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## BOOK REVIEW

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Fozi, Navid. 2015. *Reclaiming the Faravahar: Zoroastrian Survival in Contemporary Tehran*. Leiden: Leiden University Press. 224pp. \$59.50. ISBN: 9789087282141 (hbk).

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The book attempts to reconstruct the image of past and theology as recalled through rituals and being an element of identity of the Zoroastrian community in Tehran. It consists of seven chapters—the first being an introduction to the study, the second an account of the author's fieldwork experience in Iran, four providing ethnographic data, and finally conclusions. A great merit of the study is that it brings together examples of contemporary Zoroastrians' interpretation of their theology and ethics. We also get a good sense of selected public Zoroastrian rituals and ceremonies in Tehran, described in valuable detail, and have an opportunity to experience their temples and public gathering spaces.

However, the study is based on very limited ethnographic material. Despite the relatively long period of the project, Fozi was able to take part only in ceremonies open to the public and never witnessed weddings, pilgrimages, or family prayers for the dead. He refers to the religious identity of Zoroastrians as “inculcated in the believers' consciousness, albeit with different understanding and implications” (p. 61), but yet he never examined group members' attitudes towards their own religion and their community membership. He relies on two interviewees—a Zoroastrian parliamentary representative (*mobedyar*) and a priest (*mobed*)—and accompanies the interviews with a few statements from two others, a poetess and a high priest. All of the informants are recognizable, mainly by their unique position in the community: this is surprising when one thinks about the situation of non-Muslims in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which makes them hesitant towards participation in research. If they agreed not to remain anonymous, we have to assume that their opinions were very much autocensored to avoid potential problems. In the chapters providing details of the fieldwork Fozi admits that, after other disappointments in Iran, he decided to undertake research among Zoroastrians. He chose a somewhat reserved religious group, despite his national and religious affiliation, which seems to be his main reason for gathering such limited data in the field. Zoroastrians were afraid that Fozi was an Iranian, a fact that made them suspect him to be a government spy. He is in fact a Bahá'í, which made their feelings even more ambivalent. Fozi describes their “hesitation and consternation” (p. 46), receiving misleading information and ways in which prospective informants were deceiving him.

All these limitations of the ethnographic material raise doubts regarding the informational content of the study when it comes to the issues of contemporary Zoroastrian

community. However, the way in which it illustrates the relation between sociopolitical and religious characteristics of the field, the personal characteristics of an ethnographer, and the degree of success of the fieldwork, is actually a great merit of the book. Let me add a personal comment here. I met Fozi a few years ago at a conference on Zoroastrian studies at Oxford University. We talked and realized that we were both simultaneously engaged in research in Tehran. I was surprised that none of the Zoroastrian leaders with whom I was in touch had ever mentioned Fozi's work, although they mentioned a few other researchers who had contacted them recently. I was also surprised at the difference of my impressions of the community, who were mostly open, wanting me to tell their story back in Europe. But I was a "safe" ethnographer: a complete stranger, coming from Eastern Europe, a Pole, and a Roman Catholic.

I shall now comment on Fozi's findings, as presented in the book. From the very first chapter he claims that Zoroastrians position themselves in contrast to a dominant Shi'a community. In the course of the narration we are simply assured that this was evidenced by the data. This preconception oversimplifies his portrayal of the community. We find almost nothing about the complexity of contemporary Zoroastrian identity in Tehran, or its other reference points (such as Parsis, other religious minorities, other Zoroastrian communities of the country). There is virtually no mention of internal tensions, problems of leaving the community, attitudes towards outsiders and tensions following conversion, how the political situation affects what Zoroastrians can or cannot do, or changes within the community following the cultural revival after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This weakness of the study comes not only from limited data, but also from limited survey of the literature. Fozi barely refers to the ethnographic study of pre-Revolutionary Zoroastrians by Kestenberg Amighi, who actually researched the same community as him, which might have provided him with an excellent point of reference. The bibliography includes works published in Iran, containing details describing Zoroastrian rituals and their changes in the twentieth century (for example by Niknām or Mazdāpur), but they do not contribute to Fozi's descriptions of rituals. Surprisingly the author does not mention my own research or publications on the complexity of Zoroastrian identity within the same community, although we spent time discussing it. He seems to rely only on a few interviews and a few other materials, for example the study of Rashna Writer, who has never researched in Iran. In the end we are presented with a Zoroastrian community as a product of the Pahlavi nation-building project, with no mention, among other things, of the significant influence of the Constitutional Movement (1905–1911). We receive misleading or unsatisfactory explanations when it comes to *haoma* used in rituals, the meaning of covering one's hair for prayer or menstruating women in Zoroastrianism, the symbolism of the colour white, *sofre* in Iranian culture (here limited to Zoroastrian or Shi'a) or the ban on certain festivals in Iran, to give a few random examples. The study thus provides an undeservedly simplified view of Zoroastrian and Iranian culture.

Despite these shortcomings, I found the book interesting. We are provided with an excellent documentary description of chosen Zoroastrian public ceremonies in Tehran, which are not widely known, as well as a sense of the Zoroastrians' situation as a religious minority within a Muslim-dominated country. Finally, I believe that the most interesting dimension of the study is its value as a source for reflection on ethnographic practice in a difficult field.