AN ALTERNATIVE RELIGIOUS SPACE IN SHI‘A IRAN:
SOCIO-CULTURAL IMAGINARIES OF ZOROASTRIANS
IN CONTEMPORARY TEHRAN

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ABSTRACT

Based on eighteen months of fieldwork in Tehran, as well as extensive archival research and textual examinations, this dissertation analyzes the public rituals and discourses of the Zoroastrian religious minority in Iran to show how these define and defend Zoroastrian identity and values against persecution from the Shi‘a-Muslim majority. It begins by providing a focused historical sketch of Zoroastrians’ condition after the Arab invasion of seventh-century Iran, and some of the longstanding challenges they face living among Muslims. It then turns to description and analysis of hundreds of public discursive and ritual performances through which Zoroastrians identify, rationalize, and legitimate their doctrine and rituals in response to the prevalent Islamic context.

I argue that Zoroastrian religious gatherings manufacture an alternative religious space that operates in dialectical opposition to that of the dominant Shi‘a. For example, by maintaining their own astral calendar and round of celebrations, emphasizing joy rather than Shi‘a penitence, wearing white instead of black in commemorative rituals, and favoring women’s rights, the Zoroastrians assert their unique identity and make claims to global recognition.
Moreover, Zoroastrian socio-discursive conventions constantly play upon national, religious, and ethnic categories in a continuous process of identity construction. By sometimes coalescing, sometimes parsing out, the identities of Zoroastrians, Iranians, Shi’a, and Arabs, these maneuverings enable Zoroastrians to construct, imagine, and secure their survival and their distinctiveness. One way this is achieved is by drawing a link between past and present, establishing Zoroastrians as creators, preservers, and promoters of authentic Iranian culture. Furthermore, Zoroastrians stress their influence in the formation of Shi’a-Islam as a form of resistance against the invading Arab Sunnis. By emphasizing similarity with the Shi’a as an Iranianized religion, they carve out a habitable niche for themselves. At the same time, by accentuating the Arab roots of some Shi’a religious and cultural practices, portrayed as contrary to authentic Iranian culture, they maintain their distinctiveness.

In conclusion, I address the Islamic Regime’s recent linkage of nationalism to the glories of pre-Islamic Iran. This shift has, inadvertently, helped bring Zoroastrians’ assertion of themselves as symbols of primordial Iranian nationalism to public recognition.