Preface


3. Ilya Gershevitch’s proposal to divide the Avestan corpus into two “religions,” “Zarathuštrian” (represented by the Old Avestan texts) and “Zoroastrian” (the Younger Avesta), does not seem to me to really address or resolve the problem (The Avestan Hymn to Mithra, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959, p. 9).


5. This is not to be confused with the Common Pool Theory (CPT) of Garrett Hardin, which refers to the use of natural resources, or the Electron Pool Theory in chemistry and physics.

6. This notion was first coined by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), and continues to hold a prominent place among religion scholars.


1. The Origins of Iranian Religion


2. Other contemporary Iranian languages include Kurdish, Baluch, Pashtu, Ossetian, Pamiri, and many others.


5. From the verbal stem *dyeu-*, “to shine.” (An asterisk * signals a reconstructed word not attested in any written sources.)


9. This explanation, of which archaeologist Marija Gimbutas was an early champion, is known as the “kurgan theory,” after the burial mounds (kurgans) found across the south Eurasian steppe region. (See for example Marija Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974.) The various arguments are summarized in Mallory and Adams, *The Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World*, pp. 460–463.

10. Remco Bouckaert, et al., “Mapping the Origins and Expansion of the Indo-European Language Family,” *Science* 337 (2012): 957–960. Bouckaert’s team, which applied a Bayesian phylogeographic analysis developed for mapping virus outbreaks, suggest that the “original” spread of PIE was linked to their development of agriculture 8,000–9,500 years Before Present. In a preface to the same article, Victor Mair points out that the study examines linguistic data exclusively and ignores other areas such as archaeology. Even in the area of linguistics, Bouckaert et al. fail to account for the fact that Hittite and its relatives appear to have been intrusive to Anatolia.


14. The tripartite nature of PIE society has been most fully theorized by the French comparative mythologist Georges Dumézil and his students. (See for example Georges Dumézil, Les Dieux des indo-européens, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1952.) Others have challenged this approach, however, variously arguing that the paradigm has been applied too rigidly, or that it is not unique to Indo-Europeans.


16. Watkins, How to Kill a Dragon, p. 70.


20. It is perhaps equally ironic that the Rig Veda is less relevant for an understanding of Hinduism—which includes much that predates the Aryan arrival in the subcontinent—than modern Hindu scripturalists have tried to argue. While the Rig Veda and other later Vedas do count among the sacred texts memorized by Hindu Brahmin priests for the performance of rituals, their historical role in Hinduism is fairly circumscribed and is in no way analogous to the central and normative role of the Bible or the Qur’an in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, or even the Avesta in Zoroastrianism. The attempts of Hindu nationalists in modern India to endow the Vedas with such a status is very recent, and certainly owes something to imposed Western notions of what constitutes religion.

22. It is probably significant that the term “shaman” is a word originating from the Eurasian steppes, albeit as a much later appearance in Altaic—that is, non-Indo-European—language.

23. Karšvar; the modern Persian word, kešvar, means “country.”

24. While the “inversion” of these two classes of deities, attributed to Zoroaster, has been central to discussions of the Indo-Iranian split since the nineteenth century, Johanna Narten has gone so far as to question whether speaking of these deities as constituting distinct groups is even appropriate. See her “Zarathustra und die Gottheiten des Alten Iran,” Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft 56 (1986): 61–89.

25. The earliest written evidence of Indo-Iranians is found in cuneiform texts from the Mitanni kingdom of northern Mesopotamia. One document, a treaty dating to about 1370 BCE, mentions the Aryan deities Mitra, Varuna, and Indra.

2. Mithra and Mithraism

1. Or, perhaps, of alliances. For an overview of discussions regarding the etymology and meaning of the term mitra see Hanns-Peter Schmidt, “Mitra Studies: The State of the Central Problem,” in Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, ed., Études
Mithraïques, Tehran: Bibliothèque Pahlavi, 1978, pp. 345–394. The word seems from ancient times to have implied the notion of “friendly alliance,” and thus by extension “peace” (cf. Slavic mir), and “love” (cf. NP mehr). An additional semantic function, found in Vedic as well as Avestan sources, is that of “mediator” or “arbiter,” and by extension “judge.”


4. R. D. Barnett, “A Mithraic Figure from Beirut,” in John Hinnells, ed., Mithraic Studies, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975, pp. 466–469. Barnett observes that while this figure, who is clean-shaven, is often held to be Gilgamesh, the latter is always depicted with a beard.

5. This theme is emphasized in the Avestan Mehr Yašt, especially verses 5 and 8–10.


17. Helmut Humbach, “Mithra in the Kusana Period,” in Hinnells, Mithraic Studies, p. 136. Humbach points out the Bactrian name of Ahura Mazda, Ooromazdo, has been found on only a single Kushan coin (p. 139).


34. Pirouzdjou, Mithraïsme et emancipation, pp. 216–218.
36. Bahar, Az ostāreb tā tārīx, pp. 27–41.

3. In Search of Zoroaster

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4. Mazda and His Rivals

1. The Elamite version of the Behistun inscription glosses Mazda as “the god of the Aryans (har-ri-ya).”
2. The term is commonly translated as “the Mazda-worshiping religion,” but “worship” is actually a misleading translation of the Iranian root yaz-, which more specifically means “to perform a sacrifice.”
14. I have related here but one basic version of the Zurvanite creation myth, of which there exist numerous variations. For example, another version has Zurvan emanate a female partner; it is she who becomes pregnant. Other varying details include the length of Ahriman’s reign and the division of history into three periods of three thousand years each.
15. Or, as he somewhat less precisely puts it, “Zervanism was the current form of Zoroastrianism at that time” (Zaehner, *Zurvan*, p. 22).
17. In fact there are two works bearing this name, which are often confused. The work deemed Zurvanite is referred to by de Blois as “Ulama II”. As to why a Zurvanite text appears in so late a version, de Blois surmises that “. . . the author of Ulama II has inserted in his work quotations from a lost Zurvanite treatise from the Sasanian period, a treatise that he found, evidently in a New Persian translation, in some old manuscript.” (François de Blois, “The Two Zoroastrian Treatises Called ‘Ulama-i Islam’,” *The Classical Bulletin* 83/2 (2007), p. 218.)

5. Iranian Goddesses

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22. Vidēvāt, 1.3.
6. Judaism

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7. Buddhism

4. The existence of a Persian meaning for this term, “new spring,” is most likely coincidental.


18. This section is largely inspired by discussions with my wife, Manya Saadi-nejad, and my Persian translator, Askari Pasha’i.


20. Or so she informed the author, at a party in Miami in 2001.

8. Christianity

1. Matthew 2:1–12 mentions magi from the east, without specifying their number.


5. Quoted in Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, p. 112.

6. Those who follow this Christology are often referred to as “monophysites” (“single nature”), but they claim that the term “miaphysite” (“compound nature”) more precisely reflects their position.

7. This is despite the fact that Nestorius himself did not actually preach diophysitism, whose principal champion was Theodore of Mopsuestia (352–428).

8. The official adoption of Christianity in Armenia has traditionally been dated at 301 ce, but recently scholars have come to posit a date of 314–315 as more likely, see Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, p. 92.


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22. Gillman and Klimkeit, Christians in Asia Before 1500, p. 137.

23. Quoted in Gillman and Klimkeit, Christians in Asia Before 1500, p. 130.


25. In an interesting precedent, the Sasanian emperor Shapur II transferred much of the Christian and Jewish population of Armenia to Esfahan in 365 ce, an apparent attempt to weaken Armenia’s economy and make it more dependent on Iran.


9. Mandaeism


3. Jason BeDuhn suggests that the Mandaean conception of John the Baptist may have been formed during the early Islamic period, in an effort to be recognized as a “people of the Book” (personal communication, 2 October 2012).


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24. “Save the Mandaeans of Iraq,” Mandaean Associations Union website, 20 April 2009 www.mandeanunion.org

10. Manichaeism

8. Reeves disagrees with this assessment, considering that Mani saw himself first and foremost as a restorer of Christianity (Reeves, *Prolegomena*, p. 130).
10. In the first chapter of the *Kephalaia* he attributes much of the corruption of previous religions to the fact that Zoroaster, the Buddha, and Jesus did not write down their revelations themselves but left this task to their followers.
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12. Later examples of Manichaean book art have emerged from Central Asia; see for example Zsuzsanna Gulácsi, *Mediaeval Manichaean Book Art: A codicological study of Iranian and Turkic illuminated book fragments from 8th–11th century East Central Asia* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, 57), Leiden: Brill, 2005.
16. This is a clear reference to the Bodhisattva figure in Mahayana Buddhism, who chooses to delay his own passage into nirvana and remain in the world to work for the liberation of all.


37. <www.essenes.net/mani/0revival.html>

11. Undercurrents of Resistance: Mazdak and His Successors


10. Similar to the polemics against the Mazdakites and other heterodox groups, such modern sects as the Alevi and Bahá’ís are often accused by their detractors of holding an annual orgy during a ceremony known as the “Extinguishing of Light.” See Matti Moosa, Extremist Shi’ites: The Ghulat Sects, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988, pp. 136–138.

11. Shahrastani, Livre des religions et des sectes, v. 1, pp. 665–666. Three other associated groups listed by Shahrestani are the kūdakiyya, the māhāniyya, and the sapīd-jāmāgān.


13. Biruni, Chronology of Ancient Nations, p. 194. Crone sees this as a misinterpretation, arguing instead that Muqanna’ merely made lawful the women and property of defeated enemies as was common practice throughout history (Nativist Prophets, p. 37), but it seems to me that the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive.
12. Islam


3. Confusingly, the Arabic term mawla (pl. mawāli), is applied to both parties in this relationship, client and patron alike.


9. This magnificent work, commissioned by Shah Esma‘il during the early 1520s and completed some two decades later under his son Tahmasp, contains 258 paintings, many by the best masters of the time. In 1959 it was bought by the wealthy American industrialist Arthur Houghton, who had the book dissected and donated or sold its individual paintings up until his death in 1990, after which the remainder was auctioned off piecemeal. The now destroyed masterpiece is sometimes referred to as the “Houghton Shāh-nāmeh”; some art historians, who object to naming this masterpiece after the man who destroyed it, prefer to call it the “Tahmasp Shāh-nāmeh.”

10. Hasan Kashi, Tārīkh-e Muhammadi, pp. 159–160; quoted in Kathryn Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 181. Kashi’s authorship of this work is doubtful; Hasan ‘Atefi Kashani rather points out that its anonymous author, whose style is markedly different from Kashi’s, describes himself as a sixty-year-old who has recent converted to Shi’ism (Dīwān-e Hasan-e Kāšī, Tehran: Ketābkhanéh, müzech va markaz-e ostād-e
majes-e šūrā’iye eslāmī, 1388 [2009] p. 49). Kashi nevertheless displays a familiarity with the Shāb-nāme in the Divān ascribed to him. (I am grateful to Manya Saadi-nejad for providing the latter reference.)

13. Persian Sufism

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22. In Walbridge’s view, “There is certainly no warrant whatever for considering Suhrawardi as an exponent of any sort of genuine pre-Islamic wisdom. He shows no evidence of ancient Iran beyond what might be expected of an educated Muslim of his time and place” (Walbridge, The Wisdom of the Mystic East, p. 13).

14. Shi‘ism

1. Momen, An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam, pp. 75–76.
7. Naqāvat al-āsār, p. 514; cited in Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, p. 48. Shah Abbas himself put an end to these speculations by first placing the Noqtavī leader Ostad Yusufi Tarkišduz on the throne for three days in August 1593—corresponding to the Arabic lunar year 1001—then having him executed and displayed on a stake for a week (Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, p. 3).
8. “... the rise of a Persian era is expressed in terms of a return to an ‘old’ age that had passed but that would finally be revived in the form of a final and eternal victory” (Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, p. 19).
9. The term “Turkmen” etymologically means “Turkic.” Its modern usage, however, is more restricted, referring to peoples living in roughly adjacent areas of Turkmenistan, northeastern Iran, and northwestern Afghanistan.
13. Ali Rahnema sees Majlesi as a spiritual forefather to Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi (b. 1934), who rose to prominence through his criticisms of Mohammad Khatami’s presidency and his support of Mahmud Ahmadinejad (Ali Rahnema, Superstition as Ideology in Iranian Politics: From Majlesi to Ahmadinejad, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 21). It was also due to Majlesi’s efforts that Shi’ite writings began to be widely available in Persian since the earlier generations of Shi’ite scholars, who were mostly of Lebanese origin, wrote in Arabic (Rahnema, Superstition as Ideology, p. 190).


15. Zoroastrianism After Islam

1. For more on this process see Eliz Sanasarian, Religious Minorities in Iran, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 20–24.


6. Alan Williams, introducing his critical edition of this late text, remarks that “to read the QS with the sole purpose of finding a historically satisfactory chronology of the Zoroastrians down to 1599 is rather like going to see a performance of Hamlet only for the purpose of learning a lesson in Danish history” (The Zoroastrian Myth of Migration from Iran and Settlement in the India Diaspora: Text, translation and analysis of the 16th century Qesse-ye Sanjan ‘The story of Sanjan’, Leiden: Brill, 2009, p. 19).


9. For more on this re-imagining process, and the orthodox reaction it generated, see Monica Ringer, Pious Citizens: Reforming Zoroastrianism in India and Iran, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011, especially Chapters 3 and 5.


12. Or, in her own words, Shah Bahram Varzavand founded it through her (personal conversation, Mumbai, 22 July 2011).
15. <www.shahbazi.org>
16. Žaleh Amuzgar, Tārīkh-e Irān-e bāstān, v. 1, Tehran: Sāzmān-e motale‘eh va tadvin-e kotob-e ‘olām-e ensānī-ye dāneshghāhā, 1380 [2001], p. 120.
24. Iran League Quarterly (Jan.–Apr. 1938), frontispiece.
27. From gāb, “appointed time”; see Mary Boyce, “Gāhānbār”, Encyclopedia Iranica online, www.iranica.com/articles/gahanbar
28. Mary Boyce, A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Given that this remains the most detailed study of Iranian Zoroastrians to date in a Western language, it was somewhat disappo...
over by Muslims. On the other hand, there are so many Sharifabadis living in Tehran that they have their own community association.

16. Two Kurdish Sects: the Yezidis and the Yaresan

7. Christine Allison, “Yazidis,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* online.
9. This parallel is discussed in Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, pp. 48–50.
10. Allison, “Yazidis.”
11. The French musicologist Jean During, while not denying the existence of an ancient Iranian substrate, emphasizes the Islamic and Sufi aspects of the Yaresan tradition. He sees the movement “rather as an offshoot of a kind of Sufism which adapted itself to Kurdish customs” (“A Critical Survey on Ahl-e Haqq Studies in Europe and Iran,” in E. Ozdalga, ed., *Religion, Cultural Identity, and Social Organization among Alevi in Ottoman and Modern Turkey*, Stockholm: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 1998, p. 114). Philip Kreyenbroek has pointed out to me, however, that During’s arguments are colored by his association with the Paris-based Elahi sect which is a modernist, Islamizing offshoot of the Ahl-e Haqq (personal communication, 11 July 2012).
13. Izady, *The Kurds*, p. 34. Izady even claims “compelling evidence”—but without providing it—that Aži Dahâka’s troops were responsible for the murder of Zoroaster and the overthrow of his patron Vištasp (p. 139).
20. See note 8.
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17. The Bábí Movement and the Bahá’í Faith

1. Henry Corbin sees Hurqalya, which he defines as the “Earth of visions,” as a contemplative goal unifying centuries of Iranian theosophy from pre-Islamic times to the present (Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth, p. xii).
13. The Shah’s tolerance of these anti-Bahá’í activities was likely repayment for the support several leading clerics had given to the CIA coup against Mosaddeq two years earlier.
15. To be fair, the Bahá’ís themselves practice this conflation, whereas sociologists of religion would tend more to see Babism and the Bahá’í Faith as two distinct religions.

18. The Islamic Republic

1. A Shi’ite Muslim is free to choose his “source of emulation,” to whom s/he is to accord complete religious authority; religious taxes are also entrusted to one’s Marja’, meaning that these individuals control enormous wealth.
2. The term traditionally referred to jurists’ control of religious foundations. A political application of velāyat-e faqīh was advocated during the early nineteenth century by Ahmad Naraghi.


6. The Western media being somewhat fickle on this point, this wistful title appears to have since been transferred to the Swiss scholar Tariq Ramadan.


9. The university’s website is: <www.urd.ac.ir>

19. Iranian Zoroastrians Today

1. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Majmūʿī az maktūbāt, soxanrānibā, ʿayāmhā va fāṭārī-ye emām Khomeīnī az nime-ye dovvom-e 1341 tā befrāt be Pārīs* (14 Mehr 1357) [*The Collected Writings, Speeches, Messages and Rulings of Imam Khomeini from the second half of 1341 to his Migration to Paris*], Tehran: Čāpxaš, 1360 [1982], p. 277; quoted in Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, p. 30. This is not to say that Khomeini couldn’t find something positive to say about Zoroastrians when it suited his purpose. For example, he also said that “Iran is the homeland of all [Iranians], and Divine Unity [*tawḥīd*] is the religion of all [Iranians]; we are a united nation, you Zoroastrians have always served this country.” Likewise, current head of state Ali Khamene’i has said that “Zoroastrianism came into being in Iran and for our country it is an honour that the world’s first prophet was born in Iran.” Quoted before Parliament on the occasion of Nōrūz 1389 (New Year 2010) by Zoroastrian M.P. Esfandiar Ekhtiari, “Gabr” in *Encyclopedia Iranica* online, www.iranica.com/articles/gabr


6. “Eterāz-e Zartoštīān be ‘tohīn’ be neshān-e fravahr dar film-e īrānī” [“Zoroastrians Complain about ‘Insulting’ Use of Sacred Symbol in Iranian Film”], *BBC Persian service*, 7 January 2009. The fravahr, which is arguably the most well-known ancient Iranian symbol due to its prominence in rock reliefs at Persepolis and elsewhere, consists of a bearded figure rising
out of a winged disc. Long thought to represent Ahura Mazda, it is now believed by most scholars to represent the human spirit, or fravashi (Mary Boyce, “Fravashi”, in Encyclopedia Iranica online, <www.iranica.com/articles/fravasi>, accessed 8 November 2010.


8. Zoroastrians, who hold the earth to be pure and death to be polluting, traditionally exposed their corpses to be cleaned by vultures and “purified” by the sun. This practice was abandoned in Iran for hygienic reasons, but the exposure sites (dakhmes) remain sacred for them.

9. Pārs nāmeh 15, Shahrīvar 1389/August 2010, p. 3.


11. Rostam Vahidi, “Iranian Zarthushti Priesthood,” FEZANA Journal 24/1 (Spring 2010), p. 55. Mobed Mehraban Firouzgary of Tehran told us that the actual number is probably less than that given in Vahidi’s article (private conversation, 26 July 2010). There are currently eleven Iranian Zoroastrian priests and assistants in North America, seven of whom are in California. For purposes of contrast, the directory of the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario in Canada (which has the largest Zoroastrian population in the world after India and Iran) lists forty priests, all of them Parsees. For a description of the training and ordination of priests in Iran today see Mehraban Firouzgary, “The Iranian Ceremony of Nowe Zooty (Navar) to Become an Iranian Mobed,” FEZANA Journal 24/1 (Spring 2010): 61–63.


15. HIAS—the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society—was originally established to help Jewish refugees but now assists all religious minorities. Under this program Iranian Zoroastrians are first taken to Vienna, under the protection of the Austrian Embassy, before being relocated to the United States.

16. Babak Behziz, “Čerāftexārān-n-e be pīš az eslām mahdūd mikonānīn?” [“Why Do We Restrain Our Pride in the Pre-Islamic Period?”], Pārs nāmeh 2, Mehr 1387/October 2008, p. 5.

17. Hiedeh Farmani, “Iran’s Last Zoroastrians Worried by Youth Exodus,” Middle East Times, 4 October 2006.

18. Ibid.


20. A female university student in Tehran told us that “We [Zoroastrians] actually have it pretty good here,” but said she was emigrating to Australia, albeit reluctantly, because of her fiancé.


23. Jafarey is founder of the Zarathushtrian Assembly, based in Southern California <www.zoroastrian.org>
26. <www.mazorcol.org>
29. Manoj R. Nair and Ram Parmar, “Parsis Storm Zoroastrian College to Stop Conversion of a Russian,” Mumbai Mirror online (22 February 2010).
35. This possibility was suggested by John Hinnells in his monumental book The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 485–486.
36. The city of Toronto, where two temples and three community organizations serve a Zoroastrian community of as many as six thousand individuals, now has the largest Zoroastrian population outside India and Iran. See Richard Foltz, “Iranian Zoroastrians in Canada: Balancing Religious and Cultural Identities,” Iranian Studies 42/4 (2009): 561–577.

Conclusion: The Ever-Expanding Pool of Iranian Religion