

Review: *The Iranians – Persia, Islam, and the Soul of a Nation*, By Sandra Mackey

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The Iranians, written by Sandra Mackey, an expert on Middle Eastern culture, in a popular style, reviews the ideological pillars sustaining Iranian culture from the times of Cyrus to the present day. She maintains that the Iranians possess two complex and interlocking traditions: one comes from their Persian and Zoroastrian archetype of the good and just ruler, and the other out of Islam.

After briefly delineating the fundamental principles of the religion of Zarathushtra, the author contends that “Zoroastrianism carries a powerful social content. Religion is not only spiritual, it is political. In terms of contemporary Iran, the profound and lasting legacy of Zoroaster is that he imposed God’s moral will on society and implanted in Iran from its earliest beginnings, a strong religious character that has shaped the Iranian and his culture ever since.”

“... (Zoroaster), one of the most significant religious figures of all time and (Cyrus), one of the greatest political-military geniuses ever to stride across the human landscape, both occupied the cradle of the Iranian nation in the same era (which is questionable as Zarathushtra preceded Cyrus by many centuries). Their creations – one religious, the other political – blended. Zoroaster gave Cyrus’ earthly realm a soul and Cyrus gave Zoroastrianism a body.”

She asserts that Cyrus established the basic elements in Iranian culture – the basis of leadership, appreciation and collection of art and mores, and the unique and very special nature of the Aryans (Iran actually means Aryan). These “reappear in varying degrees and in various forms in the rulers and dynasties that followed him and on into the centuries in which Iran is described in terms of Islam.”

“Beyond his personal motives of conquest and glory, Cyrus believed that the supreme God defined by Zoroastrianism had entrusted him with the task of uniting the people of the earth in one kingdom of justice and peace. As the king of that empire, Cyrus exercised the Zoroastrian concept of the just ruler.

“Cyrus was raised as a symbol of Iranian nationalism and political tradition. The Pahlavi Shahs creatively invoked Cyrus’s name and defined his legacy to remind Iranians of their pre-Islamic past.”

Monarch, priest, and God. Zoroastrians regarded their kings as the

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instruments of God on earth, his right to govern stemming from his righteous conduct, his '*farr*' (*khoreh*) being its external evidence.

“The great king was to be the perfect man, the column of light connecting the upper world of ideals with the lower world of concrete facts. His task was not just to improve the human condition but to rise to a supernatural level on which he renewed the world according to the celestial pattern”. This theme looks like a reading from the *Shah Nameh* which she quotes too, but without realizing that this theme veritably reaches its pinnacle there.

Since the religion of Zarathushtra is based on free will, a ruler can choose to be evil, but he thereby loses his *farr*, “the sign of divine favor, which confirmed his inherent right to rule. It was this sacred principle of kingship which linked monarchy and religion as the dual forces of power, the symbolic manifestations of God’s will.

“Zoroastrian priests ripened into the authenticators of truth and justice. Thus the king and the priests, the secular and religious, formed another dualism in Persian culture.”

Persians and Arabs. When Iran fell to the Arabs in the seventh century, Persian culture stayed intact to fertilize Islam and define it for him ... Iranians rejected Arab culture, choosing instead to hold to the values, mores and aesthetics of pre-Islamic Persia.”

Centuries later, Saddam Hussein “played on the deep prejudices between Arabs and Iranians ... His speeches characterized the Iranians as fire-worshipping Persians and (boasted) that once more the Arabs would crush the tyranny of ‘the Magi’. In Iran, the Iraqi invasion tripped all the switches of Iranian nationalism,” a Persian heritage.

The author seems to have put in tremendous effort to study the subject. I for one, do not remember reading a book on Iran, except perhaps *The Cambridge History of Iran*, that gave me so much insight into how the past is still governing the present Islamic Iran. As a psychoanalyst, I benefited from it greatly.

This book, more than any other, also enabled me to fully understand why my Iranian friends are so weary of British and American intervention in Iranian politics. The book also afforded me complete coherence about what I had read piecemeal as a teenager, about the struggle between the Shah and his prime minister, Mossadique.

The author’s plea to the US not to brand and treat Iran as a pariah nation, but allow it the respect and standing among all nations it deserves, is timely. After all, when the US established diplomatic ties with Persia in 1882, it did so mainly because it was “the oldest government in the world”. Today, without Iran’s cooperation, few can ensure the safety of the Persian Gulf for us.