ne of the most famous performances of Iranian nationalism was the elaborately choreographed celebration of 2500 years of Iranian monarchy by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi before Cyrus the Great’s tomb in 1971. Scholars have pointed to Iranian nationalism’s use of the ancient past in an attempt to construct a modern, secular nationalism free from the institutional power of the ulama and legal constraints of shari’a law. Iran as a nation and identity was thereby imagined as an entity of *longue durée* – and thus distinguishable from more recent history of decadence and decline.\(^1\) Increased centralization, accompanied by the reduction of ulama power and shari’a law led to increased legal status and socioeconomic opportunities for religious minorities. The emphasis on the ancient past was also welcomed by religious minorities eager to embrace a national identity that was not primarily Islamic. Although all religious minorities benefited from nationalism and increased centralization and secularization, no minority group was as closely associated with the pre-Islamic past than the Zoroastrians.

Iranian nationalism’s relationship to the Zoroastrian community was unique. The ancient, pre-Islamic past of the Achaemenid and Sassanian empires, although (re)imagined as a secular, historic and national past, was in fact ethnically Persian and religiously Zoroastrian.\(^2\) Nationalism was envisioned as inclusive – seeking to embrace and unify all Iranians – yet was unable to include all Iranians equally. The Zoroastrian community not only appreciated this fact, but actively participated in promoting nationalism and their special place in it. Yet their enthusiasm was not without some ambivalence. The intimacy between Iranian Zoroastrians and Iranian nationalism obscure the fundamental underlying tensions in this relationship. Nationalism produced profound complications within the Zoroastrian community over the basis of its identity. By seeking to universalize the pre-Islamic past, the past was articulated as a historic and thus national past. But in so doing, the secularization of this past denuded it of religious content. Were the Zoroastrians thus an ethno-historic group? Or a religious group defined by tenets of faith? Modern, reformist Zoroastrianism in the Pahlavi period increasingly defined itself as an individual faith yet the community never abandoned a strong, and implicitly contradictory, sense of historico-ethnic identity. This paper explores the Zoroastrian articulation of, participation in and uneasy relationship to nationalism in the Pahlavi period.

**The Distinctive Place of Zoroastrians**

Iranian nationalism was constructed as modern, accessible and retrievable. Ancient Iran was claimed as the origin and repository of modern ideas and institutions that could be retrieved and resuscitated. This past was imagined not as a Persian and Zoroastrian past, but as a secular historic past that was thereby the inheritance of all Iranians, regardless of

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2. Zoroastrianism spread under the Achaemenians. Cyrus the Great is generally believed to have practiced Zoroastrianism. Boyce claims that “his actions were […] those of a loyal Mazda-worshipper”. See Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1979), pp. 51-52. Subsequently, Sassanian Iran adopted Zoroastrianism as the state religion.
religious or ethnic affiliation. This claim to universality was an essential component in nationalism’s ideological utility and stood at the basis of claims of authenticity. Posting ancient Iran as the foundation of modern Iran enabled modernity to be claimed as intrinsic, inherently Iranian and thus not imitative or adoptive. Nationalism also contained a strong element of secular citizenship which provided an ideological basis for equality of citizenship as opposed to inequality based on religious affiliation. Muslims, inequality, in this formulation, was accessible to all, not the preserve of one group, but instead dependent on the conscious embrace of nationalism’s ideology and its modern project.

Despite these significant elements of universalism and accessibility, nationalism’s location in the pre-Islamic period inevitably privileged the Zoroastrians as the most authentic and thus the most Iranian. The tension between inclusivity and exclusivity remained unresolved and found frequent expression in the Zoroastrian community. For example, the principal pillars of nationalism that permitted the resuscitation and accessibility of ancient Iran were language, literature and the celebration of selective historical sites as monuments to ancient (and thus present) national identity. Persian (Farsi) was claimed as a common national language – local and linguistic (ethnic) differences were deemphasized through compulsory acquisition of Persian in schools and the use of Persian in the vast majority of publications, literary and otherwise. Persian was thus claimed as the language of all Iranians, whether native Persian speakers or not. To this end, many “non-Persian” Arabic-based words were eliminated and new Persian words invented for use. The Zoroastrians made particular claims to ownership of the Persian language. An editorial in Mahnameh-ye Zartoshtian argued that the people of Fars, Persian Dari speakers (explicitly Zoroastrians), were the “original Iranians” and advocated ridding Persian of foreign, read Arab, elements and returning to what he termed “Shahnameh” Persian. The Zoroastrian Anjoman of Tehran situated itself as a preserver of Iranian culture by sponsoring students interested in the literature and culture of ancient Iran to study abroad.

The Shahnameh was seized upon and promoted by nationalists as the quintessential Iranian epic, written in “pure” Persian, and capturing the nostalgia for the pre-Islamic era of Iranian greatness. The Shahnameh clearly differentiates Iranians from non-Iranians, and identifies Arabs with Islam (and implicitly thus, Islam as an Arab and thus foreign religion). It should also be noted that the Shahnameh commemorates values of royalty, nobility and an ethical system that differs markedly from Islamic-based virtues. For example, the knight-hero, not the Prophet Mohammad is the ideal man, aristocratic

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3. Full secularization which would have permitted equality of citizenship was never enacted in Iran. Instead, Islam remained the religion of state, Muslims enjoyed certain privileges prohibited to non-Muslims, and legal identity remained a function of religious sectarianism. See Suad JOSEPH (ed.) Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).


5. Khodadad KHODABAKHSHI, “Farsi or Dari” in Mahnameh-ye Zartoshtian (Nowruz, 2535 Shahanshahi), pp. 25-26. Although held up as the epitome of a “pure” Persian text, the Shahnameh is not devoid of Arabic words.

6. Pendarha (2, 4 2499 Shahanshahi), p. 43.
privilege trumps equality of faith, and women in the *Shahnameh* more closely resemble early Islamic models of political action and power than medieval shari’a-oriented prescriptions of seclusion. In practice, pre-Islamic Persian conceptions of kingship were Islamicized in the political theory of al-Ghazzali and Nizam al-Molk, and the synthesis of early Islamic, Arab tribal and Persian ideas of kingship became the functioning norm for much of Islamic (and Iranian) history. The *Shahnameh*’s association with the ancient past was emphasized by Zoroastrians who considered the book an actual history. The association of the *Shahnameh* with non-Muslim non-Arab “Iranian-ness” and thus Zoroastrianism was perfectly illustrated by an Iranian Muslim who sought to convert to Zoroastrianism in the Pahlavi period. As he explained it, he “had always been a nationalist and had read a little Ferdowsi”; since he considered himself Iranian, not Arab, he felt that he should adhere to an Iranian, not an Arab religion. Not surprisingly, one of the first “historical sites” to be celebrated in Pahlavi Iran was the discovery and refurbishing of Ferdowsi’s tomb in Khorasan in 1935. This project was directed by Zoroastrian parliamentary representative and head of the Tehran Zoroastrian *anjoman*, Kay Khosrow Shahrokh at Reza Shah’s request.

The anti-Arab component in Iranian nationalism was seized on by the Zoroastrian community. It often bled into indistinct anti-Muslim attitudes as well, although the Zoroastrian community was always careful not to criticize Islam directly. Articles in Zoroastrian journals frequently referred to the coming of Arabs (and thus Islam) to Iran as a calamity. Arabs were clearly distinguished from “Iranians” as uncivilized. In seeking to answer the nagging problem of why the Arabs defeated the Persian Empire, authors were at pains to insist that it had nothing to do with cultural or religious superiority. The religious implications were explicitly refuted in a public lecture by Hashem Reza in *Hukht*, the organ of the Zoroastrian Anjoman of Tehran. He insisted that “everyone knows that Arabs had no culture or civilization.” When the Arabs came to Iran they brought with them destruction. He describes Islam as “intolerant” and “harsh” and responsible for destroying “humanity, morals and kindness.” To the contrary, he asserted

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that the Zoroastrian Avesta inculcates strong morals, culture and love for humanity.10

The lines between Zoroastrian and Iranian identity were naturally indistinct. The difference between Zoroastrian religious ceremonies and national, secular ceremonies was deliberately blurred both by the Pahlavi monarchs, and by the Zoroastrian community itself. Reza Shah adopted Zoroastrian calendar names, and placed the Zoroastrian Fravahar symbol on the National Bank and the Ministry of Justice.11 Reza Shah had a close relationship with the Zoroastrian parliamentary representative Kay Khosrow Shahrokh, and entrusted him with many governmental tasks on his behalf.12 Reza Shah was also sympathetic to Indian Zoroastrians (Parsis), inviting delegations to Iran and even offering to facilitate their settlement in Iran. Dinshah Irani, the Parsi founder of both the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman and the Iran League in India, was invited by Reza Shah to Iran in 1932 as leader of a Parsi delegation. Reza Shah awarded him honours and entrusted him with a message to take back to the Parsi community in India:

You Parsis are as much the children of this soil as any other Iranians, and so you are as much entitled to have your proper share in its development as any other nationals. We estimate Our Empire’s resources to be even greater than those of America, and in tapping them you can take your proper part. We do not want you to come all bag and baggage; just wait a little and watch. If you find the proposition beneficial both to yourselves and to this land, then do come and We shall greet you with open arms, as We might Our dear brothers and sisters. Iran is a vast country pregnant with many advantages and fresh fields waiting for development. We suggest that the Parsis, who are still the sons of Iran, though separated from her, should look upon this country of to-day as their own, and differentiate it from its immediate past, and strive to derive benefit from her developments.13

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Reza Shah’s interest in Zoroastrianism even led one American diplomat to speculate that the shah might one day establish it as the state religion.\textsuperscript{14} Reza Shah’s heir, Mohamad Reza Pahlavi, continued his father’s emphasis on Iranian nationalism and the resultant nationalization and secularization of the Zoroastrian past and religion. He encouraged the performance of Nowruz and the winter-solstice celebration of Mehragan as national holidays. Prominent Zoroastrians, Mobed Rostam Shahzadi and Ardeshir Mobed, were invited to the palace for Zoroastrian festivals.\textsuperscript{15}

Not surprisingly, Zoroastrians frequently laid claim to pre-eminence as the most Iranian of Iranians. A writer in the journal \textit{Pendarha} exclaimed that, “the [Zoroastrian] youth have not forgotten old ways and ancient customs. You are the souvenir of an illustrious past. Long live the king.”\textsuperscript{16} This idea was also voiced by Muslim Iranians. For example, in 1979 Ayat Sadughi speaking in Yazd noted that “Zoroastrians are the roots of

\textsuperscript{14} U.S. State Department, Letter dated 3 February, 1932, RG59/250, file 891.404/24, National Archives, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{15} Ardeshir Mobed was the secretary of the Zoroastrian Anjoman of Tehran. See for example \textit{Pendarha} (2, 1 1338), inside cover; and \textit{Pendarha} (2, 4 2499), p. 2; and AMIGHI, \textit{Zoroastrians of Iran}, pp. 277-8.

\textsuperscript{16} Mohamad Ali ASEF, \textit{Pendarha} (2, 8 2499 Shahanshahi), p. 34.
Iran. We Moslems are like the branches of a tree, if our roots are cut off, we shall shrivel up and die.” 17 The Zoroastrian community encouraged the identification of national symbols, sites and ceremonies with Zoroastrian historical and religious ones. For example the Sadēh religious ceremony in Shiraz was celebrated at the historical site of Nakhsh-e Rostam and inaugurated by the singing of the national anthem. 18 Nowruz in particular was characterized as an Iranian and thus national holiday. In an article in the Zoroastrian journal Pendarha, the author described Nowruz as an ancient Iranian festival which had persisted despite Arab attempts to wipe it out. 19 Consistent with nationalism’s secularization of the Zoroastrian past, Zoroastrians themselves de-emphasized the religious nature of this ceremony. Nowruz was portrayed as a day of remembrance of the mythical King Jamshid’s discovery of fire, and closely identified with “the celebration of royalty and [royal] farr”. 20 The importance of kingship was stressed as an integral component of the Avesta. 21

**ZOROASTRIAN LOYALTY**

Zoroastrians consistently emphasized their loyalty to the monarchy. Their noted monarchism had a number of underlying reasons. It was foremost a commitment to the Pahlavi monarchy as it promoted centralization, secularization and modernization with the concomitant reduction in the institutional and ideological power of the ulama and Islamic law, respectively. The central government had been responsible for initiating and protecting legal, social, economic and political advances of minorities since the late nineteenth century. Zoroastrian attachment to the monarchy also stemmed from the nationalist emphasis on the ancient glories of the Persian monarchies that were seized on by both Zoroastrians and the Pahlavi monarchs. The Zoroastrians repeatedly mention the institution of kingship as a respected component of Zoroastrian religious tradition. This also enabled a disassociation from Islam as marking the end of the ancient past of might and glory of the Persian Empire. The Zoroastrian press is full of eulogies to Reza Shah who is lauded as having brought Iran back on the path of greatness and assuming her rightful place as a leader of civilization. 22 Not coincidentally, the 2500 year anniversary of the Persian monarchy was claimed by Mohamad Reza Shah Pahlavi and celebrated with much fanfare. The Zoroastrian community in Iran and India were actively involved in preparing events to coincide with the celebration. It was seen as an opportunity to promote awareness on the international stage of Zoroastrian religion, the Zoroastrian

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historical past and Iranian civilization.

ZOROASTRIANISM AS THE SOURCE OF MODERNISM

Zoroastrian traditions were posited as models for Iranian modernity by the Zoroastrian community. Contemporary Iranian society, if purged of the non authentic and if firmly anchored in the traditions of the pre-Islamic past, could in fact become modern and in so doing recapture Iran’s glorious place as a leader among nations. In addition to obvious historical associations of pre-Islamic Iran with the Zoroastrian past, Zoroastrians also marshalled theological arguments to assert the essential modernity of Zoroastrianism. These arguments exhibit similar tensions between universality (inclusivity) and particularism (exclusivity) as do the historically-based arguments. The theological arguments claimed that Zoroastrianism was consistent with modern values (women’s rights, science, and progress). As hallmarks of Iranian-ness and pre-Islamic “authenticity” the Zoroastrians both symbolized this modern project, and went a step further by claiming to be the originators of many of these modern values.

In community lectures and articles, it was frequently posited that Zoroastrian religious ideals not only were consistent with the modern agenda, but that Zoroaster’s teaching was in fact the origin of their first articulation. Zoroaster was the first to establish a monotheistic religion and to preach a simple ethical religion suitable for contemporary Iranians. In a public lecture given in 1965 entitled “The Teachings of Zoroaster and the New Civilization”, the audience was instructed that the subject itself “is not just for Zoroastrians, but for all Iranians interested in this country and those who know about their history and glory of the past.” The speaker went on to explain that “thousands of years ago, the teachings of Zoroaster can be compared with today’s humanism,” and that his teachings continue to be relevant in the twentieth century. Zoroaster’ teachings about humanity and human happiness were claimed to be “true” according to modern principles of economics, as well as contemporary social values, according to the speaker. In another lecture given by a Zoroastrian priest on the occasion of the anniversary of Zoroaster’s birthday, the Zoroastrian tenets of ritual purity were given scientific certification: “now we have scientific proof of the polluting danger of microbes.” In yet another public lecture, Dr. Sarefnia argued that “Zoroaster was the first prophet of mankind” who taught peace, the promotion of agriculture, civility and love of homeland.” Zoroaster’s message is universal: “That which Zoroaster taught thousands of years ago is now in the twentieth century the essence of civilization and salvation.”

Zoroastrian theological compatibilities with modernity credit Iranians as the originators of these ideas, and even go further by presenting Iranians as the originators of something universal, something that generated human “progress” and the “civilization” of mankind. Zoroastrianism is presented as the crucible of universal modern social values. The historical argument for resting modernity on the pre-Islamic past was easier to extend to contemporary Iranians, who, even if not Zoroastrian, still in a sense shared this historical past. It was trickier to Iranianize Zoroastrian religion and claim that somehow

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Muslim Iranians were also its inheritors. A resolution was attempted by making the argument for universalism according to which all monotheists – all Christians, Jews and Muslims – shared in Zoroaster’s legacy and were thus in a sense also the inheritors of his message. Zoroaster established a set of universal ethics for all mankind.

Zoroastrianism was claimed as the first modern religion and therefore consistent with modern ideals of rationalism, science, hygiene and women’s rights. Claims that the Zoroastrian historical past enjoyed gender equality, freedom, and social justice abound in the Zoroastrian journals. For example, although civilized countries now tout the importance of women’s rights, they had always been important in Zoroastrian religious text and historical tradition. Another example from the Zoroastrian journal Hukht reads:

His Majesty ordered that in order to renew the splendour and glory of ancient Iran, all practices and laws of the old Iran should be followed – including freedom of women to pursue their own destinies [...] In ancient Iran men and women were equal [...] Now women are out from behind the black curtain of hijab and are accepting their rights. Zoroastrian women have established organizations and societies in the service of the king and are bearing fruit in advancing public health, and the culture of our country...

Zoroastrian women’s organizations were deeply involved in promoting the ideals of the new modern woman as quintessentially Zoroastrian. The provincial, Yazd-based Zoroastrian women’s organization (the Sazeman-e Zanan-e Zartoshtian-e Yazd or the Jalaseh-ye Zanan-e Zartoshtian-e Yazd) was first established in 1925 in the context of Reza Shah’s promotion of modernization. In the Zoroastrian community’s own history of this organization, based upon the records of the organization itself, the connection between modernizing women and modernizing religion is made explicit:

The ignorant and prejudiced realized that cleanliness and dirtiness were not functions of which religious community you belonged to, but rather whether your clothes were clean and you lived a clean life. [The Zoroastrian women who founded the organization] believed that Zoroastrians worshipped Ahura Mazda and had the book of the Avesta. They believed that the principles of their religion were good thoughts, good words, good deeds and following the path of cleanliness and righteousness, the love of shah and country, humanity and culture. They understood that Zoroastrians were the true Iranians and the true heirs of this land. And that Zoroastrian women needed to gather together [...] and pursue their goals of ending deprivation and spreading culture and raising the level of knowledge, awareness of religious practices and fighting against superstition. [They organized in order to] end their backwardness.

What is clear in the above quotation is the firm connection of the “New” woman agenda


of social activism, hygiene and education, with nationalist notions of Zoroastrian identity and goals of ending backwardness and its association with filth. Particularly interesting is the additional conviction that religion too needs modernizing. Modern religion reconsiders Tradition and redraws the line between “true religion” and “superstition” using the yardstick of compatibility with modern values. Modern religion is rational, internalized and ethical, and placed itself at odds with “tradition” and “ritual” as failures to understand the underlying intent of religion and to thus move into a more spiritual and rationalized relationship to religious performance.

**RATIONALIZATION OF THE RELIGION**

This new understanding of Zoroastrianism was a function of the Parsi and subsequently Iranian Zoroastrian reform movements. Parsi religious reform began in the 1850s and left a deep footprint in the Iranian Zoroastrian community. Iranian reformism was most forcefully argued by Kay Khosrow Shahrokh in the 1920s and retained its essential features in the subsequent Pahlavi period. Zoroastrian reformism was characterized by a rationalization of religion and consequent emphasis on individual spirituality and ethical responsibility. Rational religion eschewed external mediation between individuals and God, instead promoting the interiorization of piety and it outward expression as ethical behaviour in society. Ritual was seen as irrational and the performance of ritual in public viewed as essentially inimical to the emphasis on the universal ethical foundation of all religions. Kay Khosrow Shahrokh espoused these ideas which became widely accepted in theory, although not always corresponding to community practice. Shahrokh’s articulation of reformist Zoroastrianism was frequently expressed in public lectures on religion sponsored by Zoroastrian groups, as well as in articles and editorials in Zoroastrian journals. For example, Mobed Firuz Azargoshap argued that Zoroaster knew God as fatherly and kind. He established monotheism and an ethical view of world with consequent

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responsibilities of individuals. Zoroastrians must work to create the “heavenly kingdom” of equality and universal well-being in this world; people should work on their souls, not worldly gain. Individual spirituality was frequently linked to social responsibility.

Zoroastrian Identity Crisis

Modern rational religion, although firmly embraced by the Zoroastrian community, was also partly responsible for a lack of community identity. The de-emphasis on ritual and the performance of difference as opposed to the emphasis on individual faith as ethical behaviour stressed the nature of religion as faith, rather than ritual practice and particularism. This contributed to a decline in participation in religious observance, something that the Zoroastrian community viewed with concern. The problem of youth not having faith and not interested in religion was the subject of a public lecture by Mobed Rostam Shahzadi who worried about eventual diminishing numbers of Iranian Zoroastrians.

The Zoroastrian Anjoman of Tehran and other community organizations sought to educate Zoroastrians about their religion in an attempt to revive identity and practice. Zoroastrians were urged to differentiate Zoroastrian religious practice from Muslim practice. For example, they were urged to wear white only at religious ceremonies, rather than black as was typical of Muslims. Animal sacrifice was another practice that the Zoroastrian community leaders sought to eliminate, arguing that it had no basis in Zoroastrianism. Mobed Rostam Shahzadi explained that Zoroastrianism, despite its antiquity, was an evolved religion. Sacrifice, typical of ancient religions, was outlawed by Zoroaster. In a thinly veiled denunciation of Islamic practice as irrational, Shahzadi declared that “sacrifice is senseless and illogical and not practiced by Parsees” and noted that the Zoroastrian Anjoman of Tehran and the Council of Mobeds (Konkash-e Mbedan) of Yazd had both forbidden it.

The Dari dialect was also seized on as quintessentially Zoroastrian. Leaders sought to

31. Ibid, pp. 31-32.
32. See also Mobed Firuz AZARGOSHI, “The Testimony of Faith of Zoroastrians” in Pendarha (2, 4 2499), pp. 29-31.
34. “A’ineh” in Pendarha (2, 4, 2499), pp. 22-23.
35. Ibid and Pendarha (2, 7, 2499), pp. 22-24 and Pendarha (2, 8, 2499), pp. 22-23.
36. Here he cites Yasna 32 line 12.
maintain it as a “pillar” of Zoroastrian identity, although the youth increasingly did not speak it. The preservation of Dari as a language particular to Iranian Zoroastrians was of special interest to prominent philanthropist and community activist Morvarid Khanum Giv. In order to preserve the use and knowledge of Dari she ordered that Zoroastrian students in the Tehran Pars development must always speak Dari in religious classes that were held three times a week.

Dwindling attendance at community religious ceremonies was countered in the post 1960 period by new Zoroastrian community organizations that sought to combine religious performance with socialization and other activities. Both the youth group Fravahar and the Women’s Anjoman, as well as the Zoroastrian Anjoman of Tehran, sponsored religious ceremonies that combined the teaching of Zoroastrianism with social events. The Zoroastrian Anjoman of Tehran decided to hold monthly lectures on religion. An editorial in the journal Mahnameh-ye Zartoshtian encouraged people to attend, promising that, “this will create feelings of faith and love of religion and Zoroastrian-ness and [...] in this way develop a sense of unity and togetherness and similar spirit and maybe even you will learn more about Zoroastrianism.”

The inherent conflict between religion as faith and religion as community identity remained in full force in the Zoroastrian community. This deep ambivalence about the essential nature of Zoroastrian religious identity was exacerbated by Iranian nationalism. The Zoroastrian community’s embrace of Pahlavi modernizing programs, secular culture, citizenship and westernization was inseparable from its rapid growth in terms of economic wealth, social status and political power. The Zoroastrian community’s fortunes were in many ways tied to the official promotion of modernization, secularism and Iranian nationalism. At the same time, nationalism’s claim that the ancient past was a national past, universally accessible and claimable by all Iranians created strong ambivalence in the nature of Iranian Zoroastrian identity. The secularization of the ancient past and emphasis of Zoroastrians as “authentic” Iranians suggested that Zoroastrians were in a sense an ethnicity. If their religious holidays were national holidays, and Zoroastrians exemplars of Iranian-ness, then what was the status of Zoroastrian religious practice and belief? The question revolved around what determined Zoroastrian identity: faith or birth. The tensions about identity were clearly not just an issue of tension between the state and the

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38. Morvarid Giv was the wife of Anjoman President and philanthropist Rostam Giv, and the daughter of Ardestosh Mehraban.

40. “Morvarid Khanum Giv, One of the Most Notable Women of our Community” in Pendarha (2, 8, 2499), pp. 28-29.

Zoroastrian community, but also within the community itself. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the debates surrounding the twin problems of marriage and conversion.

As socioeconomic Iranian elites of all religious backgrounds increasingly sent their children abroad to Europe and the U.S. to pursue higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, the social and cultural fallout from time spent abroad began to be felt. In particular, the Zoroastrian community, as a minority community, suffered from Zoroastrians marrying foreigners (and thus not fellow Zoroastrians). This negatively affected community cohesion since Zoroastrians married to foreigners either did not return to Iran, or upon their return were less enthusiastic about participating in community activities. The problem was so intensely felt, that it was likened to the kidnapping and forcible conversion of Zoroastrian girls in the pre-modern, Islamic period: “I remember when […] girls from our villages were taken away and converted and how miserable we all were. But today we are unaware of a danger even greater, and more home-wreaking” – study abroad. As one editorial in a Zoroastrian journal lamented, “this might be of no consequence to other communities and religions but for our small community, the loss of each person is a problem.”42 It was also a problem with the integration of children from these marriages into the Zoroastrian community, and with the growing issue of whether or not a non-Zoroastrian born spouse might in fact convert to Zoroastrianism.

What we see here from this brief sketch of the problem, is the inherent conflict between community identity, religious identity and nationalism. On the one hand we have the paradox of Zoroastrian enthusiastic adoption of the modernizing national agenda, yet an adoption that in its effects, can and did lead to loss of community. Study abroad threatened the community with loss of its members. We also see the related problem of identity – what is a Zoroastrian: primarily a member of a religious community? Or a member of an ethno-historical community? Can one join by adopting the tenets of faith? Or must one be born into the community? These were not easy questions. They were all the more complicated given in a Muslim context which forbade apostasy from Islam. Although there were conversions from Islam in the 1960s and 1970s, the National Zoroastrian Organization never sanctioned them, perhaps for political reasons, although a Zoroastrian priest was found to perform initiation ceremonies.43 At the Third World Zoroastrian Congress in 1968 conversion of non-Zoroastrian spouses was condoned, although with the understanding that these spouses would not be apostatizing from Islam. More than ten foreign-born spouses in Iran took advantage of this ruling.44 Yet the notion, consistent with Zoroastrianism as a modern rational religion, that faith denoted identity, never led to the abandonment of Zoroastrian identity as an ethno-historic community. Commenting on the conversion of forty or so Muslims in Abadan to Zoroastrianism in the 1970s, a Zoroastrian woman voiced her opposition in

42 Hukht (14, 5 1342), pp. 18-20.
43 The Zoroastrian Anjoman of Tehran sent literature about Zoroastrianism but refused to sanction the conversion. Mobed Shahmardan performed the initiation rite. The converts, to assuage the fears of the Anjoman, called themselves the lesser-known name of Mazdiyasna, rather than Zoroastrians. See AMIGHI, Zoroastrians of Iran, p. 230.
44 AMIGHI, Zoroastrians of Iran, p. 286. These spouses were Christians, not Muslims.
ethnic terms: “Zoroastrianism is a race and a culture. When we suffered persecution, where were these would-be Zoroastrians?”45

Zoroastrianism as a religion contained strong elements of both universalism and particularism. Zoroastrianism was claimed as universal by insisting on its essential modernity. This was partly an argument about the universal validity and applicability of Zoroastrian values and the past in order to claim authenticity and thus the intrinsic capacity of modernizing, avoiding the charge of imitation of Western models. But this argument also implicitly rested on a substantially different notion of what religion was. Modern Zoroastrianism – the result of Zoroastrian reformism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – promoted the acceptance of secularism and citizenship in important ways. Adopting a deist notion of religions as human phenomena that in essence all provided a similar impetus for individual ethical behaviour meant that religious difference was not based on truth value so much as historical context. Religion was privatized not in the sense of reducing the role of religion, but in the sense that public performance of sectarian identity and ritualism was abandoned in favour of individual spirituality and internalized piety. This meant that individual consciousness of God led to ethical behaviour in society – public participation and civic duty. Religious universalism, internalization and privatization opened up space for the articulation of national identities and public participation of equality of citizenship.

Iranian nationalism, Zoroastrian community identity and the changing nature of religion and its relationship to society were indissolubly connected in Pahlavi Iran. Iranian nationalism, due to its reliance on the secularization of the ancient past, contained fundamental conflicts between inclusivity and exclusivity – with Iranian-ness so closely associated with the Zoroastrian past. On the one hand, it had to be a secular past in order to include all Iranians as citizens and equal participants in the nation. On the other hand, it was impossible to completely disassociate Zoroastrians from this past, and thus to include Shiite Muslims and other religious minorities equally. The Zoroastrian community also suffered from the tensions this created in their identity, since the nationalization of their religious past and their religious ceremonies simultaneously voided them of religious content.

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