

CONFLICT AND COOPERATION ZOROASTRIAN SUBALTERNES AND MUSLIM ELITES IN MEDIEVAL IRANIAN SOCIETY

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A Book Review

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CONFLICT AND COOPERATION is a well-researched and informative book on how Iran was conquered and converted by the Arabs. I do not know of any other book that covers this topic so succinctly and yet to very thoroughly, leaving out no available evidence. Unfortunately however, most of the evidence comes from Arab writers who are biased against Zarathushtis. However, the author has done a good job of objectively evaluating various data and remaining very impartial in his conclusions.

The book is studded with facts and references, which is its main strength, making it one of the best reference works on the subject, though at times, it becomes rather tedious for non-scholars. Nevertheless, it is as enthralling to a persistent lay reader as to a scholar.

This young, Harvard-educated scholar, originally from Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the only full-time, Behdin Zarathushti professor of Iranian studies outside of India, that I know of, has devoted his career to Zarathushti studies, and is a shining example to our young generation. He has researched a subject every Zarathushti is interested in, in a very dispassionate way, befitting a true scholar. He describes various reasons for the fall of the Sassanians – incessant wars with the Byzantine Empire, transforming a clan-based army into an indemnified one, termination of the vassal kingdom of Hira, which acted as a buffer between Iran and Arabia, weak leadership, excessive taxation, and social discontent.

Arabs first invaded Hira in 633 AC, and later, nearby towns and the Sassanians were able to drive them away once, but did not take them seriously. On a second attack, the Sassanians were defeated, at Quadisias, after a standoff for four months. The Arabs then proceeded to capture Iraq and Iran. Yazdegerd III, the last Sassanian king, went to eastern Iran, hoping the Arabs would eventually go away. But one after another, Sassanian citadels fell to the Arabs, who gave them three choices: to accept Islam, pay poll-tax, or fight it out.

The Iranians, as a rule, preferred to make peace by paying poll-tax, but reneged on it or even turned on the Arab garrisons in their city after the Arab army had left, until the Arabs returned and reconquered them. In Samarkand, the Iranians reneged on their forced conversions to Islam three times until the Arabs settled enough Muslims to ensure that the Zarathushtis did not again apostatize. Even then, they rebelled twice later on.

The Iranians engaged the Arabs in large numbers in 642 AC at Nihavand near Hamadan and fought bravely but lost to the Arabs who then found it easy to capture the rest of Iran. However, the area near the Caspian Sea held on for another century or so.

At first the Arabs were a tiny minority in Iran and lived by themselves as they were afraid of reprisals by the Iranians. Initially, converts in the rural areas were few and they had to move in with the Arabs in cities for their own safety. But the situation reversed in a century or so, as the Arabs induced Iranians to convert by exempting them from the poll-tax, offering them government jobs and equal status with the Arabs.

Shia and Sufi preachers went from place to place and converted many rural Iranians by their missionary zeal. In 750 AC, the Arab population in Iran was only 8%, but it went up to 50% in 850 and 80% in 990. Zarathushti priests began to depict their sense of despair in their religious writings and felt that the Satanic times predicted in their eschatological literature had already arrived, and hoped desperately for the Saoshyant to deliver them from the evil.

They also tried hard to be accepted as “People of the Book”, as were the Jews and Christians, by trying to prove that they had their own scriptures too, but the author shows that Zarathushtis were not treated as “People of the Book” but a shade lower. His treatment of the legendary Salman-Al Farsi is very factual. His extensive research shows little veracity for various claims that Zarathushtis were regarded as “People of the Book” by the Prophet Mohammed.

The reader will be hard-pressed to find a single typological, grammatical or factual error in this work. The author does not hesitate to disagree with such stalwarts as Boyce or Frye if facts warrant it, but his style is not as lucid as theirs, and he has little to add of his own except for meticulously proving his thesis, perhaps owing to his youth. And yet, one can hardly wait for another book that he says he is working on.

The author often takes issues with those, especially Boyce, who maintain that conversions to Islam were achieved mainly by force, and asserts that exemption from poll-tax, equal status with Muslims, job opportunities, etc., also played their part in alluring Iranians to convert. But is not this social coercion, at least by today’s standards? That should imply that the book title should be changed to *Conflict and Coercion*, as only the Zarathushtis, who bore the brunt of cruelty and oppression for centuries in the name of religion, could testify that there was only coercion and coerced cooperation they

underwent, once the conflict with the Arabs was over. No academic treatise, however, brilliant, can prove otherwise. Boyce lived with the Iranians and knows it firsthand. The Zarathushtis had to cooperate with their Muslim masters in order to survive, but all they got in return was a few instances of respite from the Arabs now and then.

Many scholars, following Darmesteter, have maintained that Arabs did not transform Iran so much as Iran transformed them, culturally, especially to Shiite beliefs, thus retaining its inner soul. One looks in vain for such philosophical attestations in this book, except for a terse admission: the converts “then modified both Islam and its behavioral norms” [p. 141].

The author has done a magnificent job of proving his main thesis, a job far better than many Western scholars have done, and yet without making the reader ever suspect partiality on his part, as a Zarathushti: “This investigation of social transformations is thus a study of how and why Zoroastrians developed into a subordinate, subjugated, or inferior class, that is, a subaltern community, experiencing crisis, displacement, and marginalization not only during that time but also later” [p. 11]... Cooperation however, came only from those who had converted to Islam and “their defiance ceased” [p. 143], but it was quite another matter for those who did not, and as such the title of the book may not be acceptable to them. We will not be surprised, therefore, if the Irani Zarathushtis take issue with him, as indeed Dr. Daryoush Jahanian often has, in *FEZANA Journal* and in Congresses.

And yet, that does not detract a bit from the usefulness of this excellent work, which every Zarathushti household should possess, as a factual record of their history.