Book Reviews


Careful studies of confessional minorities in the contemporary Middle East are few and hard to come by. Our limited knowledge of this topic has a lot to do with the politicization of minority rights in the Middle East and lack of easy access to a lifeworld that is overtly guarded by minorities themselves. The group that is the subject of this careful ethnographic work by Navid Fozi is one that, in addition, has a protracted record of being neglected by scholars in the West.

The Zoroastrian community of Iran has a long history of being mistreated, discriminated against, and outright persecuted in Iranian society. It was only in the 19th and 20th centuries that some serious attempts were made to lessen the burden of the economic, social, and legal pressure on the community. While these efforts brought about some meaningful changes, they politicized minority rights in Iran and led to severe measures being taken against the community in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution. Still, the Islamic Republic found ways to ease some of these measures over time, and it is during this period of controlled accommodation that Fozi gained access to the community. During his fieldwork, the author attended numerous Zoroastrian rituals, ceremonies, exhibitions, and communal events in Tehran with its largest concentration of Zoroastrians in the country. He had open-ended conversations with a sizable number of believers from among the laity, the learned, and the priestly class. Fozi has combined this ethnographic research with some historical and archival work, and engaged with the literature on the anthropology of knowledge and history, as well as performance, performativity, and discourse analysis. His principal aim was to illustrate how Zoroastrians derive religious and cultural sustenance from a variety of sources that are mythical, devotional, historical, genealogical, textual, rational, and academic.
Fozi’s research indicates that the Zoroastrian community faces a number of intractable dilemmas. For one, it is still subjected to the persecution, discrimination, and difficulties that have been part and parcel of the experience of all confessional minorities in contemporary Iran. In addition, Zoroastrians have to deal with a multifaceted demographic question as they lose members to other religions, cross-communal marriages, and migration to foreign countries. (The estimated size of their small community in Iran is between 14,000 and 25,271 individuals.) That the prevalent mood of the community continues to see the Zoroastrian identity in a racialized ethnic manner while it experiences a low rate of marriage and childbirth adds to internal anxieties over the possibility of its extinction. But such threats against their physical and cultural survival also prompt Zoroastrians to make deliberate attempts at stopping or reversing the processes that exacerbate the dwindling of their population.

Far from being passive with regard to their current predicament, Zoroastrians also take an active role in the propaganda war that is fought against them and articulate a set of ideas against common accusations and criticisms by the most conservative groups in society. The process of responding to such charges ultimately leads them to unexpected outcomes; they engage in systematizing and rationalizing their beliefs and practices for internal consumption. In addition, Zoroastrians undertake a series of projects that aim at revitalizing their community and raise its place in society. A few of these projects are explained by Fozi to involve the public reopening of a Zoroastrian-owned and -operated clinic, and a public library that holds a sizable number of books on the Zoroastrian religion and community. The leaders of the community also plan on building a massive fire temple in the city, and expanding housing and educational facilities for young members of their community.

In closely observing and analyzing Zoroastrian rituals and communal events, Fozi discovered a vibrant community, which actively facilitates the formation of what he calls “spatio-temporalities” that are distinct from society at large. He observed that different Zoroastrian administrative organizations hold and manage a series of celebrations meant to strengthen social ties among various members of the community. Fozi contends that these events help the community preserve important rites and cultural practices, transfer religious knowledge from one generation to another,