically.)

Fozi becomes confused, openly puzzled and even irritated, at how Zoroastrians answer questions about how Iranian mysticism and Zoroastrianism do or do not connect. He never stops to consider how purity logics and mythopoetics function in Middle Eastern and Indo-European (especially Vedic) traditions, nor the possible alternative modal logics of oppositions (conflict, complementarity, balance, etc.). Intent on finding mysticism in Zoroastrian beliefs, he is dissatisfied when he is repeatedly told that asceticism is not valued. When he reminds people that they claim Zoroastrian imagery (good and evil, heaven and hell, angels and demons and

cyclical escatology of saviors to come) was the source for such locutions in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, he is told that good and evil are not so much opposed as perhaps like yin and yang, side by side, always present, always part of moral struggle. When he wants to find bodily ascetic practices that instill enlightenment, he does not look to (or know about) purification rituals like the *bareshnum,* only knows about menstruation taboos as old fashioned, and does not seem think that care of the world can be entrained in consciousness and practice, through mindful focus, in repeated or periodic ritual. He has trouble, in other words, distinguishing on the one hand between ecumenical efforts to make analogies or correspondences as discursive bridges to other religions (e.g. the seven amshaspands with the seven valleys of spiritual journey in Attar's *Conference of the Birds*) and on the other hand the deep ritual logics and mythopoetics of the Zoroastrian texts and rituals, about which Zoroastrians (quite distinctively) often defer to scholars who over the past 300 years have patiently (and sometimes wildly) through comparative work in philology, myth, and ritual begun to clarify and recover what has been preserved in the traditions, texts, and ritual forms and their structural transformations.

I think that a more fine-grained historical awareness of the chess game among religions in Iran, and more comparatively across the region, would be helpful as I have argued in my analysis of the discursive structures of ritual exemplified in the Yasna and its Avestan and Pahlavi texts; of epic parable exemplified in the Shahnameh and its various oral naqali traditions; and illuminationist (ishraqi) philosophy (Fischer 1973, 2004). I have argued (Fischer 2004) that Zoroastrians know the first two but are not particularly conversant with the third, while Shi'ite Muslims know the latter two, but know little of the first. Further, Iranian illuminationist (*ishraqi*) or mystical philosophical traditions (Suhravardi, Mir Damad, et al.) have had a revival of interest, beyond the scholastic, in the past decades through the collaborative work of Henri Corbin and the circle around Allameh Tabatabai in the 1960s (e.g. Corbin 1960 [1990], 1969, 1992). This was construed by them as not just an Islamicization of neo-Platonism, but also a recovery of the "ancient wisdom" of Zoroaster. I say "beyond the scholastic" insofar as this was part of an effort to both retool the leadership of Shi'ism in Iran after

Ayatullah Borujerdi's death and to deal with issues of re-enchanting the world with a viable spiritual vocabulary that Corbin felt had become deadened in his French Catholic upbringing and that Allameh Tabataba'i and his circle felt had become dry scholastic Islamic pedagogies in Iran. The struggle over whether Suhravardi is to be considered a poetic mystic or a rationalist scholar (as argued by Husain Zia'i [1976, 1999]) is also a struggle over the course of modernity and the future, not just the past. But such debates in both the Tabataba'i circle and the more popular forms of Sufism among the urban middle classes had little resonance among Zoroastrians. The latter became, however, a resource for a number of Yazdis who immigrated to India and became exotic and popular gurus in the Indian context, including the development among a small group of Parsi Zoroastrians of "*Ilm-e Khnsoom*" mentioned in passing by Fozi via a reference in James Russell.

A few other passages where a wider lens might have helped are on funerary rituals and levels of fire purity. Like many outsiders Fozi is puzzled that funerary exposure (a practice across Central Asia, called sky burial in Tibet) would not be condemned as polluting the earth. But of course, not only are *dakhmehs* ("towers of silence") built away from human habitation (except in Bombay and Karachi where the city has surrounded them) but there is elaborate filtering to keep the fluids from polluting the earth, while the flesh is recycled into life by vultures. That the dakhmehs have been closed in Yazd (and earlier in Tehran) is purely due to Muslim pressure. A form of burial that is ritually protective of the earth is practiced on the plain below the dakhmes of Yazd. As I have described, the rituals still practiced at the funerary sites metaphorically and psychologically function in the way the anthropologist Robert Hertz [1960] analyzed from comparative material in the early twentieth century (Fischer 1973). In any case as Fozi notes if slightly obscurely (153-54), Zoroastrian ossuaries are still extant in cliff faces in southwestern Iran, and cremation is on the table in India (particularly since the die-off of vultures). Again, in the discussion of whether fire can be polluted (150), Fozi seems not to know about how different sacred fires are created out of many mundane forms of fire, and the hierarchy of fire temples thus produced. In a similar imprecision, or perhaps typo slip (137), he confuses the Islamic greater jihad (that of the internal

soul) calling it the lesser one (violence in protection of Islam, or what Touraj Daryaee has called, in his 12 October 2014 blog post, in reference to both the early Islamic Khawarij and the "Islamic State" [IS, ISIL, or ISIS] today, "militant piety").

Fozi claims a little too quickly in his conclusions, citing a 30 year old source, that "biblical and Jewish studies have remained very much aloof from the study of Iranian language, literature, and religion" (175), but one might acknowledge here the books and articles in this quite productive field of studies by Yaakov Elman, Gabby and Secunda (2014), Geoffrey Herman (2012), Jacob Neusner (2008), Shai Secunda (2013), Shaul Shaked (1994), and the 2012 volume edited by Secunda and Steven Stein with articles by Geoffrey Herman, Yishai Kiel, Reuven Kiperwasser and Dan DY Shapira, Aaron Koller, Maria Macuch, Shaul Shaked, Oktor Skjoervo, and Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina.

In the final chapters, Fozi's book returns, as in his opening chapters, to a useful update of community concerns. These range from contemporary gestures such as creating a Women's Day to coincide with the Esfandegan gahambar, held in 2008 at the Firuz Bahram Zorastrian High School (145, 171), or holding a nationwide thousand *yasht* recitation for the survival of the community (160), and in the mode of his title, creating a youth wing of the Zoroastrian Association called "Farawahar" (170). Old community halls have been refurbished (161), an old folks home created (with headaches about how to staff it, [158]), a few confiscated estates taken by the Revolution have been claimed back (165), young families have been helped to buy houses (168), and the long closed Bahram Yeganegi Clinic and the Ardeshir Yeganegi Library (166; presumably family of Esfandiar Yeganegi, one of my early patrons in the community, a Columbia educated hydraulic engineer and a member of parliament) have been repaired and reopened. In passing Fozi mentions, but seems to have little access to, the contrasting debates among Iranians and Parsis about conversion, and the experiences of those who have intermarried, and seems not to know about the Bombay High Court legal cases that established the patrilineal rule that governs the Parsi Punchayat.

Fozi ends with astute, and telling, observations about the limits of rapproachment with the Islamic Republic of Iran; the limits of the IRI's ability to

control the cultural roots of its own nationalism; and the management of its cultural diplomacy with the Gulf and Arab worlds. At the opening of the Yeganegi Library, the IRI High Commissioner for Culture (*Vezarat-e 'Ali Farhangi*), Haj Agha Dr. Ahamdi, was an honored guest. He had written a commentary on the Shahnameh, followed along in raising his palms as the mobeds recited the Avesta, and in his address spoke of the value to the IRI to have a functioning Zoroastrian community. The limit however was reached when members of the audience asked if he would help change the name of the street back to Arbab Kei Khosrow, a revered leader of the community in the early twentieth century and member of parliament, from that of a revolutionary martyr, and he registered visible "unhappiness" (166). On the other hand, as Fozi delightfully points out, the creation of the English-language Press TV, to counter Western press coverage of Iran, inadvertently created a voracious need for content to fill its 24 hour cycle, and this is filled in part by presenting pre-Islamic materials "to soften the image of the Republic's record of human rights abuse by presenting Iran as one of the greatest and oldest of world civilizations with a record of toleration and inclusion" (183). Finally, Fozi notes that in the management of relations with the Arab Sunni world, Iran agreed to destroy the shrine to Abu Lolo, the Iranian alleged assassin of Caliph Omar (125); while on the other hand suggesting it might construct an island in the *Persian* Gulf in the shape of a Farawahar (185).

Despite its limitations, Fozi's account is that of a mature (he was born in the 1960s) and self-reflective scholar, and his writing is a pleasure to read. I look forward his new project on Iranians living in Malaysia.

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