Response to Richard Foltz, “Religions of Iran: Pool Theory as a Non-normative Approach”
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In reading this very interesting book, I immediately found myself challenged by Richard Foltz’s definition of “the national pre-Islamic religion(s) of the Iranians” (p. xii). While agreeing with the author on the fact that the term “Zoroastrianism” may not be the best way of referring to it, I believe that the role played by such a powerful religious innovator, as Zarathushtra must have been, was crucial to its coming into existence, at least in the form that we know through surviving religious literature.\(^1\) Moreover, there certainly is a considerable degree of continuity in its literary and cultic tradition, as shown by, among other things, the fact that the majority of Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts derive directly or indirectly from the Middle Persian commentary to the Avesta (Zand).

Nonetheless, I partly share the author’s position when he reports Alessandro Bausani’s point of view:

“We are not dealing – as some believed when these studies started in Europe – with one Iranian religion, but with various ‘religions’ or types of religiosity characteristic of one or another branch of the Iranian family.” (p. xii)

That is, I believe that many different types of religiosity were present in Iran one by the other, this being true at least in the period of the last pre-Islamic Iranian dynasty, as shown by Shaul Shaked in his powerful synthesis on late Sasanian Zoroastrism.\(^2\) Moreover, I share Shaked’s understanding of the parallel presence of various types of religiosity – sometimes even wide apart – under the umbrella of one main religion, probably based more on orthopraxis than on orthodoxy, which one may variously name “Mazdaism,” “Zoroastrism,” or, like the believers of Sasanian times, Wehdēn, the “Good Religion,” which was attested throughout the Iranian world.

Quite interesting is also Foltz’s concise exposition of the “Pool Theory,” according to which there is “a pool of ideas and behaviours from which individuals and communities may draw in constituting their particular world views”. This is certainly true for individuals, although when dealing with communities and their religious or ethical beliefs one must also take into account “identificatory” characters and values. Although he does not state it openly, Richard Foltz seems to have taken this aspect into consideration, since he chooses to devote a large part of his book to religions that were born in Iran, while discussing “Foreign Religions in Iran” as well. Central to our understanding of Iranian religion is its definition, both synchronically and diachronically. In this respect I found puzzling the limited space dedicated to Islam (only Chapters 12, 13, and 14, since Ch. 18 on “The Islamic Republic” is quite different in its nature), showing an approach quite different from that of Alessandro Bausani. The Roman scholar in his “Persia religiosa” traces a line of continuity between religious phenomena in pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran, identifying specific traits of Iranian religiosity lasting through the ages.\(^3\) Moreover, Bausani draws an interesting picture both of the impact of Islam on Iran and of the peculiar “Iranization” of Islam, i.e. the persistence of Iranian themes in Islam, to some extent comparable to the “Hellenization” undergone by Christianity in the early centuries.

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Foltz’s chapters on “Mithra and Mithraism” and “Two Kurdish Sects: The Yezidis and the Yaresan” ultimately derive from a belief stated clearly at the beginning of his book: “This book devotes separate chapters to what appear to be the three most visible religious tendencies in pre-Islamic Iran: the worship of Mithra, of Mazda and of the Goddess (who is most recognizable as Anahita)” (p. xiii). Foltz further states:

“It may be that the proper status of Mithra-worship in the ancient Iranian world has been underestimated. Most often subsumed under Mazda-worship, as in Sasanian Zoroastrianism, Iranian Mithraism may deserve to be considered a religion in its own right. (…) Prior to the political efforts of the early Sasanians (backed by fanatical and ambitious Mazdean priests such as Kerdir) to articulate and forcibly impose a particular Zoroastrian orthodoxy upon a very religiously heterogeneous Iranian society, it seems more likely that across the Iranian lands there were at least three major religious tendencies (along many minor ones).” (pp. 19-20)

Mithra was certainly an important cultic divinity for Zoroastrians, as shown by the extensive and ancient hymn to Mithra, as well as by the mention of his name alongside those of Ahura Mazda and Anahita in royal Achaemenid inscriptions dating to the time of Artaxerxes II and Artaxerxes III (in the latter’s inscriptions, only alongside Ahura Mazda). However, when one takes a closer look at the texts themselves, it becomes clear that for both these kings Ahura Mazda was the greatest of gods, while the other two were invoked only in a specific context.

The inscriptions of Artaxerxes II in Susa (A²Sa) and Hamadan (A²Ha) both read:

“…. This palace Darius my great-great-grand-father built; later under Artaxerxes my grandfather it was burned; by the favor of Ahuramazda, Anaitis, and Mithras this palace I built. May Ahuramazda, Anaitis, and Mithras protect me from all evil, and that which I have built may they not shatter or harm”.

Another inscription by Artaxerxes II in Susa (A²Sd) is slightly different, assigning the more important role to the sole Ahura Mazda:

“… Saith Artaxerxes the King: By the favor of Ahuramazda this is the palace which I built in my lifetime as a pleasant retreat. May Ahuramazda, Anaitis, and Mithras protect me from all evil, and my building”.

The Inscription by Artaxerxes III at Persepolis (A³Pa) clearly distinguishes between the role played by Ahura Mazda and the more limited one played by Mithra alongside Ahura Mazda:

“A great god (is) Auramazdā, who created this earth, who created yonder heaven, who created man, who created blissful happiness for man, who made me, Artaxerxes, king, the one king of many, the one master of many. (…) Proclaims Artaxerxes, the king: This stone stairway I

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4 On the Goddess, see Manya Saadi-nejad’s chapter “Iranian Goddesses”, pp. 56-74.
5 For the sake of clearness I stick here to common usage, although as stated above this designation derives from the application of concepts that are foreign to the culture of which we are speaking, belonging rather to the realm of Abrahamic religions.
have built in my time. Proclaims Artaxerxes, the king: Me may Auramazdā and god Mithra protect and this country and what (has been) built by me!”7

These inscriptions show that even in the late Achaemenid period, the religion of the sovereigns was henotheistic, postulating Ahura Mazda as the creator god while allowing space for minor cults.

Let us now turn to the domain of onomastics. The divine name Mithra is well attested as a component of personal names (mainly compounds) already in the Achaemenid period in various Nebenüberlieferungen. Among the more meaningful examples one may mention: *Miça-Baga-, *Miça-pāta-
*Miθrapāta 
*Miθradāta-
*Miθradātaς, *Miθrafarnā, *Miθranamā, etc.8

In the Middle Iranian period, the theonym Mithra is well attested in personal names. It is found in Bactrian texts and more limitedly in Sogdian.9 In Middle Persian onomastics it is widely attested and names such as Mihr-āfrīd, Mihr-bōzēd, Mihr-dād, and Mihr-buxt; but also Mihr-Šābuhr, Mihr-Husraw, Mihr-Narseh, and Mihr-Guṇasp are often found. Perhaps more significant in our context is the anthroponym attesting Mithra’s name side-by-side with Ohrmazd’s: Mihr-Ohrmazd, also found in Syriac: Mihr-Hormizd; or else the personal names showing Mithra accompanied by the name of a sacred Fire: Mihr-Ādur-Farrbay, Mihr-Ādur-Guṇasp, or again containing the divine name Mithra and the name of the fire, together with that of other divinities or kings: Mihr-Ādur-Ohrmazd, Mihr-Ādur-Māh, Mihr-Ādur-Šābuhr.10

The evidence listed above shows that in the Sasanian period Mithra was a divinity belonging to the Zoroastrian pantheon, and at the same time that names attesting his “creative” power were still in use. Therefore, one cannot use the occurrence of such names in the Achaemenid period to argue in favor of an independent Mithra cult.

To conclude, I doubt that there is enough evidence to postulate an independent Mithra religion in Iran – differently from what happens in the Roman world – at least in the historical period. I still adhere to the traditional view that Mithra, though understandably absent in the Gāthās, was to be readmitted in the Zoroastrian pantheon soon after Zarathushtra’s reform. Quite clearly, the Zoroastrian faith never was a monolith, allowing for many different variants, probably both regional and sectarian. In fact, even Pahlavi literature, which in the form that has come down to us was definitely committed to writing only in Abbasid times, contains traces of the religious variety that characterized Iran before – and after – the arrival of Islam. This is so notwithstanding the fact that Islamic domination had put an end to most Zoroastrian religious disputes, determining a forced

orthodoxy, while the Zoroastrian priesthood was fighting to keep the Good Religion alive. There is no need to imagine different and separate religions of Iranian heritage, though certainly Zoroastrian religion was, even in Sasanian times, internally much more differentiated than some modern scholars would like to believe.

Aspects of the old Iranian religiosity survive to present day, and ancient festivals still mark the year of all Iranians, be they Muslims or not. Certainly, the faith of both Yezidis and Yaresans contains elements inherited from the pre-Islamic past, but these need not be necessarily “Mithraic”, since they all could derive from the Iranian popular religion of Late Antique times. More important, the doctrines and traditions of both sects can only be fully understood when set against their Islamic background.