Missionaries of a Religious Revolution: Continuity in the Politics of Iranians

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Missionaries of a Religious Revolution: Continuity in the Politics of Iranians by Shayaan Benjamin Karimi, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Political Science at San Francisco State University.

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Abstract

This thesis examines unanticipated continuity and unexpected congruence in Iranian political discourse, vernacular, theory, and thought. Although Iran has undergone seismic transformations in religious and political systems throughout the many historical epochs of its lengthy recorded and pre-recorded past, what is remarkable has been the observed, demonstrable tenacity of particular attributes in regard to politics both in conceptual approach as well as in tangible practice. These attributes of continuity between past and present include: dualism, tendencies towards puritanical orthodoxy, the persistence and entrenchment of hierarchical and class-based stratification that is nonetheless curiously counterbalanced by communitarian and populist inflections, an ethical disposition centering on ‘the poor’ or ‘oppressed’, and state-formation as the prime achievement and apotheosis of political aspiration. Each of these listed attributes have survived from earlier times through the transference of idiom and values between successive ideologies, dogmas, and belief systems. The purpose of this thesis is to utilize content analysis along with linguistic and etymological methods in order to analyze how Iranian political regimes are inexorably colored by these themes – which long predated modernity – more so than any regime or intellectual body was aware, is aware, or is willing to concede. My thesis, by desiloing salient bodies of literature and through pursuing explicit yet underutilized connections made in secondary scholarship between modern Iran and the antique heritage of its civilization such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeanism, and the rise and fall of the historic Persian Empires,
demonstrates that despite vitriolic opposition between regimes and their exponents, considerable continuity and congruence is evident between them and Iran’s inherited political tradition.
Preface

This thesis in no way glorifies, rationalizes, or sanctions political violence or religious persecution, but because of the unfortunate reality that these phenomena are manifest in the subject matter treated, these aspects are critically analyzed in such manner as is appropriate in an scholarly academic work.
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Introduction

The premise of this thesis - which is to identify specific thematic elements that are manifest within the contemporary politics of Iran and to demonstrate and analyze how these themes are inherited from and represent affectual, salient continuity with the political forms and attributes of ancient Iranian civilization - came about over the course of extensive primary and secondary source research that this author engaged in. By the time that this research process reached a critical juncture, a remarkable set of correlations lay before me that the interpretative frameworks which are popular and dominant among Iranian Americans (essentially superlative truisms that posit diametric opposition between past and present ‘x or y has nothing to do with a or b’) proved incapable of resolving. Yet the word correlation, even when paired with the hefty modifying adjective of remarkable, still amounts to a diplomatic underplaying of the correspondences identified in the sources.

In fact, what had been uncovered over and over again were often verbatim, word-for-word, articulations of the same ideas, the same concepts, in sources pertaining to Iran but which fell within dissimilar domains categorically and whose substantive content related to time periods that were incredibly distant from one another chronologically. The common threads were that of the ideas being articulated, that the cultural and geographic origin point of those who voiced these ideas was Iran or Persia in some form or another (the nuances of terminology and even the evolution of these ideas is germane to this thesis but not entirely relevant to parse through at every stage), along with one other thread: the context of these correspondences was persistently political, and persistently involved religion.
When correspondences occur and repeat with enough frequency so as to be predictable, that is to say, when systematic correspondences exist within a body of sources pertaining to the same topic and subject matter, it can no longer be said that coincidence is at work, nor is it tenable at that point to ‘blink’, and refrain from adopting a systematic treatment in order to make sense of them. So as opposed to adopting empirical or numerical methodological techniques, this thesis chiefly relies on a content analytic approach in order to assess and draw conclusions in regard to manifest continuity in the politics of contemporary Iran with ancient Iranian civilization owing to the durability of core aspects of the Iranian political tradition.

A varied number of analytical interpretations as to the subject matter and themes treated in this thesis, from that of Patrick Clawson and Michal Rubin, the authors of *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos*, who view the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979 as amounting to an aberration from the Iranian tradition, to John Limbert, author of *Iran: At War with History*, who posits that the key to successful interpretation of events pertaining to Iranian politics, particularly the Islamic Revolution, lies with analyzing the Iranian tradition in light of its religious legacy, and that of Robert Baer, author of *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, who contends that the ascendancy of the revolutionary Islamic Republic of Iran into a rising geopolitical heavyweight power in the twenty first century constitutes a modern manifestation of the imperial legacy of Iran’s political tradition. Between these different perspectives, this thesis contends that the perspective and conclusions of Limbert and Baer, particularly owing to Baer’s reliance on the seminal works of Paul Kriwaczek’s *In Search of Zarathustra* and Roy Mottahedeh’s *Mantle of the Prophet*, are the most persuasive, and that Clawson and Rubin err in failing to connect salient indications in the politics of the Islamic
Republic to the Iranian political tradition and the inheritance of the past political forms of Iranian civilization.

The little known work, *Tell the American People: Perspectives on the Iranian Revolution* provided the foremost set of correspondences that engendered the core concept of tracing the source of particular political statements and the sentiments therein expressed by twentieth century exponents of Iranian political activity. *Tell the American People* supplements the chapters written by Westerners with excerpts from a handful of the Islamic Revolution’s notable ideologues, including Ali Shariati, Abdol-Hasan Bani-Sadr, Ayatollah Morteza Motahari (who at that point had only recently been assassinated), and the figurehead of the movement, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The book - which is a compilation of several chapters each written by a distinct author, and which was published by the ‘Movement For a New Society’, a defunct organization of progressive and leftist organizers and activists - is extraordinarily fascinating for a variety of reasons, not the least which is its publication date in the spring of 1980, nearly a full year after the toppling of the monarchical regime, yet only a precarious few months before the outbreak of the monumentally transformative Iran-Iraq War in the fall of that same year.

Of additional curiosity is the fact that some of the writers who are published in *Tell the American People* accompanied the ‘Committee on an American-Iranian Crisis Resolution’, who lead a delegation to the still-nascent Islamic Republic seeking to break the deadlock only months into the infamous hostage crisis of 1979 to 1981 (Albert 1980, 112). The diary entries of journalist William Worthy of *The Baltimore Afro-American* - one of three journalists embedded with and who covered the work of the ‘Committee on an American-Iranian Crisis Resolution’ - that were composed in February 1980 and which were published as a chapter in *Tell the
American People provided the preeminent puzzle which this thesis took shape in order to ‘solve’, by demonstrating that a particular political ethic given by an important Islamic revolutionary (in fact, a verbatim articulation) represented definitive continuity in Iran’s politics, between the modern era, and what can be put simply as the ancient past.

The statement in question was recorded by William Worthy in his diary entry dated to February 9, 1980, and was delivered by a well-known personality of the Iranian Revolution whose actions can be said fairly to have significantly shaped the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the entry, William Worthy describes that he and the author of another chapter of Tell the American People, the sociologist and photojournalist Randy Goodman, “had a chance encounter with Hossein Sheikholislam, and [held an] intimate conversation for two hours” (Worthy 1980, 114). This ‘Hossein Sheikholislam’, transliterated in Tell the American People with an ‘i’ as opposed to the usual ‘e’, was none other than one of the principal leaders of the revolutionary students who seized the American embassy in November 1979.

William Worthy enumerates a list totalling seven items of “other points in the conversation with Hossein: ” (Worthy 1980, 115), almost all of which revolved around the still-unresolved international crisis generated as a result of the actions of the hostage-taking students. However, one of these enumerated points is conspicuously dissimilar to the others in that, while each of the other seven points recorded by William Worthy outlined Hossein Sheikholislam’s perspective on Ayatollah Khomeini and his appraisals of the geopolitical considerations of February 1980, the sixth point has no bearing on current affairs whatsoever, and appears to be a ethical statement or at least a core, deeply-held political conviction. In between a statement of apprehension towards the USSR over its military cooperation with the Pahlavi regime and
speculation as to the machinations of President Carter vis a vis the ousted Shah’s prospective extradition came the bombshell ethical declaration:

“–The right is eternal. The wrong will be destroyed eventually. You must be on one side or the other. If you’re on neither side, you’re nowhere.” (Worthy 1980, 115)

A brief truism such as this, succinct and seemingly innocuous, might not arouse much interest compared to the much lengthier ruminations as to “Hamilton Jordan’s hasty secret journey to Panama [which] set the stage for Shah to leave Texas” and “China’s official welcome for his sister [Ashraf Pahlavi, sister of Mohammad Reza] during his reign didn’t endear either country [USSR or PRC] to Iranians” that were sandwiched immediately before and after it. At most, analysts following conventional interpretative frameworks might concede that what Hossein Sheikholeslam offers here is merely a traditional Iranian folkway. But from where did this folkway emerge, and how far back can the ideological content of this succinct ethical truism be dated back to, if at all? The answer, I contend, certainly transcends anything ‘mere’, and amount to much more than correspondence.

“Unlike other prophets of antiquity, Zarathustra had taught that history was neither cyclical nor eternal. The struggle he described between good and evil would one day be brought to a head in a great battle, and after many troubles and torments, the forces of good would be victorious under the leadership of a divine savior called the Saoshyant (Future Benefactor): In the view of the later Zoroastrian theologians, he would be a descendent of Zarathustra himself. In what Zarathustra called the Frasho-kereti, to which some translators give the splendid name “The Making Wonderful,” the victorious Saoshyant and his helpers will restore the world to pristine purity.” (Kirwacez 2002, 151)

Shorn of references to specific names and doctrinal, this is nearly pure verbatim to the statement made by Hossein Sheikholeslam. Thus the notion of an inevitable battle between good and evil, right and wrong, or truth and falsehood taking place at the end of days in which evil, wrong, or
falsehood are destined to be smote by that which is right, good, and true is not only a longstanding Iranian folkway, but is in fact a defining aspect of the religion of Zoroastrianism; a core component of that belief system that has been traditionally attributed to the Prophet Zoroaster himself.

Mehdi Estkahr’s two volume work *The Place of Zoroaster in History* is a tour d’horizon examining as near to the full body of references to Zoroaster and his belief system as exists in the Western literary tradition, spanning an imposing interval of time from the pre-Hellenistic period in classical antiquity up to the eighteenth century when manuscripts containing the entirety of the Zoroastrian religious canon were shanghaied over to Europe where the leading Orientalist scholars subjected those manuscripts to study and translation.

“To sum up then,” as Estakhr writes at the close of an early chapter of the first volume of his book, the Greek authors of the first epoch of classical antiquity generated a significant amount of written material in regard to Zoroaster and his exotic, incredibly old religion, so much so that, “while the vast amount of work devoted to Zoroaster and the Magi by the Greek writers . . . vouches for the high degree of excitement that the Persian religion stimulated . . . their [the Greeks’s] words and reports provide us with solid evidence as to what they thought regarding the nature of Magism.” (Estakhr 2012, 41). Estakhr outlines the various aspects of the Hellenic understanding of Zoroaster, which contained many correct attributes, as well as some apocryphal notions, such as the idea that the Magi, or Zoroastrian priests, practiced an “abstention from luxury and worldly affairs” (Estakhr 2012, 42). As will be seen in greater detail, the idea that the priesthood of Zoroastrianism were aloof to the goings-on of the world around them is altogether
incorrect, is in fact close to the diametric opposite of, “the characteristic Zoroastrian attitude of responsible stewardship for this world.” (Boyce 1984, 14).

Perhaps the most correct part of the Hellenic idea of Zoroaster and his religious system is also that part which is the most crucial to the inquiry of this thesis, which was the Greek understanding that, “the Magians conceived of a dualism which was manifested in a struggle at the cosmic level between the forces of good and evil, light and darkness, or, as they expressed it, between Ahuramazda and Ahriman, the ultimate victory in which battle lay with the former.” (Estakhr 2012, 41).

The saliency of what, if anything, the ancient Greeks may or may not have correctly understood about Zoroaster and his religion may not be obvious at first glance. However, while not primarily central to this thesis, given that this is not an historical inquiry but one made into the Iranian political tradition using the methodology of the discipline of political science, being able to reliably establish and succinctly present such information is relevant because pursuing the provenance of ideas expressed by Iranian revolutionaries in the early period of the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979 that were of particular centrality and importance to them, and then tracing the first historical attestations (if not their genesis, which may not be possible to conclusively place a date upon) of those ideas back to Zoroastrianism provides us the means to understand just how ancient was that sixth item of William Worthy’s bulleted list of Hossein Sheikholeslam’s points on politics – and thus just how much continuity exists between distant epochs of the Iranian political tradition, as well as how affectual that continuity is.

So for the sake of buttressing Estakhr’s dating, we can pair his summary with an excerpt from the eminent scholar of Zoroastrianism, Mary Boyce, who in her highly useful *Textual*
Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism, provided a selection from a translation of the Greek historian Theopompus that is included in Boyce’s book in order to explicate the rather obscurantist Zoroastrian heresy of Zurvanism, yet within which is contained yet another articulation of the aforementioned doctrine of an inevitable, climactic battle between the forces of good and evil. According to Boyce, who gives an English translation of a citation from the ancient Greek work,

“Theopompus says that, according to the Magians, for three thousand years alternately the one god will dominate the other and be dominated, and that for another three thousand years they will fight and make war, until one smashes up the domain of the other. In the end Hades shall perish and men shall be happy;” — (Boyce 1984, 96).

Elsewhere, in a discussion regarding the transference of the identity of the historical Zoroaster’s identity in requisite fashion with the cultures that appropriated Zoroastrian ideas, Estakhr deconstructs the evolution of the doctrine of ‘good eventually triumphing over evil’ from a Zoroastrian idea, to an idea literally espoused by the original historical Zoroaster. Estakhr establishes, “an early Mazdean doctrine according to which in the last struggle the forces of good will be led by a World Savior, Saoshyant, miraculously born to a virgin from the seed of Zoroaster”, before clarifying that, “At a later time, however, it would seem that the doctrine was ascribed to Zoroaster himself, and he was made the author of the prophecy” (Estkahr 2012, 145). This slight modification might have taken place, Estakhr postulates, because, “since Zoroaster had prophesied the ‘second existence,’ he must have also known who would inaugurate it, especially since this person would be, as it were, his own son.” — (Estakhr 2012, 145).

In many ways, while terms such as ‘Frasho-kereti’, and proper nouns like ‘Ahura Mazda’, ‘Saoshyant’ might certainly strike contemporary readership as obscure or even occult,
the body of Zoroastrian ideas examined in this inquiry should hardly be unfamiliar, in the sense that, “belief in good and evil, angles, the Devil, heaven and hell, the coming of a Messiah, and an eventual end of the world . . . . every one of those ideas first appeared in Zarathustra’s teaching long before the start of recorded history, a message as influential today as it ever was.” (Kriwaczek 2002, 228). As Mehdi Estakhr explains in a portion of his work examining the stature of Zoroaster among the early adherents of Christianity, “such Zoroastrian eschatological and apocalyptic tenets, such as Zoroaster’s prophesy of the World Savior’s birth from a virgin, could have been transmitted to him [the Apostle Matthew] by Zoroastrian converts to Christianity” (Estakhr 2012, 160). The diffusion of these ideas into various different religions and systems of belief is a topic of discussion and scholarship, which, as fascinating as it is, nonetheless is tangential and digressive to the narrowly tailored scope of this thesis, which is to examine continuity in the Iranian political tradition, from the Iranian past to the Iranian present.

In truth, any number of a slew of sources, not merely the notably rigorous and scrutinious work of Mehdi Estakhr’s *The Place of Zoroaster in History*, Mary Boyce’s comprehensive *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, or Paul Kriwaczek’s *In Search of Zarathustra* could be used to corroborate the Zoroastrian origin of Hossein Sheikholeslam’s conviction that “the right is eternal, the wrong will be destroyed eventually” (Worthy 1980, 115), which, as shown through Sheikholeslam’s espousal of the idea as part of a list of political observations, is not merely an eschatological belief that is still extant among Iranians in contemporary times. In fact, this originally-Zoroastrian idea is a powerful ethic which, evidently, retains a significant degree of motivating force, given that Hossein Sheikholeslam’s generation of religious revolutionaries cited it to explicate why they brought down a powerful Western-backed monarch,
Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who had staked his legitimacy upon that very same pre-Islamic Iranian heritage that, somehow, also managed to direct his most vehement and ultimately triumphant political adversaries.

As it so happens, ‘religious revolution’ is a specific two-word phrase that occurs several times across a number of secondary sources in a number of ‘silo-ed’ domains which all nonetheless relate to Iranian subject matter from a similarly diverse number of historical periods. The Parsi Zoroastrian Dastur Ardeshir Framroze Bode used the phrase in a May 1962 speech delivered to the elites of the Pahlavi establishment at the Ancient Iranian Culture Society (drawing on Clement Huart’s 1923 book Ancient Persia and Iranian Civilization which itself cites the famous French scholar Renan for the phrase) to state that the “ancient Iranians”, taken to mean those pre-Islamic dynasties – the context does not specify which but points to the Achaemenids – whom Mohammad Reza Pahlavi affixed his legitimacy, “were missionaries of a religious revolution and they carries over the world a culture and religion of a very high quality” (Bode 1978, 56).

Then, in 1980, we have Leslie Withers, a “member of [the] Atlanta Movement for a New Society”, “Southeast Regional Coordinator of Clergy and Laity Concerned”, and who, just like journalist William Worthy who interviewed Hossein Sheikholeslam, was a “part of the Committee for an American-Iranian Crisis Resolution delegation to Iran, February 1980” (Withers 1980, i). On the opening page of her chapter published in the compilation Tell the American People, Leslie Withers provides a quotation from Zahra Rahnavard, described as “a noted Iranian scholar and revolutionary leader” (who is now under what is tantamount to permanent house arrest in the Islamic Republic) in which Rahnavard expounds on the 1978-1979
Revolution’s world-historical uniqueness stemming from its theological character (Withers 1980, 123). This leads Withers to beg the question: “why was there a religious revolution in Iran? Who led it, and what made it work?” (Withers 1980, 123).

Later in 2002, in the exceedingly engaging and panoramic work *In Search of Zarathustra*, author Paul Kriwaczek, during his survey of the “relations between the Judaean exiles and their Achaeamenid rulers” begins to examine the “rather tortured account of the re-establishment of a Jewish homeland in Jerusalem” as “is contained in the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah”, which Kriwaczek notes is riddled with unclear dates and uncertain names, although one detail unambiguous detail appears to be that Nehemiah was cup-bearer to the monarch (Kriwaczek 2002, 195). “What does seem clear”, assesses Kriwaczek, “is that both Ezra and Nehemiah were important personages in the Persian royal court in the fifth century B.C. and that they received permission – and financial support – to return to the land of their fathers and carry out a religious revolution” (Kriwaczek 2002, 195), yet another astonishing appearance of that phrase, now being used in appraisal of the Exilic Judean allies of the Achaemenids, those “ancient Iranians” whom Dabu in 1962 (an even four decades prior to the publication of Kriwaczek’s book in 2002) had characterized as being “missionaries of a religious revolution” (Bode 1978, 56). Kriwaczek, after noting that Ezra and Nehemiah, after “return[ing] to the land of their fathers” and “forcibly imposing their vision of true Judaism on the astonished population”, who were no longer “counted as true Jews”, arrives at the point of his survey, insightfully stating that, “it would be surprising if they hadn’t, even unconsciously, absorbed Iranian ideas while serving their Persian masters” (Kriwaczek 2002, 195).
At this juncture, we leap backwards in time to the year 1880, when, in the introduction to the ‘Sacred Books of the East’ publication of the Vendidad – a text pertaining to laws and punishments and the first book of the compilation of canonical Zoroastrian religious texts called the Avesta – translator James Darmesteter discusses the merits and pitfalls of vying methodological approaches to the translation of the Avesta, and over the course of that discussion brings up the eminent Iranologist Martin Haug. “But the dangers of the [comparative] method came to light in the works of Haug” writes Darmesteter, who continues on chiding Haug’s scholarship, claiming that, “[by] giving a definite form to a system still fluctuating, [Haug] converted Mazdeism into a religious revolution against Vedic polytheism” (Darmesteter 1880, xxix). Darmesteter proceeds on his harangue against Haug, writing that Haug “found historical allusions to that schism both in the Avesta and in the Veda, pointed out curses against Zoroaster in the Vedas, and, in short, transformed, as it were, the two books into historical pamphlets.” (Darmesteter 1880, xxix). While pointing out in this line of attack that Martin Haug employed an forensic process in his determination that what was on hand in these manuscripts was evidence of a “religious revolution” (Darmesteter 1880, xxix), later on in the same introduction, Darmesteter flatly denied Haug’s conclusion, stating, “there was no religious revolution”, instead forwarding the hypothesis of a “slow movement which led, by insensible degrees . . . to the sharply defined dualism of the Magi” (Darmesteter 1880, lxxxi). But does this mean Haug was incorrect, that ‘religious revolution’ is a phrase inapplicable to the historical personality of Zoroaster and to his eponymous belief system of Zoroastrianism?

As it turns out, the thinking of L.H. Mills, the scholar who, as part of the same ‘Sacred Books of the East’ series, translated the Gathas – the oldest portion of the Avesta and whose
author is believed both by Zoroastrian tradition as well as by a resounding consensus of scholars to be none other than the historical Zoroaster himself (Kriwaczek 2002, 208) – evolved considerably on the matter of the political element of Zoroaster and his revelation.

From the ‘Sacred Books of the East Vol. XXXI The Zend-Avesta Part III’ published in 1887, and Zarathustrian Gathas In Metre and Rythm: Second Edition of the Author’s Version of 1892-94 With Important Additions (certainly a lengthy title) published in 1903, L.H. Mills went from expressing that, “the marriage festival of Zarathustra’s child must have been, if without intention, a semi-political occasion, and the bard would express himself, as naturally, with regard to the struggle which was still going on” (Mills 1887, 188), to then claiming that, “the marriage of his [Zarathustra’s] child as that of the leading princely priest could not have failed to be an important religious-political occasion” (Mills 1903, 189), a remarkable and quite tangible difference in interpretation that eschews the ambiguity of his 1887 interpretation that only applied a political lens on Zoroaster in shades and hues – “if without intention” and “a semi-political occasion” (Mills 1887, 188) – to instead explicitly articulate the very same substance as equal parts religious and political – “could not have failed to be” and “an important religious-political occasion” (Mills 1903, 189) – landing much closer to Haug’s conception of ‘religious revolution’. Even the description of the bard and the struggle is noticeably and importantly different from 1887 to 1903, evolving from “and the bard would express himself, as naturally, with regard to the struggle which was still going on” (Mills 1887, 188) to “and the bard would strike in with allusions to the military struggle which by no means was entirely over” (Mills 1903, 189), the added dimension being that the ancient struggle between the first Zoroastrians and the non-Zoroastrians of that remote age was now considered by Mills, the paramount
authority on the subject, to have been, without equivocation or scholarly hesitation, a military conflict.

On the subject of the historical Zoroaster, the progenitor of this politico-religious (and apparently even military) movement, that which may well have been the earliest Iranian ‘religious revolution’, the Gathas are the best evidence which ought to be treated in order to draw any sort of conclusion. And when the description of the persona of Zoroaster provided by L.H. Mills in his translation from over a century ago is compared to the description of Zoroaster in more recent secondary sources, the characterizations are all solidly consistent with one another.

Mills arrives at his characterization of the historical Zoroaster by way of his examination of the Gathas, which, in qualitative terms, he describes as “vivid supplications” (Mills 1903, xvi). Over the course of his argumentation as to the significant age of the Gathas, in other words, as part of his line of argument where he provides, “the reasons for believing the Gathas to be old, (i.e. to date several centuries before Christ)” (Mills 1903, xv). The first reason that Mills provides as to the dating of the Gathas, and which, more importantly for the purposes of this inquiry, speaks to his characterization of the historical Zoroaster, is that,

“First, the Gathas are original, meaning by the term that they show evidence of having been composed by persons who expressed in them genuine feelings called into play by actual and contemporaneous events. The reasons for believing this are, first, their excessive personality, second, the depth and fervid character of the convictions expressed in them.” - (Mills 1903, xv)

Quite in the same vein as this characterization from Mills, as to “genuine feelings”, “excessive personality”, and “fervid character” (Mills 1903, xv), is the characterization provided by the anonymous author of In Search of My God, an impeccably researched and strikingly illustrated coffee-table style book published in 1978 by an unnamed Parsi Zoroastrian.
Notwithstanding the book’s non-objective voice – the author describes in the introduction that the book is aimed at devout Zoroastrian families for the sake of bringing members of the household together and “build in them [Zoroastrian children] a feeling of pride and faith” (In Search of My God 1978, i) – and which is an excellent and versatile resource which offers explanations and translations on Zoroastrian prayers, history, theology, ceremonies, holidays, calendars, and more. This devout yet anonymous “father, in quest of information about our religion” (In Search of My God 1978, i) offers much the same view as L.H. Mills, namely that, “The Gathas bring out the powerful personality of the Prophet” (In Search of My God 1978, 15).

According to this author, “Zarathushtra was a fiery man – a man of action and of deep thoughts” (In Search of My God 1978, 15), a description which the author couples in the following paragraph with another series of appellations that immediately recall the political, writing that, “Zarathushtra was active, practical and militant. Those who served God best he maintained, were those who rendered active service to God’s creation” (In Search of My God 1978, 15). The crux of the teachings delivered by this ‘fiery militant’ to his constituency was, “to accept the settled life of a farmer over that of a nomad . . . that peasantry was better than pillage” (In Search of My God 1978, 15).

In the characterization of the historical Zoroaster given in In Search of My God, some of the doctrinal components of Zoroastrianism which would eventually lead the exponents of that religion in its heyday into conflict with and persecution against the Manichaeans (about which there will be more later) are provided, and are articulated as having stemmed from the historical Zoroaster, with the anonymous author writing “He [Zoroaster] made clear that the ideal of life was not to be reached by ecstasy and meditation alone” (In Search of My God 1978, 15). It
would hardly be in keeping with an ‘active’, ‘fervid’ spirit and an exhortation to the highly work-intensive and time-consuming lifestyle of agriculture to sanction escapism in any form, and accordingly, the author of *In Search of My God* noted that the message of Zoroaster was one which venerated to his flock that, “. . . living in the midst of the world’s joys and sorrows enables one to touch the various chords of human life.” (*In Search of My God* 1978, 15)

From Paul Kriwaczek we have it that, “one cannot doubt that Zarathustra was a deeply radical figure in the religious history of antiquity” (Kriwaczek 2002, 213), a figure who, as Kriwaczek in his typically colorful fashion, makes intelligible to modern readership by posing a rhetorical question, “who was this crazy thirty-year old who was threatening the age-old traditions of the tribe?” (Kriwaczek 2002, 214) from the mouths of “the princes and warriors of his people, not to speak of the priests [who] reacted badly to his claims” (Kriwaczek 2002, 213-214). And as Kriwaczek further describes how, “Zarathustra saw in the workings of the world a clear sign that evil was an independent force that must be combated” (Kriwaczek 2002, 226”, we achieve further insight as to why the prophet’s message was antithetical to “observing the cloistered virtues of a hermit who flees from the temptations of the world or the ascetic who seeks salvation for himself” (*In Search of My God* 1978, 15). As it is stirringly articulated in the penultimate sentence of the requisite page of *In Search of My God*, “this [Zoroaster’s ideology] enables man not only to contemplate righteousness, but to carry it through into action and in the process, destroy wickedness”, a sentiment not very far from the sentiment of religious fundamentalism expressed to William Worthy by Hossein Sheikholeslam in 1980, and in fact, the very final sentence of the same page, “In the final analysis, to destroy all evil in the world is God’s final goal” (*In Search of My God* 1978, 15) is almost verbatim with Sheikholeslam’s sixth
bullet point which initiated the inquiry, “the right is eternal. The wrong will be destroyed eventually” (Worthy 1980, 115).

Between political-religion, fiery militant personalities, and violent contestation between forces opposed to one another on account of their interests as well as on the doctrinal and theological grounds, all the while remaining within the demarcation of Iranian subject matter, a strong atmosphere of consistency has taken shape. But does this consistency in analytical language demonstrated so far truly bare out the premise of salient and effectual political continuity through the Iranian tradition between the highly distant periods of time that have been introduced, the ancient Zoroastrian past and events in Iran less than half a century removed from the present day? However much the language and themes are the same, it would not stand as has thus far been elucidated to link Hossein Sheikholeslam, his political-ethical precept delivered in conversation to William Worthy (as much as it is identical with the Zoroastrian eschatological doctrine of Frasho-kereti) and the Iranian “religious revolution” (Withers 1980, 123) of 1978-1979 A.D. to the other Iranian “religious revolution[s]” and their exponents in the pre-Islamic epoch — that is to say, it is not sound to do so, yet.

While a considerable temporal landscape still separates that which has been presented as the ‘finish line’ and that which has been contended thus far to be the ‘starting line’, what remains to be shown – that which will be shown – will serve to close that gap. That which will be demonstrated in the following portions will flesh out the historical process of the displacement or transference of the very specific idea that, “the right is eternal. The wrong will be destroyed eventually. You must be on one side or another. If you’re on neither side, you’re nowhere”, (Worthy 1980, 115) from the belief systems of its origin, Zoroastrianism, to the belief system
through which it was expressed as a revolutionary political tenet by Hossein Sheikholeslam in 1980: the Iranian-interpretation of Islam.

Although it has been described thus far in this thesis – and not-incorrectly – as a ‘tenet’, an ‘ethic’, a ‘principle’, etc, in a categorical sense, the aforementioned idea expressed by Hossein Sheikholeslam that has been demonstrated as being identical to Zoroastrian eschatology constitutes something which, in the Iranian political tradition, is something in between a core belief, or, “[a] view that [is] a part of a person’s deep identity [which] [is] not easily changed” (Petraeus 2007, 90) and a value, “an enduring belief that that a specific mode of conduct or end state of existence is preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end state of existence” (Petraeus 2007, 91). Furthermore, a belief system, which, “acts as a filter for new information”, and which is, “the lens through which people perceive the world”, is defined in a finite sense as, “the totality of the identities, beliefs, values, attitudes, and perceptions that an individual holds” (Petraeus 2007, 92). The preceding definitions are taken from the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, a text which, being a military text, introduces and defines these concepts in a concise fashion in order to familiarize soldiers with the information they would require in a practical context in order to be the most effective. The figure most closely associated with the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, and who wrote the book’s foreword, General David H. Petraeus, was the commander on the opposing side of another figure who will be treated later in this thesis, General Qassem Soleimani, and thus, the *Field Manual* is not only an effective source, but a highly salient one.

Returning from this digression, another point that might perhaps be obvious yet undoubtedly critical is made in the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, which is that, “religions,
ideologies, an all types of ‘isms’ fall into this category [of belief systems]” (Petraeus 2007, 92). It is further clarified that, “as a belief system, a religion may include such things as a concept of God, a view of the afterlife, ideas about the sacred and the profane, funeral practices, rules of conduct, and modes of worship” (Petraeus 2007, 92). It is to this definition of religion as a belief system that attention ought to be affixed. Given the Field Manual’s correct-seeming assertion that, “core beliefs are unstated, taken for granted, resistant to change, and not consciously considered” (Petraeus 2007, 90), a theoretical schema is now nearly completed for the transference of the Zoroastrian eschatological notion of Frasho-kereti, which is literally a “view of the afterlife” (Petraeus 2007, 92) and simultaneously, given its traditional attribution to Zarathustra (Kriwaczek 2002, 151), the prophet of the Zoroastrian religion and its centrality to that religion, constitutes, for all intents and purposes, constitutes a core belief. What remains is to precisely layout the details and circumstances demonstrating the movement of this core belief from the antecedent belief system dominant among Iranians to the subsequent belief system – or, put another way, the lack of any movement; the successful maintenance of this core belief on the part of Iranians and its preservation in the Iranian political tradition.

“For many peoples of the Persian Empire”, writes Paul Kriwaczek, “the fall of the Achaemenians did not merely mean a change of masters. It is no exaggeration to call it the end of the world” (Kriwaczek 2002, 150). The key conceit which explains this cataclysmic conception of the collapse of the Achaemenid state at the hands of the Macedonians is provided by Kriwaczek, which is that, “in ancient times, kingship was an aspect of the divine order” (Kriwaczek 2002, 150). Indeed, in etymological terms, the word in Old Persian that the Achaemenid emperor Xerxes used in his monumental inscription to describe his title was
“xshayathiya” [transcription, i.e. ‘x’ standing in for ‘kh-’], which is rendered by A. Shapur Shahbazi, the noted authority on the Achaemenid ruins of Persepolis, as “king” (Shahbazi 2011, 134). Variations included “xshayathiya vazarka [transcription]” or “Great king”, and “xshayathiya xshayathiyamn”, or “King of Kings” (Shahbazi 2011, 134).

Furthermore, from the Behistun inscription of Darius Hystapses (Kriwaczek 2002, 190-193), we are given the names of several defeated rebels who aspired to kingship in the aftermath of the disputed succession of the son of Cyrus II, the founder of the Achaemenian Empire. The Old Persian name of of these rebels, “One, named Phraortes, a Mede, lied and said, ‘I am Khshathrita, of the family of Cyaxares’” (Kriwaczek 2002, 192) is given a detailed etymological explanation in a rather obscure and out of print source, the *Histories of Herodotus Vol. III*, in which it is written that, “[Kshathrita] is apparently from old Pers. khshatram, ‘empire’, with a suffix -ita . . . the sense is ‘one who has obtained the empire’” (Rawlinson 1875, 552). Alongside this analysis of Old Persian, a Western Iranian language, is the linguistic evidence of the Avestan language, a closely related yet distinct Iranian language. From the Parsi Zoroastrian Dastur Khurshed S. Dabu’s *Message of Zarathushtra: A Manual of Zoroastrianism*, in an appropriate section of that work, “Zoroastrian Politics”, we are given an Avestan title, “Hukshathrotema” which in the Zoroastrian reckoning that relates to the notion of God as being “[he] who wisely and firmly governs the world” (Dabu 1959, 34). In addition to this, the “Zoroastrian Politics” section of the *Manual of Zoroastrianism* also relates that, “the archangel who is presiding over the mineral kingdom is also the supervising arbiter of all governments for two reasons” (Dabu 1959, 35). The identity of this “archangel” and its connection to the political conception of Zoroastrianism is quickly made clear by Dabu, who notes, “secondly steel weapons would
provide the army with means of defense against aggressors . . . mineral wealth, that Kshathra-
vairya gave the kings as boon” (Dabu 1959, 35-36). By coupling the names and meanings of
these Old Persian political figures with the similarly antique Avestan terms and concepts, we can
glean profound insight into the religious politics of the Achaemenian era, and thus appropriately
apprehend the shock of the collapse of the divinely sanctioned political order.

As Paul Kriwaczek explains, “the rural populace [of Iran] and probably the old nobility
too, can’t have given up their ancestral Zarathustrian beliefs so easily [after the conquest of
Alexander and the imposition of Seleucid rule]” (Kriwaczek 2002, 150). Kriwaczek reaches this
determination based on a reasonable, persuasive train of logic, writing that, “for when the time
came for the Sassanians to take their turn of power from the Parthians, they were able to restore
Zoroastrianism as the state religion almost at once” (Kriwaczek 2002, 150). And as we observe
from Mehdi Estakhr, “in the resistance which was actively formed after the early expectations
for the rapid dissolution of foreign rule proved illusory . . . the Magians . . . played the leading
role” (Estkahr 2012, 119). Estakhr goes into further detail, explaining that, “from the outset, the
resistance to the Macedonian rule had taken on a religious coloring and was justified almost
universally in theological terms, and in connection with the concept of Persian kingship”
(Estakhr 2012, 120).

“The shock of the conquest . . .”, writes Kriwaczek, “seems to have led the Iranians to
concentrate heavily on one particular aspect of their ancient sage’s message”, before going on to
outline provide the outline of the messianic doctrine of the inevitable climactic triumph of truth
and good over falseness and evil: the Frasho-kereti (Kriwaczek 2002, 151).
“It was this fervent belief in the Saoshyant, the Zoroastrian Messiah, which came to the psychological rescue of the conquered Iranians, who convinced themselves that the horrific destruction of Ahura Mazda’s ordered world and the triumph of the godless Greeks was just the first stage in a final battle whose ultimate outcome would be glorious. To be sure, good would triumph in the end.” (Kriwaczek 2002, 151-152)

It would be from these very same anti-Macedonian Magi who leaned on this messianic core belief of an eventual and inevitable, glorious and militaristic vindication that the next great Persian Empire would arise, in an event which, in the surprising appraisal of a previously cited scholar, constituted yet another religious revolution.

While the Avesta translator, James Darmesteter, as described previously, had disagreed with Martin Haug’s articulation that the revelation enacted by the historic Zoroaster’s amounted to “a religious revolution against Vedic-polytheism” (Darmesteter 1880, xxiv) – a well-founded and deductive appraisal in the view of this author – only four pages afterward, James Darmesteter does in fact use the term ‘revolution’ in order to characterize the rise of the devout Sasanians. Darmesteter undertakes a lengthy critical examination of the historical account of the Dinkart, an important post-Sassanid Zoroastrian work authored in the initial centuries of Islamic rule, the salient takeaway from the exploration (being that the vicissitudes of Iranian dynastic scholarship are tangential if not intriguing) is that Darmesteter’s caution and thought revolve around, “the ideas generally entertained about the character of the Sassanian revolution” (Darmesteter 1880, xxxiii),

“The Sassanids”, begins Peter Crawford, “claimed descent from the Achaemenids, with whom they shared the same homeland in Fars” (Crawford 2014, 12). The founder of the dynasty, Ardashir I, “rose in rebellion against the warring Parthian kings” (Crawford 2014, 14), and “after
taking power in 224 A.D., Ardashir I and his successors embarked on the full-scale transformation of the state” (Frankopan 2017, 33). This “full-scale transformation” (Frankopan 2017, 33) is an analogous articulation to that provided in In Search of My God, which, eschewing objectivity on the matter, writes that, “from the time of Ardashir Papakan, the first of the Sassanians until Shapur II, the religious renaissance went on” (In Search of My God 1978, 188).

“The eponymous Sasan” writes Crawford, “is recorded as a high priest in Persis; a position that his son Papak used to rally support and seize control of the region” (Crawford 2014, 14), an critically important detail which tracks with the account Mehdi Estakhr, who noted the trends of increasing religiosity in the aftermath of the fall of the Achaemenids, and “in the resistance . . . the leading role” of the Zoroastrian priesthood, “who formed an already established net in many of the provinces of the shattered Achaemenian state” (Estakhr 2012, 119).

Those priests that had spread “apocalyptic oracles prophesying the Macedonians’s doom” (Estakhr 2012, 119) had now fulfilled the prophecies they had circulated for centuries, and as might be expected, “under the Sassanids, the Zoroastrian priesthood became more structured and organised across the empire . . . while a Priest of Priests oversaw the whole of the Zoroastrian hierarchy” (Crawford 2014, 15). And yet, for all of the institutional entrenchment, what resulted, theologically speaking, was “the radicalisation of Zoroastrianism precisely around this time” (Frankopan 2017, 35), “the suppression of local cults and rival cosmologies, which were dismissed as evil doctrines” (Frankopan 2017, 35). The result was that that “Zoroastrianism was ‘burdensome, devoid of persuasive power and lacking in open-mindedness or readiness to reform’” (Crawford 2014, 15). The “Sasanian revolution” (Darmesteter 1880, xxxiii) while ultimately producing an fatal ideological ossification, was initially coupled with “a period of
military and economic expansion” (Frankopan 2017, 34), which resulted, per Frankopan in “an increasingly strident, resurgent state” (Frankopan 2017, 34), or per Crawford, “as both empires [Roman and Sassanian] were essentially militaristic states, they saw each other as a target” (Crawford 2014, 20). Authors writing on the Sasanian period hardly vary in their assessments, “the expansion of the Persian state was accompanied by a stern enforcement of values and beliefs that were presented as both traditional and essential for political and military success” (Frankopan 2017, 35) being an effective summation of the paradigm of the age. The tragedy of that paradigm is well-delivered by Paul Kriwaczek, who recounts the chauvinistic taunt of the high priest Kartir against Mani, “a charismatic third-century prophet” (Frankopan 2017, 35) and painter (Kriwaczek 2002, 104), charging him with the cardinal deficiency of pacifism, which to Kartir’s orthodox Zoroastian outlook, amounted to an refusal – a choosing of the wrong principle – to take part in the existential struggle of good against evil (Kriwaczek 2002, 111) (Crone 2012, 373). Eventually the Sasanian state and would meet its end with the rise of a new revolutionary religious movement, Islam, which supplanted Zoroastrianism as the majority faith believed in by Iranians, and which remains to this day the dominant religion in Iran – yet not even this change in belief systems would displace the core beliefs of Iranians, chief among them being a worldview centered on dualism.

Between priests, kings, heretics, and prophets, it would in fact be an Iranian hailing from an entirely different profession who would serve as the primary artery of transference of the core beliefs of the bygone Zoroastrian belief system into the dominant and established schools of Islamic thought in Iran: a twelfth century religious philosopher named Sohravardi who founded the highly influential Illuminationist school of thought (Estakhr 2012, 354). Sohravardi, who
“seems to have received a *madreseh* education” (Mottahedeh 1985, 149), reinterpreted the Zoroastrian dualism of the pre-Islamic Iranian tradition, appraised Zoroaster – who at that at that point had long-since been transformed from whatever his reality had been into a variable figure through the Iranian and Hellenistic traditions (Estakhr 2012, 136, 137, 362, 647) – as an exponent of a pre-Islamic monotheistic revelation, and thus made the aspects of the Illuminationist philosophy that had hints of his dualism into a compatible form for Muslims (Mottahedeh 1985, 150). Once Sohravardi had aggregated those elements and others into his own Illuminationist school of Islamic thought, owing to his deftness as a religious philosopher, and to the resonance with which this school of thought enjoyed with Iranian Muslims (Mottahedeh 1985, 156), the Illuminationist philosophy and its familiar idiom of dichotomous light and darkness (Mottahedeh 1985, 155) became the wildly influential. Illuminationism would go on to inspire a lengthy historical sequence of Iranian Shiite religious scholars and schools of thought (Mottahedeh 1985, 179) that would eventually culminate with Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Mottahedeh 1985, 184, 272), the leader of the best-known and most recent Iranian religious revolution, the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979 – a revolution that would bring American journalist William Worthy to the Iranian capital of Tehran in February 1980, where he would have a chance encounter with a student of Ayatollah Khomeini’s school of thought, Hossein Sheikholeslam, whose core belief in dualism and the prophesized triumph of good over evil inspired him to join the revolutionary movement, thus bringing the ‘story’ full-circle, fulfilling the analytic necessity for an comprehensive theoretical inquiry to “fully trace the continuity of ideas” (Iqbal 1909, 17).
“A storyteller can always count on heightened interest if his listeners believe the story applies to their own lives too”, or so writes Max Weber in the penultimate portion of his *Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* (Weber 1988, 390). Continuing, Weber says, “Then he can end with a moral exhortation” before quickly differentiating himself from this romantic typology, clarifying that, “My story, however, is not of that sort” (Weber 1988, 391). He concludes the thought by writing that, “There is very little which ancient history can teach us about our own social problems” (Weber 1988, 391), and it is on this point that Weber and myself diverge.

Rather than viewing ancient history as devoid of the capacity to educate contemporary audiences about our modern struggles as Weber does, it is the view of this author that, at least in regard to the politics of Iran and the political paradigms so observed and analyzed in this thesis, the only conceivable path forward for Iranians to achieve a more desirable future outcome is to interrogate their views and, in light of what can be demonstrated as belonging to the ancient past, deliberately, explicitly identifying what is that they believe in, to what extent they believe in any fixed notions, and so on and so forth. The process would certainly be painful, and it may in fact be impossible given the hagiographic tendency of Iranian culture generally speaking, yet it is clear that the tendencies which are so often reviled about Iran’s current political configuration, the Islamic Republic of Iran, are hardly at odds with the overarching Iranian political tradition – in fact, if anything, the Islamic Republic, quite more so than its immediate political predecessor (in spite of all of the Pahlavi era narrative posturing and aesthetical gloss), is profoundly representative of highly antique elements of Iranian politics.
The Islamic Republic of Iran, from its highest officials on down, subscribe to a permutation of ethical dualism which is identifiable if not more or less identical to the ethical dualism espoused by Iranians prior to the rise of Islam, essentially from time immemorial. While the specific permutation of dualism has undergone change and transformation, it has not shed its political implication, and remains the cornerstone of the Iranian political paradigm of religious revolution.

Similarly, the Islamic Republic, rather than transcending or abolishing hierarchical elements and attributes of Iranian society as was strived for by the Islamic Revolution’s initial generation and their rather utopian ideal of a *tawhid* society, has replicated hierarchical facets of Iranian social organization that resemble the multi-tiered Zoroastrian priesthood of the high-late empire of the Sasanians to such an extent that Kriwaczek himself shrewdly analogized two, if only by noting that this is the precise line of criticism employed in contemporary times by fundamentalist Sunni Muslims against the Islamic Republic of Iran (Kriwaczek 2002, 224).

Meanwhile, in spite of the silent and unexamined tension of a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam serving as the cornerstone of the Islamic Republic of Iran – a country which, as is often noted in the relevant literature, is significantly influenced by its pre-Islamic civilization – nonetheless, in regards to its politics, the Islamic Republic is staunchly orthodox and anti-heretical in a very similar sense as the Sasanians were, in that, the Islamic Republic has institutionalized one single politico-religious interpretation, (that of Ayatollah Khomeini’s thesis rather than, for instance, Ayatollah Taleqani, Ayatollah Shariatmadari, or Ayatollah Montazeri) rendered that interpretation as the sole acceptable line in the same stroke that is has raised Islam itself to the status of state-religion.
And yet, in another manifestation of continuity between past and present and of the staying-power of the Iranian political tradition, the Islamic Republic is a powerful, hierarchical, orthodox state that nonetheless commits itself to advancing and raising the station of ‘the oppressed’ through unique religious-economic institutions and a political framework that has displaced the Westernized upper and middle classes of twentieth century Iran in favor of the traditionalist bottom-must rung of the totem pole - which is not altogether dissimilar to the manner in which the glorious and wealthy Persian Empires obtained a tyrannical reputation among outside observers, yet internally, featured direct conference between monarch and peasantry, doctrinal veneration of the ‘the poor man’, and other communitarian inflections.

Last and perhaps most strikingly, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s much discussed and much studied adroitness and success in the enterprise of erecting and facilitating allied political-military forces in the MENA/SWANA region, the ubiquitous ‘Iranian proxy group’ or ‘Iran-backed militia’, or ‘state-within-a-state’, is also argued in this thesis as being a manifestation of continuity; a product of the element of statecraft and administration that is contained within the Iranian political tradition which was demonstrated by the several Persian Empires of history.

Indeed, if we were to limit the Iranian tradition by articulating it only as a ‘Persian tradition’, perhaps the first and best-known component of the ‘Persian’ political legacy is simple: empire. And as the Persian Empires – Achaemenid, Sasanian, and more – were maintained by sophisticated systems of administration and taxation, expanded themselves and offered serious, deadly military challenges that often overcame their competition through the deft use of advanced strategies and technologies, yet ultimately came into being through feudal dynamics that transformed petty local lords and small kingdoms into multi-continental ‘world empires’, so
does the Islamic Republic’s geo-political ascendancy owe itself to Iran’s effective if not spotless economic management, to Iran’s ability to develop (often through reverse-engineering and often at a spectacular cost-savings compared to Western military procurement) and field military technology capable of inflicting morale-shredding casualties on better-equipped states.

But most importantly, the rise of a twenty first century ‘Shia Crescent’ or ‘Axis of Resistance’ in which Iran is the acknowledged *primus inter pares* is because of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s essential religious-political philosophical approach that, when implemented by charismatic figures such as Qassem Soleimani who combine religious, political, and military species of authority (just as Iranian and Persian leaders have since the days of Cyrus II and arguably before), creates durable, tenacious and self-sustaining military establishments out of bombed and besieged bodies-politic and their various types of clan-networks through feudal and religious mobilization and militarization; these then typically subsume themselves into whatever institutions remain in a given national context and continue to grow, creating what General Petraeus effectively termed as a ‘counter-state’ (Petraeus 2007, 12).

The continuing importance of clans in the MENA/SWANA region as compared to the disappearance of clan-structure elsewhere in the world is perhaps best articulated by Max Weber himself, still routinely cited for his enduring theoretical definition of the state, who wrote in his *Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* that, “indeed the clan was essentially an institution which functioned parallel to the state rather than as part of it” (Weber 1988, 273), essentially presaging the rise of the ‘non-state actor’ that has, with the Islamic Republic of Iran’s patronage, proliferated throughout the MENA/SWANA region amidst the backdrop of several generations of United States military intervention and competition with the Islamic Republic of Iran that is
increasingly and tragically taking on the appearance of a twenty first century rendition of the
futile Roman-Sasanian wars that stretched on for hundreds of years during late classical
antiquity.
Dualism – Chapter 1

The harrowing events that have transpired in recent days across the entire West Asia region - and within the former British Mandate of Palestine in particular - have colored this thesis with undesired zeitgeist and have endowed certain components of the content analytical treatment that would have otherwise remained abstruse and bookish with an unanticipated, even urgent sense of saliency. Former Congressman Dennis Kucinich, in an appearance on award-winning journalist Chris Hedges’ eponymously titled news and interview program *The Chris Hedges Report*, weighed in on those harrowing events, the recent outbreak of war between the State of Israel and Hamas. In a lengthy and in-depth conversation held between the two intellectuals, Kucinich offered his perspective on the devastating magnitude of the violence wrought since the unprecedented October 7th attack, and the infamous tendency of the United States to haphazardly launch wars, only to then find itself mired in intractable quagmires that, in the view of the former Congressman, ultimately undermine American national security and economic vitality. But more specifically, Kucinich zero-ed in on a phenomenon that he identified as being at the heart of the American propensity towards instigating warfare at the expense of diplomatic and other policy alternatives. Kucinich stated that,

“We have to keep in mind that one of the things that drags us into war is an ideological mindset. Today in the US, it’s sponsored by a group famously known as neoconservatives, who see America as a force fighting against evil all over the world. The Manichaean struggle which they invite is one that is generally of their own making, the desire to create wars and cash in.” (*The Chris Hedges Report*, 3 Nov 2023)

The adjective which the former Congressman employed in his remark, ‘Manichaean’, is hardly a colloquial word, yet the concept which the term refers to is all-too ubiquitous and is particularly
common in the realm of politics and especially within political discourse. A ‘Manichaean’ is
typically given to be someone who harbors or espouses sharp ethical or moral dualism, and the
term has become synonymous with ‘black-and-white’ thinking. And while the everything-or-
nothing cognitive logic which produces immaculate ‘good-guys’ and their irredeemably bad
counterparts is unfortunately all-too pervasive within the typical vernacular of political
discussion, why in particular has such an esoteric, multi-syllabic, and rather obscure phrase as
‘Manichaean’ become the technical term for the mutually exclusive, inexorably contrasting
reckonings of good and evil that is essentially the default moral framework that is employed not
merely on the part of political idealogues and demagogues, but even by ordinary citizens as soon
as the political gauntlet is cast down?

It is from Webster’s dictionary that we find that Manichaean, or Manichean, has entered
into the modern English language from a highly particular historical trajectory, with the
definition of the word reading, “a believer in a syncretistic religious dualism origination in Persia
in the 3rd century A.D. and teaching the release of the spirit from matter through asceticism”
(Webster’s Dictionary 1987, 723). It is further articulated in the entry for ‘Manichaean’ in
Webster’s that the Late Latin “Manichaeus”, from which the term made its way into English,
came from the Late Greek “Manichaios”, which itself ultimately derives from the namesake of
the ancient religion, “Manes” the “Pers. [Persian] founder of the sect” who is dated to the year
276 A.D. (Webster’s Dictionary 1987, 723). It is from this provenance and historical context that
Webster’s derived it’s second definition of the term, which reads, “a believer in religious or
philosophical dualism”
“Dualism was the single most successful doctrinal export of Iran in antiquity” (Crone 2012, 460), or so appraises Patricia Crone in the closing chapter of her voluminous tome, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism*. While the book’s succinct introduction does not refer to dualism in particular, it becomes clear through the successive chapters that subject of the book, “the religious communities that these [eighth and ninth century A.D.] revolts revealed” (Crone 2012, i), held staunchly to their dualistic ethics, which was the cardinal virtue among a, “complex of ideas has been endemic to the mountain population of Iran and has occasionally become epidemic with major consequences for the country” (Crone 2012, i).

The doctrine of dualism makes its appearance in the Zoroastrian scriptures in the Gathas, specifically in Yasna XXX (Mills 1903, 40), the passage in which the idea of there being “‘two original spirits, each independent in thought, declarations, and action’” (Mills 1903, 40) is given its “earliest statement” (Mills 1903, 40). Perhaps most importantly, the presentation of two separate, diametrically opposed “‘principals”’ (Mills 1903, 40) in the Gathas is then, “followed at once by an admonition to choose the better” (Mills 1903, 40). And even though Manichaeism today is altogether synonymous with the generalized notion of dualism, several centuries ago, its conception of dualism was seen to be at odds with the state-sanctioned doctrine of Sasanian Zoroastrianism, owing to a variance in morphology regarding the opposing principles. As Dabu explains, “the Manichean doctrine of our physical body being an enemy, was treated as a heresy, not in consonance with the spirit of Zoroastrianism” (Dabu 1959, 175). The ascetic dualism of the Manichaens and their antipathy towards the physical world (and thus the corporeal body) as representative of principle of darkness was also crucially at odds with the Zoroastrian
proscription against depriving the body, for, according to al-Biruni, “the Zoroastrians have no fasting at all. He who fasts commits a sin, and must, by way of expiation, give food to a number of poor people” (Boyce 1984, 69). The official philosophical dualism of the Zoroastrian priesthood could not brook the idea of the living body, which had always been considered to be a vessel of the good principle, to now be argued (and in a highly persuasive manner at that) to fall outside of the domain of the righteous principle.

In fact, author Patricia Crone reconstructs the justification of the orthodox Sasanian condemnation of non-Zoroastrian dualist morphologies such as that of the Manichaean dualists, and finds that the key locus of contention revolved around those parts of belief which, when extrapolated, were or have the potential to be, “associated with refusal to serve in the army. (‘What are you good for since you go neither fighting nor hunting!’ as the priest Kerdir said to Mani)” (Crone 2012, 373), a finding which dovetails with the overall scholarly assessment of the dualist theology of the Sasanian Zoroastrian possessing a “warlike quality” (Estakhr 2012, 162), and of the Sasanian government itself amounting to “essentially a militaristic state” (Crawford 2014, 20). And while other non-sanctioned dualist philosophies and their metaphysics, “departed from Zoroastrianism by equating darkness with matter, as did the Manichaeans”, the orthodox Zoroastrian formulation of dualism posited that, “darkness is but absence of light, falsehood is absence of truth”, with the ultimate precept being that, “the principle of evil is but ‘absence of life’” (Dabu 1959, 20).

As to whether this dualistic doctrine precluded monotheism, Zoroastrian thought and scholarship has expressed significant disagreement and debate at worst, or, in the most charitable sense, has expressed mixed messages. And so in a cauldron of competing religions, empires, and
steadily, the conflation of political views, philosophical dispositions, and adherence to theologies as was the case in the world of classical antiquity in which Zoroastrianism in which, “the rhythm of political objectives imposed the choreography of religious expression, the two nearly always moving in harmony and in lockstep – with politics being the dominant partner” (Mehdi Estakhr 2012, 274), seemingly esoteric or marginal doctrinal differences such as that between a dualist and monist theology could serve to sustain the fires of war, especially given that, “at any given time, a rule could overturn years of peaceful relations in favor of a ‘glorious’ campaign of conquest should he need to distract his population from internal problems or add legitimacy to his rule” (Crawford 2014, 20). This backdrop, combined with the material reality of an, “‘apparently never-ending cycle of armed confrontations’” (Crawford 2014, 24) between the leading powers, the Zoroastrian Sasanians and the Christian Byzantines, of which, the penultimate round, “the war of 572-591 represented the previous 350 years of Romano-Persian warfare in microcosm” (Crawford 2014, 23), and the unprecedented-ly devastating scale of the final round, infused as it was with pitched-desperation (Crawford 2014, 50) and explicit religious total-war (Mehdi Estakhr 2012, 261) goes far to explain the epochal changes that ensued, and which, “change[d] both empires and the world forever” (Crawford 2014, 24).

The extent of the religiosity of the last war between the Romans and Sasanians is such that the Roman Emperor Heraclius who fought against the Sasanian Emperor Chosro II acquired the reputation in the later historiography of the West as “First Crusader” (Mehdi Estakhr 2012, 261). And while scholarly research holds against this premise of the war as a ‘proto-crusade’ (Crawford 2014, 55) (Estakhr 2012, 262), the war did feature the Persian sack and conquest of the city of Jerusalem (Cameron 1993, 186) (Crawford 2014, 43) (Estakhr 2012, 259) (Frankopan
2017, 67), the taking away of the True Cross (Cameron 1993, 186) (Crawford 2014, 46) (Estakhr 2012, 259) (Frankopan 2017, 67), and, “in a crushing blow to the prestige of Khusro’s regime, [the looting of] the great fire temple of Takht-i-Suleiman” (Crawford 2014, 56). Altogether, these were cataclysmic times, and the events were of such magnitude so as to explain how millennia of Iranian religious continuity as exemplified by the long history of the dualistic Zoroastrian religion was permanently ruptured as a consequence – ruptured, but not obliterated.

According to Averil Cameron in *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, “it is increasingly clear from archaeological evidence as well as literary sources that the Persian invasions . . . caused serious and widespread destruction” (Cameron 1993, 187). Thus in the wake of the devastating and economically ruinous (Frankopan 2017, 72) Roman-Persian wars – which assuredly played a key role in facilitating the military success of the first generation of Muslim rulers (Cameron 1993, 194) – the corresponding religious systems of the belligerent powers, mostly that of the Zoroastrianism of the Sasanian Empire, which had been completely swept away and subsumed into the Islamic polity, was severely discredited. In the words of Peter Frankopan in *The Silk Roads*, where once the ancient world had been a venue where, “beliefs had been changing, adapting, and competing with each other”, now “what had been a polytheist world of multiple deities, idols and beliefs had given way to monotheism and to ideas about a single, all-powerful deity” (Frankopan 2017, 70). And yet, “Persian culture itself would prove remarkably resilient . . . exerting a great deal of influence on Islamic culture” (Crawford 2014, 222), and within a hundred years, Persians were so preponderant within and essential to the administrative structure of the Islamic empire (Crawford 2014, 222) that a significant measure of
anxiety had set in on the part of the erstwhile Arab Muslim conquerors about their station vis a vis the conquered Persians.

From Crawford, we hear that, “one Muslim historian wrote in the ninth century that ‘the Umayyad dynasty was an Arab empire; the Abbasid dynasty, a Persian empire’” (Crawford 2014, 22), while from Clawson and Rubin, we are told that, “as one Abbasid caliph explained, ‘the Persians ruled for a thousand years and did not us [Arabs] even for a day; we have been ruling for one or two days and cannot do without them for an hour’” (Clawson and Rubin 2005, 18). These quotes and an extensive body of research, much of it specifically dedicated to the Iranian traditions of statecraft and the enduring viability of their political-economic structures, corroborate that although their empire had been vanquished, the remarkable bounty Iranian civilization had now been diffused into the new Islamic state, in which, “a synthesis of Islam and older Iranian traditions became the dominant cultural form over much of the Muslim world” (De Bellaigue 2012, 9).

But what of these “older Iranian traditions?” (De Bellaigue 2012, 9), that is to say, (and for the purposes of this thesis) what would be the lot of dualism in a world now governed under monotheism? How then, did the core belief of Frasho-kereti, a dualistic ethic if there ever was one, emerge from the mouth of Hossein Sheikholeslam in the conversation with William Worthy some fourteen centuries after the fall of the last Sasanians, the final dualistic religious-political regime? The answer can be gleaned by tracing how Iranians in the centuries after the rise of Islam rehabilitated and adapted particular aspects of their old dualism to fall in line with the Islamic beliefs to which they now adhered, and how those schools of thought which did so – particularly the Illuminationist school of Iranian Islamic philosopher Sohravardi – became the
dominant strain of thought among the Shiite religious culture in Iran that would eventually produce Ayatollah Khomeini, the iconic religious reference of Hossein Sheikholeslam.

Sohrvardi took interest in particular aspects of pre-Islamic Iranian dualism, and refashioned them to be compatible with his philosophical constructions of Islam, with Mottahedeh writing that, “Sohrvardi, much as he shared the Zoroastrian equation of light and goodness, rejected the Zoroastrian belief in a force of evil nearly equal in its power to the force of good”, while adding that, “as a sincere Muslim, he could hardly have done otherwise” (Mottahedeh 1985, 155). And while it is said that the appearance of his views being idiosyncratic, in the appraisal of Mottahedeh, “a Muslim eccentric who displeased the religiously learned Muslim learned of Syria” (Mottahedeh 1984, 150) contributed to his execution in Damascus by the order of Saladin (Mottahedeh 1984, 150), among the Iranians, his theoretical construction of Islamic ethics, mysticism or *erfan*, and philosophy has entered into posterity as the dominant interpretation.

The link between the twelfth century Sohravardi’s mysticism and idiomatic dualism and Ayatollah Khomeini’s application of the very same facets during his religious-political career in the twentieth century comes from an seventeenth Shiite cleric from Qom known as Mullah Sadra. “The domestication of mysticism among Shiah mullahs was largely the achievement of Mullah Sadra”, writes Mottahedeh, before noting that, “although when he died in 1640 he probably had more mullah detractors than mullah admirers” (Mottahedeh 1985, 179). And although, per Mottahedeh, between Mullah Sadra and the earlier Sohravardi existed “significant differences between the two thinkers” (Mottahedeh 1985, 179), as far as the foundations of their theory are concerned, “in his interest in illumination he [Mullah Sadra] is clearly a follower of
Sohravardi” (Mottahedeh 1985, 179). Yet more so than simply being a follower who might have interested the Shiite religious center at Qom from which Ayatollah Khomeini would emerge centuries later, according to Mottahedeh, the links are much more explicit, with Mottahedeh stating, “Mullah Sadra is the true heir of Sohravardi’s ingenious and esoteric speculations about perception, which Mullah Sadra revised and presented in rigorous scholastic fashion” (Mottahedeh 1985, 179).

Eventually, despite facing reactionary opposition owing to “the deeply mystical nature of this philosophy” (Mottahedeh 1985, 179), Mullah Sadra was able to secure the support of “a Safavi provincial governor, who founded a madreseh where Mullah Sadra taught for the remainder of his life” (Mottahedeh 1985, 180). It is not only fascinating but germane to note at this juncture that this alliance between a powerful military governor and mystical cleric who instructed his followers in the mysteries of the world, and the struggle of good against evil through the linguistic idiom of light set against darkness is a strong, ironic parallel with the alliance struck between Zarathushtra and the king Vishtapsa millennia earlier. L.H. Mills, in a perfunctory summary and explanation of the sixth stanza of Yasna L of the Gathas, describes how “here Vishtaspa is represented as intervening, and he addresses Ahura, but speaks toward Zarathushtra, exhorting him to continue on in his work of propagation undismayed by threatening circumstances” (Mills 1903, 113).

Eventually Mullah Sadra’s influence on Iranian Shiism was so great that, “in the century after his death his ideas came to dominate the teaching of philosophy in the Shah world, and they continue to do so down to the present” (Mottahedeh 1985, 180). Roy Mottahadeh sums that, “in their heedlessness and perseverance both Jamal ad-Din and Khomeini are true students of
erfan and direct descendents of Sohravardi” (Mottahedeh 1985, 185), but also indicates that this
theoretical linkage between Sohravardi, Mullah Sadra, and Ayatollah Khomeini was not merely
an intellectual inheritance. Mottahedeh explicitly notes that,

“the mystical system called erfan had a hand in creating the all-or-nothing
political style of the two most political Iranian religious figures of the last two
centuries, Jamal ad-Din, called al-Afghani (‘the Afghan’) and Ruhollah
Khomeini” (Mottahedeh 1985, 183).

Of note and import here is the highly suggestive language employed by Mottahedeh as an
adjective attached to Ruhollah Khomeini’s politics, “all-or-nothing”, or perhaps termed another
way, ‘Manichaean’ in the sense of being rote-ly dualistic and broaching no middle ground
between opposing sides. Here, it bares to note that that Sohrvardi’s Zoroastrian influence was so
strong that his Islamic cosmology drew upon the angelology of Zoroastrianism, articulating
“masses of angels, to whom he gave Iranian names and whom he arranged in hierarchies on
Zoroastrian models”, which Mottahedeh appraises as an unsurprising development, “since
Zoroastrianism had perhaps the most extravagant and elaborate system of angels among the
religions of the pre-Islamic Middle East” (Mottahedeh 1985, 156). The significant connection
between Sohravardi’s appropriation of the Zoroastrian angelology along with a reconfigured
permutation of Zoroastrian dualism is in direct reference to this term “all-or-nothing political
style” (Mottahedeh 1985, 183) that was used in reference to Ayatollah Khomeini.

While many of the Zoroastrian divinities are described in the Avesta with warrior-traits
(these are literally and figuratively befitting of the colloquial phrase ‘avenging angels’), the chief
angel of the Zoroastrian religion, Mithra, is explicitly described as the “levier of armies” (Boyce
1984, 26), one who, “sets the battle in motion, who takes his stand in the battle . . . [and whom]
in the battle shatters the ranks” (Boyce 1984, 28), even being described as beheading the “men false to the covenant” (Boyce 1984, 28) – the literal phrase being “the Mithradrug: one might also translate ‘who breaks the contract’ as mithra, as a common noun, means ‘a contract’” (Darmesteter 1880, 120). Thus, when Roy Mottahedeh notes that Ayatollah Khomeini’s interest in *erfan* or mysticism and his black-and-white political disposition both stemmed from Mullah Sadra, “the great Safavi thinker who had brought the tradition of Sohravardi to its culmination” (Mottahedeh 1985, 242), and that Sohravardi’s own tradition was heavily, indispensably derived – albeit with palatable Islamic modification – from the pre-Islamic Zoroastrian tradition, it becomes possible to glean out from this “continuity of ideas” (Iqbal 1909, 17) a very dogmatic, dualistic approach to the political being passed down along with everything else.

The ethical dualism of Ayatollah Khomeini and the current Islamic Republic of Iran, being derived from a tradition going back from Mullah Sadra, Sohravardi (Mottahedeh 1985, 242), and consequently to the oldest roots of the Iranian tradition, can evinced in a number of places and through a number of sources. John Limbert’s *Iran: At War with History*, articulates this ethical dualistic inflection to the Islamic Republic’s politics in sections, particularly those written in regard to the Iran-Iraq War, which at the time of the book’s publication in 1987, had not yet been brought to a close. Limbert captures this political dualism in the form of rhetorical questions put in the voice of the Islamic Republic, writing, “how, the Iranians ask, can good compromise with evil?” (Limbert 1987, 141) and notes that the Iranians viewed themselves as locked into, “not just a conflict between two nation-states called Iran and Iraq”, but rather believed that their war was “a battle between right and wrong, between Islam and heresy” (Limbert 1987, 141). Limbert was not incorrect in his analysis on this front, for while Ayatollah
Khomeini did eventually accept to conclude the war in the following year, the magnitude of the decision and its brake from the norm of sharp, incompatible constructions of good versus evil was equated – in what might be a Platonic allusion, very intriguing owing to the associations drawn by Hellenic Platonists between their philosophy and that originating dualist, Zoroaster – by the theologian to drinking a poison chalice (Clawson and Rubin 2005, 113).

In the final analysis, while dualism in its particulars appeared to lend itself to philosophical and other sorts of differences in construction – which had not insignificant bearing in as much as that Iranian tradition was never inclined to accommodate divergence from the tenets of enshrined, orthodox ideology – as an ethical framework, one which lent itself to precisely the sort of ‘black-and-white’ worldview that is the sensibility to which the word ‘Manichaean’ is now tantamount, ethical dualism and its consequent ramification of intractable political certainty and fundamentalism remain dominant and manifest in the Iranian political tradition.
Orthodoxy – Chapter 2

To quote Aptin Khanbagi, author of *The Fire the Star and The Cross*, an impeccable work spanning a chronology beginning in the Sasanian era and closing in the eighteenth century which analyzes the treatment of Iranian religious and ethnic minorities on the part of successive Iranian states, “there are recurrent features in Iranian history that can be observed by comparing the Sassanian period with later periods” (Khanbagi 2006, 2). The Sasanians were the dynasty which cast the historical and institutional memory of Iranians into the form that has held into the present day – shaping the so-called “Final Tradition of the Past” (Jackson 1917, vi) – leaving an indelible mold on the Iranian political tradition. In that sense, by considering what the Sasanians regarded as being the ideal of politics under their militant reckoning of Zoroastrianism, not only is insight gleaned into the inner workings and motivation of their own striking orthodoxy and theocratic severity, but it also becomes possible to shed light on the ensuing recurrence of theocracy and religious fundamentalism under the Shiite Safavids – as well as the the Islamic Republic.

In a section of Mehdi Estakhr’s work, *The Place of Zoroaster in History*, discussion is raised as to the influence of the doctrine of the Saoshyant, the Zoroastrian messiah. In this section of his work, in which the eschatological works of the early Jewish and Christian authors is treated, Estakhr narrows in the defining attributes of the Saoshyant (and thus elucidates key insights into Zoroastrianism and the Iranian tradition) through comparison and contrast with the messianic narratives of the other faith traditions (Estakhr 2012, 161-162). Accordingly, Estakhr articulates that the early Judeo-Christian works which are “[most] similar to the appearance of
Saoshyant” have a “savior [who] is called ‘a great king,’ not in a spiritual sense, but as one who puts to the sword all the evildoers and delivers the ‘captives taken by the spirit of evil’” (Estakhr 2012, 162). From here Estakhr proceeds, and in a footnote, writes that, “the description of Saoshyant in kingly terms chiefly derives from the Zoroastrian belief that religion and kingship were brothers: according to Denkard . . . ‘religion is royalty, and royalty is the Religion’” (Estakhr 2012, 162). The Denkard, or “the ‘Acts of the Religion’, is a massive compilation of very diverse materials, made in the ninth and tenth centuries . . . but much of the matter which they [priestly authors] then re-edited . . . was very ancient in substance” (Boyce 1984, 4). From this description of the Denkard provided by Mary Boyce in Textual Sources we can reliably treat that the succinct maxim of “religion is royalty, and royalty is the Religion” (Estakhr 2012, 162) as fairly representative of the Sasanian view on political as well as religious philosophy – in the sense that there was hardly a discernible distinction between the two. Because of this, an

The surviving Sasanian primary sources paint a picture of state-religion, significant institutionalism, mass imprisonment, as well as a vehement aversion to heresy verging on obsession – an important attribute to be sure, especially given the appraisal of Paul Kriwaczek that, “today’s [Iranian] clergy are no more benignly disposed towards Muslim revisionists like the Baha’is than was their predecessor [high priest Kartir] towards a Zoroastrian revisionist like Mani” (Kriwaczek 2002, 113). However, while the Sasanians the dynasts who brought orthodoxy to forefront of the historical memory of Iranian civilization, the foundations of this propensity are much more antique than their rise to power in the third century A.D.

The Avesta itself, the canonical text of Zoroastrianism, contains language in the form of a sizable number of passages which appear to exhort followers of the religion to adhere to
orthodox interpretations of Zoroastrian teachings. From L.H. Mills, in his Sacred Books of the East translation of the Gathas – the most ancient portion of the Avesta – we are told that, “the ‘first teaching’ was a prominent idea with the Zarathustrians” (Mills 1887, 89). According to Mills, who made the preceding statement in a footnote directly attached to his English-language rendering of third section of Yasna XLV, the historic Zoroaster, “hardly plays the role of a reformer in the Avesta. He is mentioned after others chronologically, not as repudiating them”, before noting that, “he [Zoroaster] might be better termed reviver” (Mills 1887, 126).

Furthermore, we have it from Mills’s standalone translation of the Gathas from 1903 that the war waged between the nascent Zoroastrian community and their counterparts was one in which, “each party [was] struggling to get possession of the seal of orthodoxy, or possibly it may mean that the saintly party were inspired by the holy regulations and creeds” (Mills 1903, 66), demonstrating that orthodox religion was a political ideal precious and sanctified enough to wage bloody struggle in order to preserve – not dissimilar at all to the conception of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Republic of Iran during the eight year Iran-Iraq War that the battle was in fact one waged “between Islam and heresy” (Limbert 1987, 141).

Moving from the oldest component to the less ancient material of the Avesta, we have yet another line of text which makes clear that compositions of religious significance were revered chiefly on account of their age, with Mills translating a line reading, “And we sacrifice to the Praises of the Yasna which were the productions of the world of old”, before attaching an explanatory footnote to that specific line, wherein Mills explains how “the later Avesta notes the antiquity of the older” (Mills 1887, 293). In similar vein to this, in a footnote to his translation of a portion of the Gathas, Yasna XXXIV, Mills writes that, “the Pahlavi [the commentary made in
the extant colloquial language intelligible to Iranians in Sasanian times] has the gloss: teach us the way of the original religion” (Mills 1887, 89). Recalling that the entirety of the surviving Avesta underwent compilation and redaction by the vociferously anti-heretical Sasanian religious establishment (Boyce 1984, 1-3), this small piece of commentary illuminates the premium that was placed on orthodox adherence the oldest compositions and their longstanding interpretations, not only in the significantly influential period of the Sasanians, but throughout the time spans of the pre-Islamic dynasties.

As Boyce outlines in regard to the religious-literary output of the remaining Zoroastrian community in the centuries after the eclipse of their religion’s hold on the hearts and minds of Iranians, “dogmatic works of the Islamic period are characterised by the words ‘one must be without doubt’, and similar phrases”, which as Boyce explains, were repetitious admonishments to the Zoroastrian faithful to hold to orthodoxy, “as the writers strove to stiffen their co-religionists against Muslim proselytising and persecution” (Boyce 1984, 99). Part and parcel of this atmosphere of unflinching orthodoxy even in the face of acute challenges is the famous Arda Viraz Namag. In the concluding chapter of the work, the text of the Arda Viraz Namag puts this same admonishment to the Zoroastrian faithful, in this instance through the word of God himself, Ohrmazd, who exclaims to Viraz to “‘speak, just Viraz, to the Mazda-worshippers’”, and reiterate to them to, “‘[take] the path of the original doctrine, and all other paths are no paths’” (Boyce 1984, 89).

And yet, it is hardly the case that the culture of orthodox religion was unquestioningly relented to, either in the era following the Sasanians, or during the zenith of their rule. As Kriwaczek harrowingly recounts, “propagation of Mani’s [founder of Manichaeism] teaching
was forbidden throughout Sassanian Iran. Mani’s successor as leader of the sect was crucified – literally” (Kriwaczek 2002, 113), and yet, such brutal attempts to quash threats to the Zoroastrian orthodoxy did not succeed in mitigating the spread of dissident ideologies like Manichaeism. In fact, “all over Iran and Non-Iran the Aramaic cry ‘Mani Khai!’ Mani Lives!, was raised” (Kriwaczek 2002, 112), which, as Kriwaczek informs us, became the root of the word for the sect that has come down into the English language, stating that, “Christian Greek critics began referring to them dismissively as the ‘Mani Khai-s’ or, as we now spell it, the Manichees or Manicheans” (Kriwaczek 2002, 112). That whatever might have been designated as heresy was not only punished – severely at that – as a religious-political crime, but also punished as a beneficent, paternalistic defense of the population against the wickedness of false doctrines is a recurring theme in the politics of Iranians both in antique times as well as under the duration of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In the medieval Zoroastrian literary work ‘Gajastak Abalish’, in which the titular heretic, Abaleh, who, “must have been one well-versed in the Zarathustrian theological literature and dogmas, but holding unorthodox views” (Chacha 1936, 87) disputes with the orthodox Zoroastrian patriarch at the court of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mamun (Chacha 1936, 9) (Crone 2012, 353), the idea of paternalism is intimately and specifically tied in with the orthodox Zoroastrian priest’s refutation of the several questions that are put to him by Abaleh.

The third of seven questions posed by Abaleh to the Zoroastrian patriarch, Atar Frenabag, relates to the severity of punishments doled out by the Zoroastrian community, “and they-cut-off their-hand and beat-them with the-stick” (Chacha 1936, 42), as well as to how such actions could possibly be reconciled with the conceit that Zoroastrians follow the strictures of a benign and
good God (Chacha 1936, 63), as Abaleh asks, “does Auhrmazd or ahriman [lack of capitalization is per the text] direct infliction [and] punishment unto men [?]” (Chacha 1936, 42). With a remarkably familiar sentiment, the Zoroastrian leader Atar Frenabag, “compares Auhrmazd to a father, ahriman to a serpent, and the sinner to a child” (Chacha 1936, 63), and states, “we-ought not to-consider the-father an-ignorant-man and enemy, but a-wise-man and friend” (Chacha 1936, 43), before extending that paternalistic logic to the officials of the Zoroastrian establishment itself, claiming, “In the-same-manner, we ought not to-consider the-Magupats, Dusters and Judges to be ignorant men and enemies, but friends and men-of-good-intention” (Chacha 1936, 43). According to the extended explanation offered by the translator and publisher, Homi Chacha, the severe actions taken by the Zoroastrian hierarchs the “the Magupats, Dasturs and Judges” (Chacha 1936, 63), whether direct against the laity or against heretics, is in order to:

“execute the divine laws of Auhrmazd the father, and inflict punishments on the sinners, His children, in order to save the souls of men from the hands of the ‘devs’ and the ‘drujs’ who obstruct their path to heaven” (Chacha 1936, 63).

It is clear from the literal translated text as well as Chacha’s well-researched and comprehensive explanations that the rationale, or rather the rationalization, offered is that of benevolent, learned religious scholars taking unpalatable yet necessary measures in order to protect those who commit sin from the prospect of being denied heavenly afterlife. What is remarkable is how reminiscent and how closely this conforms to the direct quotes given by leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran in present times as to why they enact policies and restrictions which are similarly unpopular on the part of the Iranian populace.
As Clawson and Rubin detail in their chapter of *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* about the evolution of the Islamic Republic of Iran in its second decade of rule during the nineteen nineties, officials of the Islamic Republic organized into competing factions often vacillated between lifting and imposing restrictions on acceptable cultural, journalistic, and social practices (Clawson and Rubin 2005, 121). Of particular note is Clawson and Rubin’s report as to “the new culture minister, Ali Larijani”, who rationalized, as he “reimposed restrictions”, that, “‘if we in the Islamic Republic restrain freedom, it is because our Islamic line of thinking has in mind the well-being of society’” (Clawson and Rubin 2005, 122). This notion, that of paternalistic protection of the people from their own pursuits owing to the ostensible theological consequences of their actions, is much the same “line of thinking” (Clawson and Rubin 2005, 122), that was offered by high priest Atar Frenabag to the heretic Abaleh centuries prior. In fact, this anecdote is not the only instance of the correspondence between statements offered in Zoroastrian sources as to paternalistic protection of a population from themselves on the grounds of religious doctrine – and the ensuing necessity to take drastic action – and the same reasoning being offered by the officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Yet in fact, a several years before the Islamic Revolution, dissident author Reza Baraheni in his book *The Crowned Cannibals*, claims that the Pahlavi regime designated him as “mahdoroddam, which simply meant that if somebody killed me, he would not be answerable to the authorities” (Baraheni 1977, 128), a category of guilt which is chillingly similar to the punishment prescribed in the Vendidad for same-sex relations, which, according to the footnote, was that, “the guilty may be killed by any one, without an order from the Dastur, and by this execution an ordinary capital crime may be redeemed” (Darmesteter 1880, 102).
Another important Zoroastrian document, the ‘Letter of Tansar’ that, notwithstanding redaction in a later period (Boyce 1984, 109), dates back to the early Sasanian period, and which was penned “by the Persian high priest (herbad) under Ardashir I” (Boyce 1984, 109), offers in its text bevy of salient insights, one of which is the striking assertion of Tansar that, “church and state were born of the one womb, joined together and never to be sundered” (Boyce 1984, 109). Apart from this striking valorization of theocratic politics emanating from such an early period, another quotation from the text offers fodder for direct, nearly verbatim correspondence with the statement of a high official of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the translated text of the letter that is presented in *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, the herbad Tansar is posed with the frightened sentiment of the letter’s recipient, which Tansar in his own words repeats, stating, “You declared: ‘there is much talk about the blood shed by the king and people are dismayed’” (Boyce 1984, 110). To this, Tansar offers the retort that,

“The answer is that there are many kings who have put few to death, yet have slain immoderately if they have killed but ten; and there are many who if they put men to death in their thousands should slay still more, being driven to it at the time by their people” (Boyce 1984, 110).

The variation of proportionality which Tansar expresses in regard to the scale of violence which had been subject to hushed criticism at the time evidently reflects “the Zoroastrian Law of Recompense” (*In Search of My God* 1978, 15), which is given an explanation in a popular Zoroastrian anecdote that has survived to the present day. The anecdote recounts that, “a merciless man kicks a bundle of grass to bring it within reach of a starving cow. In the other world, his whole body with the exception of that leg is covered in ulcers” (*In Search of My God* 1978, 14). If the situation demands it, that is to say, if rulers are “driven to it at the time by their
people” (Boyce 1984, 110), the killing of even thousands of people is not sinful, but merely recompense in proportion to the circumstance, and in the view of political theocrats, perhaps no circumstance is more dire and calls for more unrestrained use of force than threats to religious rule itself.

Dilip Hiro’s *The Iranian Labyrinth: Journeys Through Theocratic Iran and its Furies* – in a chapter covering the same time period of the nineteen nineties as Clawson and Rubin did in their chapter from which the quote by Ali Larijani was derived – reports a chilling exhortation to and rationalization of violence on the part of Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, “head of the conservative Haqqani Seminary in Qom and a member of the Assembly of Experts” (Hiro 2005, 164). Hiro describes how Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi had been, “preeminent in speaking and writing about the role and legitimacy of violence in political affairs”, and who had given religious sanction to the “use of force by individuals against anyone who dared to seek or articulate interpretations of the Sharia that were at variance with the official version” (Hiro 2005, 164). Hiro then provides a direct quotation from Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, which, although it is highly doubtful that Mesbah-Yazdi was in any way familiar with the antiquarian Zoroastrian document, reads almost as verbatim to the words of the Zoroastrian herbad in the Letter of Tansar. Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi stated that:

> “When people are convinced that plots against the Islamic state are endangering it, they must act because this is a case where the use of force is necessary even if thousands get killed . . . not using force against those who commit offenses will lead to more violence and chaos. Islam says mohareb (those who wage war [against the Islamic order]) should be executed or their hands cut off, or be deported”” (Hiro 2005, 165).

Not only does this sanctioning of the deaths of thousands of people if only to preserve the political rule of the religious establishment directly mirror that very same idea as expressed by
herbad Tansar in his eponymous letter, but the reference to dismembering the hands of heretics also recalls the query of Abaleh posed to Atar Frenabag in which the very same practice was cited in order to question the ethical standing of the religious-political officials of his own day. Both the statement of Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi as well as the statement attributed to herbad Tansar also evokes the famous quotation of seminal political theorist Thomas Hobbes, who advanced the notion that, “the multitude sufficient to confide in for our security, is not determined by any certain number, but by comparison with the enemy we feare” (Hobbes 1985, 224). And while the body of political theory, the school of liberalism, has innovated far beyond the state to which it was left in in the wake of the contribution of the author of *Leviathan*, as has been demonstrated, the Iranian political tradition, which so staunchly valorizes orthodoxy, has produced statements delivered centuries and millennia apart, yet which still read nearly indistinguishable from one another.

In essence, the suppressive atmosphere of the Islamic Republic of Iran where intolerance of dissent from orthodox interpretations of religious law, the paradigm wherein, “to publish anything original – or anything too analytical – could be dangerous since the tides of revolutionary fervor ebbed and flowed” (Clawson and Rubin 2005, 129), and the ubiquity and political enshrinement of religious arguments allowing for death on a mass scale in order to preserve orthodox religious rule, all constitute harrowing evidence of continuity with the Iranian political tradition that, when implemented during the Sasanian era, produced much the same results – and often with the use of harrowingly similar language.
Hierarchy – Chapter 3

Perhaps the most obvious, straightforward observations ought to begin and lead this inquiry into the aspect of hierarchy as an element of continuity in Iranian politics, especially given that Iran is a country stemming from a civilization that is best known for its lengthy history of monarchy - monarchs as the head of intricately organized societies, at the helm of powerful systems of government, who often extended the boundaries of their states well-beyond the demarcated borders of the twentieth century Iranian states. It would be well-within the bounds of reason to make the traditional Iranian institution of monarchy the point of outset.

And yet, given that Islamic Revolution, the most famous event of the last several generations that involved Iranians, broke what was supposedly 2,500 years of unbroken Persian monarchy – although, as Dilip Hiro keenly pointed out, the manner in which Mohammad Reza Pahlavi presented the monarchical tradition quietly left out the time period between the fall of the Sasanians in 636 A.D. and the rise of the Safavids in 1,500 A.D. (Hiro 2005, 104) – perhaps an examination of the various species and rankings of religious authority such as that of ‘mullah’, ‘hojatoleslam’, or ‘Ayatollah’ would be a more appropriate starting point. Of course, it was a ‘Grand Ayatollah’, Ruhollah Khomeini, who was among the leading ulema, or Shiite Muslim religious references, who, “in rare, almost unique fashion has come to exercise political and religious leadership” (Shariati 1980, 7), and who was the prime architect of the Islamic Revolution (Shariati 1980, 7). And so perhaps unsurprisingly, given the identity and the hierarchical position of the revolution’s iconic leader, it was the religious theoretical treatise of ‘Guardianship of the Jurisprudent’ or, velayat-e-faqih, which succinctly put, is the premise that
political legitimacy lays with a hierarchical religious scholar, that became the founding theoretical conception of the newly minted Islamic Republic of Iran.

Ultimately, either choice, to begin the inquiry examining the Iranian tradition of kingship or the Islamic tradition of religious leadership, would be sound and would be in keeping with scholarly convention. However, there is good reason to eschew this convention, which is that historical evidence indicates that hierarchy was an important driving force in Iranian political life long before the ascendancy of Islam in the seventh century A.D., and, in fact, even before the emergence of the best-known dynasties and monarchs of the pre-Islamic Persian Empires. In fact, the aforementioned notion that Ayatollah Khomeini’s fusion of political and religious leadership was “rare, almost unique” (Shariati 1980, 7), is unsupported by a comprehensive analysis of the relevant data gleaned from the history of the Iranian political tradition. It will be the objective of this chapter to demonstrate and interpret historical evidence in order to affirm and corroborate the importance of hierarchy as an element of continuity in the Iranian political tradition, while also appropriately back-dating the hierarchical tendency beyond conventional starting points, and elucidating why it is that hierarchical social structures and other forms of stratification have recurred at various instances over the course of Iranian history.

Historical evidence records how during several distinct periods within the lengthy pre-Islamic epoch of Iranian history, political authority and religious ranking went hand in hand. In fact, there were instances in which the latter conferred the former. The Zarathushtrotema, or “supreme head of religion” (In Search of My God 1978, 295), was a title that existed in pre-Sasanian Zoroastrianism conferred to “leading politico-ecclesiastical officials” (Mills 1887,
xxviii), and which was evidently bestowed upon more than one recipient over the course of the historical trajectory of the religion.

In fact, according to Dastur Khursheed S. Dabu, there were “thirteen” of these “supreme pontiffs, whose real title was *Zarathushratema*” (Dabu 1959, 9). Dabu continues in regard to the Zarathushratema, stating that, “[the name of the title] became shortened and mixed up with the name of the Founder of the Faith”, before offering up this conflation between the historical Zoroaster (Zarathushtra) and those who held the title of Zarathushratema as a possible explanation as to the troublesome issue of establishing a reliable date for the original Zoroaster, writing that, “later it became impossible to separate the pre-historical traditions of the first Zoroaster from the events of about thirteen successors who were reformers and interpreters of the original message” (Dabu 1959, 9). In any event, the existence of an institutionalized hierarchy within Zoroastrianism prior to that of the Sassanians, whose program of centralization is well-known and extensively researched, significantly back-dates the hierarchical tendency that has recurred at various instances over the course of Iranian political history, and demonstrates that hierarchy has much deeper roots in the Iranian tradition than is generally acknowledged or understood.

As is evidenced in the pontific title of Zarathustratema, the hierarchical attribute of Zoroastrianism typically revolves around sanctified etymology – extending or conferring the name of a deity, holy figure, or some other core concept of the religious belief system to a temporal, mortal individual. It is this linguistic-hierarchical paradigm that L.H. Mills speaks to when he described how, “some writers cannot believe that a ‘holy lord’ could refer to a ‘sainted chieftain’ because the same words occur elsewhere in reference to Ahura. But it is a striking
circumstance in the Gathas that we possess this word ‘ahura’ as meaning a ‘human lord’ more than once” (Mills 1903, 135-136). In fact, even the stratified configuration of the ancient Iranian society is given a hallowed treatment in the Avesta, a veneration of a multi-tiered feudal hierarchy that would be out of place in other religions which vaunt the leveling out of social and class distinctions rather than immortalize them as is the case in Zoroastrian theology.

Per Mills, we are informed that a schema of “house, village, district [and] province” (Mills 1903, 139) – and persistently in that ascending order, without exception – has already been the well-established norm by the time that the historical Zoroaster sets out on his “religious revolution” (Darmesteter 1880, xxix). Probably the most significant instance in the Avesta of this level-ed and ascending system of residences and requisite socio-political obligation is the one in which a critical exception to the paradigm is described. James Darmesteter, in the introduction to the Sacred Books of the East translation of the Vendidad, and in the context of an inquiry into the geographical origin of Zarathustra, points out distinct traditions identifying separate settlements that had claims to being the birthplace of the prophet of Zoroastrianism. In regard to one of these traditions, Darmesteter writes that, “[there is] a passage that either alludes to it or shows how it [the tradition] originated” (Darmesteter 1880, xlvii, xlviii). The textual content of that passage, as translated by Darmesteter, is as follows:

‘How many masters are there?’ ‘There are the master of the house, the lord of the borough, the lord of the province, and the Zarathustra (the high-priest) as the fifth. So is it in all lands, except in the Zarathustrian realm; for there are only four masters in Ragha; the Zarathustrian city.’ ‘Who are they?’ ‘They are the master of the house, the lord of the borough, the lord of the town, and Zarathustra is the fourth.’
This amounts to saying that the high-priest, the Maubedan Maubed, held in Rai the position of the dahvyuma, or lord of the land, and was the chief magistrate.” (Darmesteter 1880, xlvii, xlviii)

Darmesteter proceeds along this line of inquiry, and while captivated by the prospect of Ragha or Rai as the probable candidate of Zoroaster’s birthplace, speaks to yet another title that, “designates the high-priest of the Zoroastrian religion”, “the Masmoghan”, which according to him, “is composed of mas, ‘great’ and moghan, which means ‘magian’” (Darmesteter 1880, xlvii). While the sheer quantity of names for a high priest figure that have been enumerated at this in this chapter, Zarathustratema, Masmoghan, and Maubedan Maubed, clearly paints an evocative picture, the mere fact that in the heartland of Iran, a high priest figure wielded temporal political power millenia before the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini should also serve as persuasive evidence as to hierarchy constituting a significantly outsized theme in the Iranian political tradition, and goes far in forwarding the contention that the hierarchical tendencies of present day Iranian politics amount to a manifestation of a deeply rooted phenomenon that predates not only the Islamic Republic, but also of the politics of Islam itself.

Of course, Darmesteter is committing a probable error of conflation here when he uses the title Mobedan Mobed in regard to this passage, which is not only in reference to a particularly early time period, but which also uses the noun Zarathustra to refer to the high priest in question. As it happens the particular title of Mobedan Mobed does not seem to be attested to prior to the Sasanian-era, when it comes into prominence under such Tansar, Kertir – who was “the second Sasanian high priest” (Boyce 1984), 112) – Adurbad Mahraspand, and later the heresiarch Mazdaq, at least according to some poorly preserved secondary sources. In fact, the
career of that “second Sasanian high priest” Kertir, serves as an excellent yardstick of the continuity of hierarchy, in that, as understood from his monumental inscription in the heart of the Sassanian Empire, Kertir’s tenure as a priest was marked by several promotions from one station to another, with an increasingly elaborate appellation given to each. Not only does hierarchy become more institutionalized than ever, but it is this historical era where it first becomes the case that the Iranian priesthood becomes a three-tiered enterprise: most importantly of all, it would not be the last time that Iranian clergy would operate with three divisions in ranking.

Kertir numbers among the scant few Iranian political figures from antiquity to leave an monumental inscription, which he ordered to be engraved on the so-called Ka’ba-yi Zardusht (Boyce 1984, 112) – a name that, by mixing Arabic-Islamic and Iranian-Zoroastrian words, tells quite the story in itself – which allows for scholars to study a Sasanian primary source and finally subject a religious patriarch who executed dissidents with impunity to critical examination. At first referred to “Kirder the Herbad” (Boyce 1984, 111) or mid-ranking priest in the inscription of Shabuhr I, in his own monumental inscription produced during the reign of Vahram II, Kirder introduces himself as “Kirder the Mobad” (Boyce 1984, 112) indicating that he arose to the highest echelon of the Zoroastrian priesthood. Then, as according to his inscription, during the reign of Shabuhr I’s son, Kirder became “styled [as] ‘Kirder the Mobad of Ohrmazd’, in the name of Ohrmazd the Lord” (Boyce 1984, 111). Following this, Kirder claims that, during the aforementioned kingship of Vahram II from 276-293 A.C., “I was made more authoritative and independent than formerly over religious matters” (Boyce 1984, 112). His formal positions and responsibilities increased, stating that, “I was made Mobad and Judge of the whole empire . . . Master of Ceremonials and Warden of the Fires of Anahid-Ardashir and
Anahid the Lady at Istakhr” (Boyce 1984, 112). Furthermore, his styling was extended yet again, this time to its most protracted final iteration, with the ladder-climbing priest of priests writing that, “and I was styled ‘Kirder by whom Vahram’s soul is saved, Mobad of Ohrmazd’” (Boyce 1984, 112). Compared to this, the formal title and styling of the present day Iranian priest of priests, ‘Grand Ayatollah’ and ‘Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution’ strike one as being succinct, almost terse.

As Darmesteter pointed out while examining the rare example in the Avesta of a high priest who also served as the prime political functionary of his province, eventually, at the end of the Zoroastrian era, “Khaled besieged [Zarathushtrian Ragha] and destroyed the power of the last of them’”(Darmesteter 1880, xlvii, xlviii). However, the example of the Sasanians and their permutation of the Iranian hierarchical tendency would remain the aspired to ideal long after the collapse of their empire and the displacement of Zoroastrianism with Islam as the majority faith adhered to by Iranians.

The Arda Viraz Namag, per Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism, is an “ancient Zoroastrian version [of] a widely attested type of mantic composition in the oral literatures of the world”, namely, “the ‘vision of the home of the dead’”, and was accordingly passed down in the Iranian oral tradition for generations until a recension of the tale was at last put to writing in the ninth century A.D. in order to shore up the faith of the steadily declining population of devout orthodox Zoroastrians amidst an increasing number and of conversions to Islam (Boyce 1984, 84). Interestingly enough, the Arda Viraz Namag has been demonstrated as being the original source of the Divine Comedy of Dante Aligheri (Boyce 1984, 84). In the twelfth and fourteenth chapter of the Arda Viraz Namag, the titular character, Viraz,
who was sent on an otherworldly journey by the Zoroastrian patriarchs (according to the text as translated by Boyce, this was achieved no less than by means of the ingestion of some sort of “narcotic” (Boyce 1984, 84)), observes members of the four Sasanian-era estates, which were, “the warriors, the priesthood, farmers, and artisans” (Crawford 2014, 16). Over the course of the narrative, Viraz encounters members of each of these castes enjoying their afterlives – albeit, each separately, sequestered apart from representatives of the other castes; which would appear to indicate that the hierarchical distinction of Iranian society was perceived as being so laudable that caste was never shaken off, not even upon or after death (Boyce 1984, 87).

The first caste encountered by Arda Viraz on his journey were the priests, “those persons who in the flesh had chanted the Gathas and performed acts of worship”, whom the text, through the observation of Viraz, indicates that, “they were in garments adorned with silver and gold, the most embellished of all garments” (Boyce 1984, 87). Afterwards, Viraz encounters, “the souls of ‘warriors’”, followed by “the souls of ‘herdsmen’”, until lastly (which actually should in this case be inferred to also connote the least importance) Viraz “saw the souls of those ‘artisans’ who in the world had served their lords and masters” (Boyce 1984, 87), with this phrase that reiterates the necessity of that caste to practice obsequience to their more authoritative higher ranking estates being applied solely to the Arda Viraz Namag’s description of that lowest class. It might be superfluous and anticipated then to clarify that the textual description of each caste residing in the idealized Zoroastrian afterlife becomes steadily more and more sparse from “those persons who in the flesh had chanted the Gathas” to “those ‘artisans’ who in the world had served their lords and masters” (Boyce 1984, 87).
The priesthood are described as wearing “garments embellished with silver and gold, the most embellished of all garments” (Boyce 1984, 87). Similarly, the “souls of ‘warriors’” are described as being outfitted, “in kingly garments”, with the text noting that “the well made caparisons of those heroes were made of gold, studded with jewels, very glorious, richly adorned” (Boyce 1984, 87). However, with reference to “the souls of ‘herdsmen’”, all that is offered in the narrative as to their clothing in the afterlife is that they wore “glorious raiment”, and the text, uniquely in regard to these agriculturalists, clarifies that “their position is great, and they occupy a good place” (Boyce 1984, 87), almost as if there is some exigent need to convince someone – perhaps the ninth century Zoroastrian laity – that all is well and that nothing is amiss in the disparity between the detailed finery of the preceding two estates and these farmers.

Finally, and as noted previously, the most scant description of the four estates in the Arda Viraf Namag is that of the artisans, where, besides the perfunctory (rather suspect) statement that they “in the world had served their lords and masters”, are only said to “[sit] upon daises which were well carpeted, large, brilliant and shining”, before the description concludes with the same sentence as it did with all of the estates, with Viraz stating “and it seemed to me very praiseworthy” (Boyce 1984, 87).

A significantly lengthy passage in the critical notes of the ninth century A.D. Zoroastrian literary work, ‘Gajastak Abalish’, another work that lionizes the standard template of the Sasanian era, details the arduous process set forth in the Vendidad of the Avesta as to the procedure necessary in order to consecrate the highest ranking of ritual fire in the Zoroastrian religion. A total of sixteen types of fire are required, each belonging from a distinct profession and social class, including: corpse burners, “the burner of refuge”, the burner of dung, the potter,
the manufacturer of crockery, the frier, the goldsmith, the silversmith, the blacksmith, the steelsmith, the baker, the worker in the kitchen, the melter, the herdsman, the warrior on the battle-field, and “the user of fire in the nearest place”. Later on in the critical notes, the Persian Rivayats, a series of discourses and exchanges between the Zoroastrian communities of Iran and India is cited on the same subject of the process of establishing an Atash Behram, and in this account, the extensive list of fires belonging to various traditional professions and social castes is much the same, however, the fifteenth type of fire required is stated as being “those of the lightning of the sky” (Chacha 1936, 80). Translator Homi Chacha then reports the dizzying number of ceremonies required merely for the consecration of those sixteen, notwithstanding the other ceremonies and rituals involved and called for at other stages in the process, writing that, “if only one pair of ‘athravans’ were to undertake the entire work of consecration, it would take them nearly three years, one month and eighteen days to complete it. If there were two pairs of ‘athravans’, the consecration would be completed in about one year, six months and twenty-four days. If four pairs co-operated in the work, the consecration would be completed in nine months and twelve days.” (Chacha 1936, 84).

Furthermore, the critical notes of Gajastak Abalish state in regards to the sixth question posed by the heretic Abaleh to the leader of the Zoroastrian community Atar-Franbag Farokhzatan that, “[the sixth question] . . . must have suggested itself to Abaleh from the Avestan text of the Vandidad, Pargard V, 27-38, where Zarathustra asks Ahura Mazda . . .” - the question itself is about ritual defilement in the context of the untimely passing away of an individual in space shared by other persons. In the sense that Zoroastrian theological treatises routinely concern themselves with highly strict and rigorous protocols of physical hygiene and ritual
purity, the question is par for the course, and digressive to the inquiry of this thesis. However, it is within the answer to Zarathustra’s question, provided by none less than Ahura Mazda, that the component germane to assessing the recurring element of hierarchy in the political tradition of Iranians is found.

As Chacha writes, “In reply Ahura Mazda mentions thirteen classes of men and animals and the number of men to whom the body of the person or animal spreads infection” (Chacha 1936, 87). Then later, with reference to the same section of the Vandidad, Chacha explains that, “it will be seen that after the death of a person, the contamination reaches eleven persons if he be an athravan, ten if he be a warrior, nine if he be a farmer, and none if he is a wicked man, an unholy heretic, and it is this proposition that Abaleh wants to refute, as it appear to him illogical and absurd” (Chacha 1936, 87). Without falling into the dense metaphysical and ritualistic justification offered in the text in order to refute Abaleh’s query (indeed, given the ecclesiastical form of literature being dealt with, each and every question of the ‘idiot heretic’ is soundly refuted by the high priest to the fanfare of the seated Caliph, much as the Sasanian King would have been seated centuries prior), we can take this question-and-answer as indicative that, even at this point in history and quite probably much earlier, there existed long-simmering currents of dissent against the social stratification and caste-divisions of Iranian society and the reinforcement of those divisions through the theology and corresponding internal logic of Zoroastrianism.

Insofar as the text of ‘Gajastak Abalish’ indicates that the vehement denunciation of Abaleh is owed not only to the heretic’s deviation from the religious views of orthodox Zoroastrianism, but also because of the heretic Abaleh’s highly visible and public questioning of
a figure of authority, the work exemplifies two intimately related tracks of condemnation against dissent which essentially go hand-in-hand together.

As it so happened, the hierarchical impulse that had existed in the Iranian tradition for millennia would prove difficult to shake and even though the dominant belief system had changed, once again, “Arab and Iranian Muslims began to organize religious and social life to a degree that earlier generation of Muslims had thought unnecessary” (Mottahedeh 1985, 147). “One such form of organization was the madreseh . . . . these colleges of religious learning [which] appeared in the late eleventh century”, and which, from the detail which is the key insight to be gleaned from this passage in The Mantle of the Prophet, “[were] founded in most cases by Iranian civil servants who worked in high positions for the Turkish sultans and their generals” (Mottahedeh 1985, 147). Then, centuries later, “the Safavis founded Shahi madresehs in numbers in which they had never existed before”, a telling historical fact to which Mottahedeh attaches the insightful observation that, “Shi’ism was by no means an ‘Iranian religion,’ but Iran was emphatically a Shah kingdom, usually the only Shah kingdom” (Mottahedeh 1984, 94). And in a sentence which conspicuously recalls the symbiotic relationship of the old Sasanian monarchs and the “‘Mobad of Ohrmazd by whom Vahram’s soul is saved’” (Boyce 1984, 112), Mottahedeh writers that, “the attraction of these madresehs and of royal patronage in general drew a stream of Shahi learned men from other parts of the Islamic world to Iran” (Mottahedeh 1985, 94). It would appear that a distinguishing politico-religious identity from that of neighboring states, as well as hierarchically graded institutions with which to entrench that identity had blossomed in the Iranian experience once again.
Institutions of higher learning had been a perennial feature in Iranian history, and had persistently reinforced hierarchical organization of society. In fact, it was none other than Kirder, “the second Sasanian high priest” (Boyce 1984, 112), who, “drew up many documents and charters for fires and priestly *colleges” (Boyce 1984, 113) several centuries prior to madrasehs.

Fascinatingly enough, it is the strength of this continuity, the resiliency of this hierarchical tendency and the replication of hierarchy through institutions of learning, which has actually severed to bare out Boyce’s own translation of the phrase “priestly *colleges”, which appears in the printed script of *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* with an asterisk – a symbol used to indicate “a doubtful meaning or a restored form” (Boyce 1984, viii). In fact, the same specific quotation, “many fires and priestly colleges”, appears wholly without an asterisk in Peter Frankopan’s *The Silk Roads*, in a section pertaining to, “inscriptions commissioned by the chief priest, Kirdir” (Frankopan 2017, 34). What is more is that, from Mehdi Estakhr, we are told, “According to Xenophon, the Magians did not have their own college until late in the life of Cyrus who, in expression of his devotion to the gods, instituted it for the first time” (Estakhr 2012, 33), thus demonstrating that the hierarchical institution of religious learning, first the Magian college of Achaemenian times, then the priestly college of the Sasanian era, and then the madreseh of Iranian Islam, are all manifestations of the same long-running element of hierarchy in the Iranian political tradition.

So even though it is clearly in the spirit of a wry jab in which Paul Kriwaczek, an ardent advocate of the thesis of standing continuity in Iranian civilization between the pre-Islamic Zoroastrian era and the Islamic Iran of the present-day, wrote that, “Iranian Shi’ahs see themselves as ideal Muslims and are horrified when orthodox Sunni critics accuse them, as they
do, of secret Zoroastrian tendencies, pointing to the hierarchy of clergy with a Supreme Leader at its head, like some Zoroastrian Mобед-мобедан, Priest of Priests”, (Кривачек 2002, 224), it is nonetheless not for nothing that the comparison is drawn between the position of Grand Ayatollah and its antecedent, Mobед-e-mобедan. As Mottahedeh wrote nearly two decades prior to Kriwaczek’s In Search of Zarathustra, “at various times in their two hundred-odd years of rule the Safavis had an official chaplain called мullah-bashi, or ‘top mullah’” (Mottahedeh 1985, 203), a position also spoken to by Aptin Khanbagi in his work The Fire The Star and the Cross, where Khanbagi renders it as “mulla bashi (head of mullas)” (Khanbagi 2006, 156). Per Khanbagi, the mulla bashi was an official, who, by the year 1720 during the twilight years of the Safavid dynasty in which the declining strength of the monarchy coincided with the increasing power of the clergy, wielded enough political influence, “to topple a Grand Vizer such as Fath Ali Khan” (Khanbagi 2006, 156). And by the time of the Qajar dynasty, the trend progressed to the point where “it now was both possible and intellectually defensible to construct a religious hierarchy, and they [the Iranian Shiah mullahs] did so” (Mottahedeh 1985, 207).

Mottahedeh then immediately provides evidence of how this hierarchy was constructed, and does this by detailing how an intermediate rank of Shia cleric was brought into being through the re-appropriation of “the title Hojjat al-Islam (‘Proof of Islam’) . . . [which] became increasingly common . . . and at present is of secondary importance, merely the designation for a mullah of some learning who is not yet an ayatollah” (Mottahedeh 1985, 207). Of course, this title had a standing precedent, in the sense that, while “Hojjat al-Islam” was not an invention of the Safavid era, it was “hardly ever given to anyone in earlier Islamic history except Ghazzali” (Mottahedeh 1985, 207). It becomes clear then, that the inauguration of this second-tier mullah,
enacted in order to forge and to institutionalize a triply-stratified Shia clerical hierarchy was a clever maneuver which certainly proceeded from the presumption that some sort of intermediate rank was necessary in order to cement the whole enterprise. In fact, as it stands in the twenty first century, the gradations of the Shia clerical establishment now include,

marja-e taqlid: source of emulation; ayatollah ozma: grand sign of Allah, a term that ha replaced the earlier mujtahid; ayatollah: sign of Allah; hojatalislam: proof of Islam; thiqatalislam: trust of Islam; mullah: derivative of ‘maula,’ master or learned man; haajj/haaji: one who has performed the hajj (Hiro 2005, 402).

What is at hand is the coming-into-fruition of an ideal that had existed in the minds of Iranians, a premise acted upon, a core belief in the virtue of hierarchy.

Thus, in sum, it is reasonable to vindicate (if only to a qualified extent in that Iranians today do sincerely espouse Islam, albeit inflected with and mediated through their unique prism of cultural influences) the view of Patricia Crone as to the questionable and polemical notion subscribed to by medieval Muslim Arabs that Iranians feigned their Islamic faith (Crone 2012, 19), in that, according to Crone’s outlook on the issue, “propaganda only works if it plays on something real” (Crone 2012, 19).
According to Max Weber in his *Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*, it was the case not only that, “whenever, in addition, the monarchy assumed a theocratic character, there we always find that religion and law sanction ‘protection of the weak’ as in the Near East”, but also that this confluence of religious sensibility and legal strictures, “set rather precise limits to capitalist exploitation of men” (Weber 1988, 65). What Weber may or may not have been aware in 1896 and 1909 when he first wrote and published his German language works on the economics and sociology of the civilizations of classic antiquity that would be compiled together and released again in German in 1924 (not receiving a first English translation or release until 1976) was just how precisely his statement comports with the reality of the situation.

The famous Weberian notion of the “ideal type”, which he explained satisfied an exigent analytical need, writing that, “we must create precise concepts and use them properly, concepts which I prefer to call ‘ideal types’”, the misuse of which Weber cautioned against when he stated that, “such types should not be used as rigid schemata to which historical truth is made to conform, but [ought to be used] as tools with which to determine the economic character of a phenomenon” (Weber 1988, 372). In the context in which the definition of ‘ideal types’ is provided in the *Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*, it is made clear that this process of determining “the economic character of a phenomenon” was to take place “by asking to what degree does that phenomenon resemble this or that ideal type” (Weber 1988, 372).

So it may indeed have been in this vein that Weber made his statement about ‘theocratic monarchies’ and their tendency to “sanction [the] ‘protection of the weak’” (Weber 1988, 65) –
Weber making an abstract yet precise typology based on enough evidence so as to be useful and facilitate inquiry through comparison with evidence of phenomena. It should be noted that in spite of being incredibly well-researched and, of course, featuring a dizzying number of entries relating to Persia, (different Persian dynasties, cities, rulers, the use of the endonym name Iran, and more) while Weber in *Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilization* deals with religion in the Near East and religion in the context of the Persian Empire in a general, theoretical sense, there is a lack of even a single instance in the book’s index or in its text of the key proper nouns: Zoroaster, Zoroastrianism, etc. This returns us to the point made at the conclusion of the first paragraph of this chapter in regard to his statement about ‘protection of the weak’: it is not clear that Weber was aware of just how correct he was in his ideal type matching up with the phenomenon.

The central component of this astonishing paradoxical correctness of Weber in this matter relates, in fact, to the most central, most efficacious prayer in the Zoroastrian religion: the Yatha Ahu Vairyo, also called the Ahuna Vairyo or Ahunavar. From Mary Boyce’s *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, we are told that the prayer – here called “Ahuna Vairyo” – is, “the greatest Zoroastrian prayer, composed by the prophet himself”, “[is] embodied in the yasna liturgy”, and which possesses such a sheer force of spiritual power that, “its recitation may at need replace all other acts of devotion” (Boyce 1984, 56). The interpretation of the prayer which is found in *Textual Sources* is hardly innovative, as Boyce notes, “there are many translations of it, the following deriving essentially from that of S. Insler” (Boyce 1984, 56). Boyce translated the Ahuna Vairyo as meaning:
As the Master, so is the Judge to be chosen in accord with truth. Establish the power of acts arising from a life lived with good purpose, for Mazda and for the lord whom they made pastor for the poor. (Boyce 1984, 56)

Boyce notes that, “the ‘lord’ of the last line is held to be Zarathushtra himself”, while referring readers to a previous section of *Textual Sources* in order to receive a specific definition and identification, writing that, “on the ‘poor’ see 2.2.17” (Boyce 1984, 56). Accordingly, the section that is pointed to – a verse of a different section of the Yasna which features the same phrase as the Ahuna Variyo – provides a definition for the endonym, with Boyce writing that, “‘Poor man’ in v.9 renders Avestan ‘dregush’, forerunner of Persian ‘dervish’” (Boyce 1984, 44). Being that the prayer is paramount in the Zoroastrian religion, a score of sources treat it and provide definitions, as well as transliterations, which are quite useful in the present circumstance.

From both *In Search of My God* as well as Dastur Khurshed S. Dabu’s *Manual of Zoroastrianism*, we are provided with not only with similar translations of the Ahunavar as that of *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* by Boyce, but we are also given English transcriptions of the concluding stanza, ‘Khshathatre mcha Ahurai a, yim dreghuby o dadat vastarem’. Between the *Manual of Zoroastrianism* and *In Search of My God*, the transcription of the latter appears to drop a letter twice – fascinatingly enough, an ‘h’ from the first word of the prayer, and an ‘h’ in the third from the last word (the word which is of utmost importance to this inquiry) is absent from the transcription of *In Search of My God*, but whatever significance or reason exists for this falls beyond the capabilities and training of this present author to present here, and in any case, would almost certainly be digressive. In any case, as it turns out, the Ahunavar appears to use a plural form of the word ‘dregush’ – ‘drighuby o’, and it is this plural form of ‘poor man’ which, combined with the theological language invoking divinity, lordship,
and the like, is suggestive of the cosmological scope of this expression of commitment to the poor.

For further evidence which corroborates this valorization of the ‘poor man’, we have primary sources that may be referred to, namely, the monumental inscriptions in the Old Persian language of Darius the Great, one of which, the Behistun inscription, states that, “neither to the weak nor to the mighty did I do wrong” (Boyce 1984, 104) while another, the inscription at Naqsh-i Rustam – a royal burial site proximate to the city of Persepolis (Boyce 1984, 104) – proclaims, “it is not my desire that the weak man should have wrong done to him by the mighty; nor is that my desire, that the might man should have wrong done to him by the weak” (Boyce 1984, 105).

Another, later, primary source, the Letter of Tansar – a document originating in the first generation of the rule of the Sasanians, yet which underwent redaction and survived the collapse of the Sassanian Empire through successive translation down through the centuries (Boyce 1984, 109) – which, in the form of a question-and-answer dialogue, repeats the doctrine of the ‘protection of the weak’. The relevant portion of the letter, through the translation offered by Boyce in Textual Sources, begins, “Then you said: ‘he has exacted money from men of wealth and merchants’” (Boyce 1984, 110). Even before proceeding to the ‘answer’ to this query, it is interesting to note the variance between the inscription of Darius Hystaspes at Naqsh-i Rustam which was previously treated, and which coupled its statement protecting the weak from persecution from the strong with a corollary defense of the strong against wrong-doing from the weak (Boyce 1984, 105). In contrast, the ‘answer’ in the Letter of Tansar offers no such reciprocal enjoinder, with the letter stating, “the idea that the king of the day should seek help
for the common people from the superfluity of the wealthy is a religious principle and clearly
justified in reason” (Boyce 1984, 110).

And yet, it should not be extrapolated from the Letter of Tansar that, “the masses, which
were by far the most numerous of the population” (Crawford 2014, 17) were afforded any sort of
blanket immunity from the trespasses of the wealthy or from the centers of power. As Peter
Crawford, author of *The War of the Three Gods: Romans, Persians, and the Rise of Islam* relates,
those most numerous masses, “were subcategorised into those poor that Zoroastrianism taught
should be protected, and the insolent troublemakers, who could cause trouble for their landlords”
(Crawford 2014, 17). The so-called “insolent troublemakers” (Crawford 2014, 17) were almost
certainly the followers of Mazdak, described as a “charismatic preacher” (Frankopan 2017, 59)
in *The Silk Roads*, a more recent source, yet who, according to a much older secondary source,
the article *History of Persian Literature* by Prof. M.A. Shushtery, published in the January-April
1938 issue of the prestigious magazine ‘The Iran League Quarterly’, Mazdak was no mere
preacher. According to Shushtery, Mazdak “was well educated and at an early age was raised to
the dignity of Mobedan Mobed or Zoroastrian high-priest and became the minister of the
reigning sovereign, Kubad” (Shushtery 1938, 137). While ascertaining the political position of
Mazdak might allow scholarship to more accurately contextualize the events which would
transpire (and thus glean sharper insights) whatever the case might have been, as the exceeding
useful and sagacious *Iran: At War with History* reports, “Mazdakism . . . advocated radical social
reform, including communal possession of property and (according to hostile sources) women”
(Limber 1987, 49). Limbert then concludes his survey of the heresiarch who may well have been
the priest of priests, writing, “the Sassanian emperor Kavadh (ruled 488-531) accepted this
doctrine, which then flourished under royal protection until its bloody suppression in 524 A.D.”
(Limber 1987, 49). While this reversal of monarchical sanction might initially indicate that the kings, being the prime hierarchs of the Zoroastrian system, were implacable opponents of ‘the poor man’, additional evidence demonstrates that this was not the case, and that the central political leader’s purview and mission included their welfare – which is in keeping with the commandment of the Ahunavar.

Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism, citing an account from al-Biruni circa 1,000 A.C., notes that on a particularly auspicious Zoroastrian holiday, “the king used to descend from the throne of the empire . . . and exclusively give himself up to the consideration of the affairs of the realm and its inhabitants” (Boyce 1984, 68). At such time, while clothed exclusively in white, the monarch would “suspend for a time . . . all the pomp of royalty [and] . . . whosoever, high or low, wanted to speak to him in any matter went into his presence and addressed him” (Boyce 1984, 68). This would appear to indicate that the ancient Iranian monarchs would practice a form of direct conference (not quite direct democracy in that the subjects ultimately had no power to affect any outcome resulting from this audience) with their subjects, an interpretation that finds support in the additional details of al-Biruni’s account. The text, as translated by Boyce, continues, stating that, “besides, he held a meeting with the small landowners and farmers, eating and drinking with them” (Boyce 1984, 68-69). Perhaps most interesting of all, al-Biruni then provides a snippet purporting to be the direct speech of the king himself, who would announce:

‘Today I am like one of you. I am your brother; for the existence of the world depends on that culture which is wrought by your hands, and the existence of this
culture depends upon government; the one cannot exist without the other’ (Boyce 1984, 69).

This practice, though replete with distinctly Zoroastrian theological significance, is likely the antecedent of the phenomenon observed by both twentieth century Iranian regimes, wherein high officials – ranging from ‘Shahbanu’ Farah Diba, to the current President of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi – travel to the countryside in order to literally and figuratively walk and talk among the people. In any event, al-Biruni’s narrative provides a fascinating if narrowly delimited counterpose to the typical paradigm of staunchly hierarchical relations between Iranian socio-economic and socio-political castes, and demonstrates that the objective of ensuring the best interests of the peasantry and the poor was a prime directive for the leaders of Iranian states.

The chapter in Tell the American People authored by Richard Falk, who was not only an Albert G. Milbank Professor of International Law at Princeton University, but also the Director of the North American Section of the World Order Models Project of the Institute for World Order (Albert 1980, i) features an eye-catching indication that the longstanding imperative to ‘protect the weak’ made its way into the twentieth century along with several other elements of continuity in the Iranian political tradition. In his chapter, Falk notes that, “Ayatollah Khomeini seems dedicated to evolving a form of governance for the people of Iran that includes a central commitment to social justice for the poor” while also stating Ayatollah Khomeini’s efforts in that regard included aims to ameliorate the wide gulf between classes and, “an elimination of the kinds of wasteful consumption and production patterns that grew up during the Shah’s years” (Falk 1980, 89). Given the essentially correct assertion of John Limbert, which is that, “the shah
pretended that Islam did not exist as a cultural force” (Limbert 1987, 105), his regime’s “appearance of modernity, stability, and power” (Limbert 1987, 105) inadvertently contributed to the perception that he constituted an enemy of the poor, which in the Iranian reckoning, was never and has never been a primarily material classification, but rather, a theosophical one.

What Richard Falk does not provide in his chapter, is a transcription or transliteration of whatever term it was that Ayatollah Khomeini used in the dialogues and speeches which created the perception that he was an advocate for the poor. Rather than representing some sort of warm, amenable account of Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, Richard Falk’s statement here, and specifically the very particular language Falk employs, “a central commitment to social justice for the poor”, ought to be interpreted more so as a reflection of how deeply held the ancient norm of valorizing the lot of the disenfranchised is within Iranian society and culture. It also demonstrates how core beliefs such as magnanimity towards the poor, can, and often do, serve as first-principles upon which political dispensations and their theoretical scaffolding are erected.

In fact, the “central commitment” expressed here strongly evokes the popular Iranian Shia notion of ‘jahanbini’ or “total world-view” (Shariati 1980, 8) that was most famously associated with Ali Shariati, who was one of the most important intellectual fathers of the Islamic Revolution next to Ayatollah Khomeini(Shariati 1980, 12). In addition, ‘the poor’, as used in this specific context, almost certainly refers to the highly-differentiated Islamic notion of “mostaz’afin” or “the world’s oppressed” (Limber 1987, 139), also defined as “[the] deprived” (Hiro 2005, 401). In the glossary to his Iran: At War with History, Limbert provides an extended definition of the “Quranic term” (Limbert 1987, 161), which sheds valuable insight as to how religious terminology and conceptions as to the ‘poor man’ trumped competing theories, writing,
“Khomeini and his followers have used this term effectively to preempt the Marxist’ rhetoric of social justice and to present Islam as the only true ideology of the oppressed” (Limbert 1987, 161), and concludes tellingly that, “one of Khomeini’s titles is ‘hope of the oppressed of the world’” (Limbert 1987, 161). Indeed, and per Limbert, the sweeping scope of ‘jahanbini’, combined with the deeply-rooted Iranian religious affinity towards the lot of the mostaz’afin, has led to a geopolitical positionality in which, “the Islamic Republic has appointed itself champion of the world’s oppressed (mostaz’afin) against world arrogance (estekbar-e-jahani), i.e., the great powers” (Limber 1987, 139).

In that sense, the “world’s opposed against world arrogance” (Limbert 1987, 139) dichotomy not only represents manifest continuity with the dualistic element of the Iranian political tradition and the paradigm of persistent, internecine, and theologically charged competition with competing nation-states, but it also tracks with the ‘poor man’ or communitarian-inflection element that was a core component in the prior Iranian religious belief system of Zoroastrian. From ‘drigubyo’ to ‘mostaz’afin’, the astonishing similarity of the religious-political vernacular of Iranian belief systems, and the observed ability of these core beliefs to militate political mobilization on a wide variety of scales, is simply remarkable. That it was precisely in the time-period of the victory of only the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979 – merely the most recent religious revolution in the history of the Iranian political tradition – what is also demonstrated, is the phenomenon of transference of core beliefs from different belief systems through folkways and idioms of language, and indeed the core beliefs are often those which carry the most significant payloads.
In regards to normative political theory of the state, perhaps the two foremost names and enduring theoretical contributions remain Thomas Hobbes and Max Weber. However, given that the central objective of this thesis is to utilize the methodological technique of content analysis in order to establish and interpret salient aspects of the politics of contemporary Iran and the political thinking and practice that displayed themselves in the ancient Iranian civilization, and thus narrow in on the themes of continuity manifest in the Iranian tradition, what reasons, if any, would there be to rely on the contributions of these two Westerners, however influential their works might be? Is it not the case that to incorporate the theoretical perspectives of Thomas Hobbes and Max Weber in the purview of such an inquiry might amount to a deviation away from the principled approach of rendering an analysis of extant and affectual continuity between Iranian politics of present and past epochs that centers and treats the Iranian cultural and civilizational context on its own terms?

The present writer submits that there is ample reason to employ the theory of Hobbes and Weber, and that, rather than amounting to a superficial or arbitrary invocation of prominent thinkers, the normative theory of Thomas Hobbes and Max Weber are particularly germane and well-suited to the objective of this thesis.

The name and theoretical conception of Hobbes is invoked by Paul Kriwaczek in *In Search for Zarathustra* in order to contextualize the appeal of Manichaean dualism in regard to the perennial ‘problem of evil’, in that, “a kind and loving God could not possibly have been the author of such a cruel and frightful place, as the Church insisted he was”, before alluding to the
‘solution’ which the Manichaean religion offered: “only Satan could have created such a miserable existence” (Kriwaczek 2002, 67). According to Kriwaczek, “their [Manichaean] ultra-pessimistic heresy only makes sense if they were desperate people clinging to a despairing belief”, before then citing Hobbes, “‘continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’ was Hobbes’s familiar rendering” (Kriwaczek 2002, 67).

In fact, the sheer Hobbesian scale of violence which was routinely inflicted upon the Manichaeans made its way into their religious writings, in which, according to a chapter written by author Jason David BeDuhn in the compilation *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, amounted to a “critique of the concept of ‘church’ towards the end of the psalm, hinting at the polemical context in which Manichaeans and Christians vied for the mantle of Christ” (BeDuhn 2000, 122). According to the translation BeDuhn offers, the Manichaean view certainly evokes a Hobbesian state of nature bereft of safety and beset with war, with the line in question reading, “this whole world has gone astray because of this name, ‘church’. Let no one give us toil” (BeDuhn 2000, 124). This refrain refers to the Manichaean ascetic doctrine of “‘the Rest’, an absolute cessation of harmful interaction with the world” (BeDuhn 2000, 122-123), to which, BeDuhn clarifies, “there is a double meaning to ‘toil’ here: on the one hand, work; on the other, trouble or bother of any kind” (BeDuhn 2000, 123). This is a striking and sharp counterpose to the worldview of the Zoroastrians who persecuted Mani and his followers, who were motivated by the notion that good must actively confront and destroy evil, a concept which in the Gathas appears in the Avestan language word ‘maga’ and ‘magavan’, which were the “the great Cause” and its adherents (Mills 1903, 186), a notion of the utmost centrality and which, as L.H. Mills
speculates, may have provided the name of the Magians, the Zoroastrian priesthood (Mills 1903, 186). In an immediate sense of the theories at hand there is an evident tension between a religion in which the core belief is an ascetic ‘rest’ and a religion in which there is a ‘holy cause’ – between the latter in which orthodox institutions or ‘churches’ as well as religious-states are erected and expanded, and the latter, which chafes at those notions.

Thomas Hobbes produced *Leviathan* in the aftermath of the English Civil War and the execution of the King, hitherto the foremost organizing pillar of the English political system, by rebels, and the work is a response to the conceptual challenges of articulating what the subsequent political configuration would look like and how it would derive and justify authority without a rightful monarch whose rule was legitimized by divine right (Hobbes 1982, 13). This motivation and context, not to mention the corpus of theory itself, bares striking symmetry and similarity to several distinct periods of Iranian political history, not the least of which is the period following the Islamic Revolution in which the monarchical political system of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was coronated and ruled under the traditional title of ‘Shah’, was succeeded by the theocratic revolutionary political system founded by the Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, who authored his own treatise on the question and nature of legitimate political authority, the thesis of *velayat-e faqih*, or “leadership of the supreme jurisprudent” (Moghaddam 2016, 23).

In fact, according to author Arshin Adib Moghaddam, “at least in theory, the supreme jurisprudent resembles a Hobbesian Leviathan whose purpose it is to secure and stabilize the state and ensure the Islamicity of the system” (Moghaddam 2016, 28). This is not the sole instance in which Moghaddam invokes and incorporates the language of Hobbes in order to
explicate the political theory of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Republic of Iran, as Moghaddam writes, “the Iranian Leviathan did not merely wield a scepter, it was equipped by Khomeini with a distinctly other-worldly sovereignty that has given the office of faqih disturbingly arbitrary powers”, which, in a phrase which recalls so much of the tumult and turmoil of Iranian political history of both the Zoroastrian and Islamic epochs, “have been recurrently challenged both by other institutions of the state and the combatant Iranian civil society” (Moghaddam 2016, 28-29).

And much like the political prescriptions of Hobbes in *Leviathan* are often critiqued under the premise that the ‘Leviathan’ fails to transcend the past and appears closer to a recreation of the prior system than it appears to articulate a new one, so to do critiques of the Islamic Republic of Iran frequently chide the perceived authoritarian attributes of its political system and point out that politics and political life in Iran post-1979 often resembles that which existed prior to 1979. Furthermore, the iconic cover of *Leviathan* – which depicts a single gargantuan character whose form is comprised by a multitude of miniscule human figures – as a work of art that is typically described as embodying the core conceit of Hobbes’s work, significantly resembles the symbolic monumental art and engravings of the Achaemenid dynasty at Persepolis in which representatives of the nations of the Persian Empire hold up the throne (Shahbazi 2011, 183). Furthermore, both this Persepolitan imagery as well as the cover of *Leviathan* evoke the propaganda posters and political artwork of the Islamic Revolutions that often depict figures or symbols of political and religious authority, including the Ayatollah Khomeini, emerging out of the masses of believers, or *momineen*. 
The archaeological excavations and subsequent scholarship conducted at the Persepolis not only facilitate a more accurate understanding of the political dynamic of the Achaemenian dynasty, but also demonstrate how the legacy of that empire remained a key legitimating factor for Iranian dynasties for centuries to come. The preeminent Persepolis researcher Shapur Shahbazi notes how the ruins at Persepolis feature an inscription from the Sasanian emperor Shapur II who reigned from 309-379 A.D. (Shahbazi 2011, 147), who “revered [the palace] as an ancestral place” (Shahbazi 2011, 149). Furthermore, and perhaps surprisingly, “of later inscriptions, one is carved in the Arabic language and Kufic characters by the [Iranian Muslim] Buyid king, Azad al-Dawla” (Shahbazi 2011, 149). Apparently the Persepolis site, over a thousand years after its immolation at the hands of the Macedonian forces of Alexander the Great (Shahbazi 2011, 13) still commanded such mystique, prestige, and respect so as to induce the Iranian Muslim Buyid Azad al-Dawla not only to commission a Zoroastrian priest to attempt to translate the inscriptions (Shahbazi 2011, 149), but also to remove several pieces of architecture from Persepolis in order to be put to use at Azad al-Dawla’s newly constructed palace at Qasr-e Abu Nasr in the very same province as the ancient Achaemenian capital (Shahbazi 2011, 149).

In similar vein to the reverence paid to Persepolis (and the political legitimation its legacy afforded) by the Zoroastrian Sasanians and Islamic Buyids is the account of the messianic rebel Babab Khorram-din, who attempted to overturn Islamic rule and who, “kept Azarbaijan in turmoil for over twenty years (817-838)” (Limbert 1987, 65). According to the meticulous research of Patricia Crone, author of *The Nativist Prophets*,
a late Armenian copyist claims that he [Babak Khorram-din] called his troops ‘the Army of the Immortals’, a name given by the Achaemenids to their elite troops and said to have been used by the Sasanids as well. This could be taken to suggest Sasanian legitism. So too could the fact that he assumed the name of Babak (Pabag), perhaps meant to evoke the father of Ardashir [founder of the Sasanian dynasty] (Crone 2012, 66).

This etymological point dealing with the Babak Khorram-din’s adoption of the regnal name of the founder of the dynasty whose political and religious legacy he invoked and possibly attempted to restore wholesale is significant in that it ties together Iranian ruling dynasties from classical antiquity, late antiquity, and the medieval era, and demonstrates that military glory and state foundation was a running thread of political legitimacy at each stage.

In fact, with reference to Ardashir I – the Sasanian founder whose father’s name was taken up by the medieval rebel Babak Khorram-din – his own name is a derivation of the Achaemenian king Artaxerxes, and in fact, in the older source *The Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy*, Ardashir I the Sasanian is given plainly as ‘Artaxerxes’, following the academic conventions of the day (Rawlinson 1875, 62). And between the Achaemenian Artaxerxes and the Sasanian ‘Artaxerxes’, the notes provided in Wilfred H. Schoff’s translation of *Parthian Stations* indicate that there was another Artaxerxes during the intervening Parthian period. Schoff writes that, with reference to the use of the name ‘Artaxerxes’ in the text of *Parthian Stations*, a text dating to the year 1 B.C. (Frankopan 2017, 17), “the statements of Isidore [ancient author of *Parthian Stations*] do not accord . . . this seems rather to be some Artaxerxes of the tributary kingdom of Persia in Parthian times” (Schoff 1913, 39). The salient kernels to draw from this etymological survey is to note the recurring practice of the carrying-forward of ancient regnal names by successive Iranian dynasts, and to draw attention to the fact that this practice was
principally intended to legitimate the rule of the current monarch (or those who aspired to that station, as in the case of Babak Khorram-din) through association with the exploits and example of the kings of the past.

As to the notion of political legitimacy itself, the Counterinsurgency Field Manual of the United States Army and Marine Corps notes that, “legitimacy makes it easier for a state to carry out its key functions” (Petraeus 2007, 37), yet the Field Manual also notes that legitimacy is a concept which defies a simple, universally applicable definition, and that in fact, concepts of legitimacy vary significantly from one political tradition to another. The Field Manual writes that, “in Western liberal tradition, a government that derives its just powers from the people and responds to their desires while looking out for their welfare is accepted as legitimate” (Petraeus 2007, 37). However, “in contrast, theocratic societies fuse political and religious authority; political figures are accepted as legitimate because the populace views them as implementing the will of God” (Petraeus 2007, 37). Then, several notions of legitimacy that are distinctly theocratic and at odds with the liberal tradition are enumerated, one of which reads, “since the 1979 revolution, Iran has operated under the ‘rule of the jurists [theocratic judges]’” (Petraeus 2007, 37). In essence, the Field Manual is correct to draw a distinction between legitimacy as it is understood under the conception of liberalism in the Western tradition, however, by outlining the general notion of theocratic forms of legitimacy, and then only citing the Iranian case with reference to the Islamic Revolution misses the long standing tradition of theocratic legitimation which has held throughout the history of Iranian civilization, and to some degree echoes the view of neoconservative scholars such as Clawson and Rubin who view the Islamic Revolution as an
inexplicable event given the Iranian tradition (Clawson and Rubin 2005, 88), rather than an obvious development because of the Iranian tradition.

From Max Weber’s *Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*, we have it that “Greek social history” (Weber 1988, 157) took a “decisive turning point” (Weber 1988, 157) in which “military urban particularism led to the *polis*” (Weber 1988, 157), whereas “in the Near East”, urban forms existed at first, yet were eventually subsumed into “bureaucratic territorial monarchy and finally ‘world monarchy’” (Weber 1988, 157). This notion of “world monarchy” (Weber 1988, 157) is the understanding which is adopted by historian Tom Holland in his excellent and quite useful book *Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West*, in which the equivalents to the phrase are used repeatedly in order to paint an intelligible portrait of those first antagonists of the Western tradition, the Persian Empire of the Achaemenian dynasty. In reference to the assumption of the throne of the empire by Darius Hystaspes, Holland pictures the “truly agonising choice” (Holland 2005, 51) faced by the heads of the feudal clans whose fiefdoms were now on the precipice either of destruction by Darius, or absorption into a much larger polity, with Holland stating that they could “forgo the opportunities of global empire . . . or remain masters of the world, but as vassals of a universal king” (Holland 2005, 51). Then later, as to the political vision of Darius Hystaspes, Holland writes, “his vision of empire as a fusion of cosmic, moral and political order was to prove stunningly fruitful: the foundation-stone not only of his own rule but of the very concept of a universal order” (Holland 2005, 56).

The verbiage employed by Holland in both instances is highly evocative of Weber’s “world monarchy” (Weber 1988, 157), and remains the dominant characterization of the political
theory of the Achaemenians, appearing also in *The Authoritative Guide to Persepolis* by Shapur Shahbazi, who wrote, “within this ‘world-empire’ various nations lived prosperously and different cultures flourished” (Shahbazi 2011, 6). And yet, as Shahbazi goes on, he writes that “the Persians based their administration upon magnanimity and liberalism but had high regard for law and order” (Shahbazi 2011, 6), which appears to be at odds with his own understanding of Persepolis as “the holy center, the cradle of the Persian Empire which Alexander strove to destroy” (Shahbazi 2011, 13). While Shahbazi’s use of the term liberalism could be construed as simply another synonym for magnanimity, it begs the question as to why he would have used two terms in succession to mean the same thing – and so it appears that Shahbazi, despite his expertise, harbored somewhat hagiographic views as to the politics of the Achaemenians. Indeed, unless it is somehow the case that Western ‘liberalism’ with its tradition of secularism is also applicable to a religious world empire that constituted a “fusion of cosmic, moral and political order” (Holland 2005, 56), it is more reasonable and straightforward to state that Shahbazi’s ascription of liberalism to the ancient Persian state is simply anachronistic.

As it so happens, Weber connects the development of world empire in the Near East to religion, writing, “hence the dominance of religious tradition in Near Eastern society and the political power of the priesthood”, before making the connection absolutely unambiguous by stating, “then, too, the peoples of the riverine cultures were repeatedly conquered by foreign invaders from Arabia and Iran, and as a result were held in permanent subjugation and powerlessness” (Weber 1988, 157). It would be in very acute discordance with liberalism indeed to conquer and subjugate other cultures, however “prosperously” (Shahbazi 2011, 6) this subjection to foreign rule might have allowed those nations to live.
Instead of understanding Iranian religious world empires as being compatible with the appellation of liberalism, the two typologies of legitimacy, liberal and theocratic, which the Counterinsurgency Field Manual placed at odds with one another, should continue to be treated as distinct phenomena. And given Weber’s indications as to “the dominance of religious tradition in Near Eastern society and the political power of the priesthood”, and the development of world monarchy in that region in contrast with Greece (Weber 1988, 157), and the compatibility of that description with the Field Manual’s contrasting of Western liberal legitimacy and the subsequent enumeration in the very same paragraph of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran as an example of theocratic legitimacy, it is indeed appropriate to distinguish the two political traditions – that of the West, and that of Iran. In fact, by proceeding with the understanding that Iranian empire and Iranian religiosity are part and parcel of the same paradigm, the former stemming from the latter, we are equipped with the insight to appropriately understand why Robert Baer in The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower made the explicit link between the Islamic Republic’s twenty first century dominance in the Middle East and the ‘world empires’ of Iranian civilization.

Given that author Robert Baer, from his admission on the very first page of The Devil We Know, is a former CIA operative (Baer 2008, 1), it is hardly the case that Baer is in any way a sympathetic voice on Iran – putting aside that even the title of his book equates the Islamic Republic of Iran to the devil. And yet it is because of this background that Baer’s admissions, such as, “the Iranians have shown a better ability to create order out of chaos than anyone in the Middle East” (Baer 2008, 252), should be taken seriously. Furthermore, Baer, who makes it plain that he has adopted the thesis of continuity between Zoroastrian Iran and Islamic Iran in Paul
Kriwaczek's *In Search of Zarathustra*, calling it an “insightful book about Iran’s Islamic antecedents” (Baer 2008, 235), and who also leans on the authority of “one of the best books written on Iran, *The Mantle of the Prophet*, [by] Roy Mottahedeh” (Baer 2008, 237) is by no means engaging in hagiography or pleasantries when he concludes that, “the new Iranian empire is driven by the old one, because Iran’s character and interests are enduring” (Baer 2008, 238).

Through adopting Baer’s thesis that “the new Iranian empire is driven by the old one” (Baer 2008, 237), it becomes possible to elucidate certain aspects of the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* in which the specter of the Islamic Republic of Iran looms behind terse references to insurgent groups and insurgency paradigms – the most important of which is the theoretical notion of the “counterstate” (Petraeus 2007, 12). The “counterstate [or shadow government]”, per the *Field Manual* is “a competing structure that a movement sets up to replace the government. It includes administrative and bureaucratic trapping of political power and performs the normal functions of a government” (Petraeus 2007, 12). The *Field Manual* notes that this parallel-state is brought into existence in the advanced stages of a protracted popular war (Petraeus 2007, 12), when “the insurgent organization may establish a counterstate that parallels the established authority” (Petraeus 2007, 12). The *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* proceeds to elaborate on tangible examples of this phenomenon, noting that, in the event wherein “the populace loses faith in the established authority the people may decide to actively resist it”, before stating that, “during this phase, a counterstate may being to emerge to fill gaps in governance that the host-nation (HN) government is unwilling or unable to address” (Petraeus 2007, 12). Directly after introducing this chain of events as a possible hypothetical, the *Field Manual* discusses several concrete examples of counterstates:
Two recent examples are Moqtada al Sadr’s organization in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Sadr’s Mahdi Army provides security and some services in parts of southern Iraq and Baghdad under Sadr’s control. (In fact, the Mahdi Army created gaps by undermining security and services; then it moved to solve the problem it created.) Hezbollah provides essential services and reconstruction assistance for its constituents as well as security. Each is an expression of Shiite identity against governments that are pluralist and relatively weak (Petraeus 2007, 12).

The running thread between each of these counterstates is, or rather, was, the recently assassinated (Economist 2020, 14) Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, who will be contended here as an exemplar of the Iranian tradition of administration, state-formation and warfighting – not in the sense of being the inheritor of the mantle of bygone Persian glory, but rather as the rearticulation of the legacy of the “essentially militaristic states” (Crawford 2014, 20) of the Persian Empires and their Iranian dynasts who raised durable empires which lasted for centuries at a time.

The issue of the Economist magazine dated from January 11-17th 2020 entitled ‘Masterstroke or Madness?’ outlines the role which Qassem Soleimani played in forming the counterstates in Iraq and Lebanon which were referred to in the Counterinsurgency Field Manual. In the article entitled “Conflict with Iran: After the Assassination” from the aforementioned issue of the Economist magazine, it is directly stated that, “General Suleimani . . . co-ordinated the activity of Iranian-backed militias from Lebanon to Yemen” (Economist 2020, 14), and it is then noted in a speculative discussion as to the potential role of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Lebanese Hezbollah, that “he [Nasrallah] chased Israel from South Lebanon twice (in 1996 and 2006, with General Suleimani playing a significant role in the second of those campaigns” (Economist 2020, 16). Indeed, per the concluding article of the magazine entitled
Obituary, it is claimed that “he [Qassem Soleimani] exulted to the Americans that he had been ‘busy in Beirut’” (Economist 2020, 78).

From the account offered in the prior article, “General Suleimani was more than the paymaster for Iran’s proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and beyond” (Economist 2020, 14), and indeed, the article features a photograph of Soleimani and his counterparts in front of a map with the caption “General Suleimani and Mr. Mohandis (right), making plans” (Economist 2020, 16). In fact, the active role which Qassem Soleimani played in these warfronts is corroborated by the text of the article, which states that “given the frequency of General Suleimani’s visits to the battlefield some thought had been put into the matter of his successor” (Economist 2020, 16).

Indeed, it can hardly be said that Qassem Soleimani’s impact was marginal or ineffectual, given the attribution made by the article of Qassem Soleimani to stating that “among the tens of thousands of people killed by General Suleimani’s forces were at least 600 Americans” (Economist 2020, 14). And given that, of all of the countries which were listed as being the venue of Qassem Soleimani’s military campaigns, it can be deduced that these 600 Americans were killed during the Iraqi insurgency which the Counterinsurgency Field Manual was developed and published in order to quash. And in a testament to the relative success and failures of the American and Iranian military campaigns in Iraq, the eponymous article in the issue of the Economist entitled ‘Masterstroke or Madness?’ plainly states that “. . .in Iraq . . . [Iran] has mostly outmaneuvered America. The government in Baghdad is dominated by Shia politicians in thrall to Iran” (Economist 2020, 7). Thus it would appear that the Iraqi counterstate described as being “expressions of Shiite identity against governments” (Petraeus 2007, 12) has not only
supplanted the formal government, but has subsumed it as well – or at the very least secured effective control over its state organs.

But how has any of this become possible? Given that even the *Economist* indicates that it cannot simply have been a matter of Soleimani as a “paymaster” (*Economist* 2020, 14), and given that the United States Armed Forces severely outgun the Iranian military and each of its allies in the Middle East, it cannot be a simple equation of military supremacy either. Nor does a political explanation alone suffice, given the assertions of the *Economist* that, “many Iraqis resent Iranian influence” (*Economist* 2020, 7), that “the underlying reality [is] that Iran is deeply unpopular with many Arabs” (*Economist* 2020, 16), and even that “if Iranians mourned the general as a national hero, Arabs vilified him as a colonial overlord who cared little about their security or sovereignty” (*Economist* 2020, 16).

Perhaps it is with this description of Qassem Soleimani as a “colonial overlord” (*Economist* 2020, 16) that the inquiry would be best served to proceed with, because, in fact, latent in this language used to articulate Arab antipathy towards Soleimani lies a veiled reference to the Persian Empire, whose legacy of domination over the Middle East dating back millennia and close association with the non-Islamic religion of Zoroastrianism have contributed to the proliferation of anti-‘Persian’ propaganda in the Arab world. Yet, as Patricia Crone sagaciously pointed out, “propaganda only works if it plays on something real” (Crone 2012, 19), and it is through this connection to the elements of continuity between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the ‘colonial’ Persian Empires through the Iranian political tradition that the ingredients to the significant success of Qassem Soleimani’s efforts to build anti-Western counterstates in the Middle East can be identified.
A scant reference to an incredibly antique Iranian institution exists in the *Obituary* article of the *Economist* magazine, which is made in a single sentence which itself requires additional corroboration in order to glean out its salient insight. The article, in describing Qassem Soleimani’s early history during the Iran-Iraq War, notes that Soleimani had “join[ed] up for the Sacred Defense [the Islamic Republic’s official term for the Iran-Iraq War] as commander of a unit he had put together from his local gym in Kerman” (*Economist* 2020, 78). The American and Western audiences to whom the *Economist* is generally conceded to be aimed at might not recognize any particular significance to the throwaway line, ‘local gym’. In fact, this venue from which Soleimani recruited his unit was no gymnasium in the Western sense, but a traditional Iranian “‘house of strength’”, or *zurkhaneh*, “where wrestlers exercise” (Mottahedeh 1985, 263).

The *zurkhaneh* is a quintessentially traditional institution in Iranian culture, which in fairness, does correspond to gym, but one in which dumbbells and elaborate exercise machines are absent, and the exercise is done by means of twirling wooden clubs, which themselves have a deep – if also obfuscated – symbolic resonance and connection with pre-Islamic Iran. The *zurkhaneh* shares its etymology with the Zoroastrian ceremonial greeting of the *hamazor*, where coreligionists on auspicious holidays would join hands and recite a greeting which is translated in *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* as “‘let us be one in strength, in righteousness!’” (Boyce 1984, 59), and in the *Manual of Zoroastrianism* as “‘may we be strong and pure in sacred union (*hamazor*) of us all!’” (Dabu 1959, 40). Thus this etymology offers insight into the antiquity and function of the *zurkhanehs*, as does the implement used – the club.

The club is a weapon which, in the Zoroastrian mythology outlined in the Avesta, was wielded by the mythical hero Keresaspa (Darmesteter 1880, 63, 195, 223), the angel Srosh
(Darmesteter 1880, 163), and the angel Mithra (Darmesteter 1880, 154) – quite tellingly, the latter angel, Mithra, being sanctified in his role as “levier of armies” (Boyce 1984, 28).

Furthermore, and in connection with this mythology is the legendary hero Pishyotan, whose legendary return to “the Iranian lands” along with the angels Mithra, Srosh, and others (Boyce 1984, 93) was foretold in an apocalyptic prophecy forwarded in the era following the conquest of the Achaemenids by Alexander the Great (Boyce 1984, 91). Furthermore, during the Abbasid revolution in which Iranians rose up against the exclusionary policies of the Arab-supremacist Umayyad Caliphate, the legend of Pishyotan was associated on the part of the Iranian peasantry with the Iranian Muslim warrior Abu Muslim al Khorasani, who drove out the Umayyads and enthroned the Abbasid Caliphate (Crone 2012, 126). But it is not merely legends, myth, or history which explain the significance of Qassem Soleimani’s origins in the zurkhaneh in Kerman, and given Soleimani’s vociferous Islamic religiosity, it is hardly the case that the importance of his tenure as a wrestler in the ‘house of strength’ lay in any occult Zoroastrian undertone. Rather, it is the connection between traditional Iranian martial culture and Iranian cultural and institutional legacies of militarism that the Soleimani’s link to Kerman’s zurkhaneh serves, in part, to contextualize the apparent success of his military efforts.

Both George Rawlinson in *The Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy* and the anonymous Parsi Zoroastrian author of *In Search of My God* offer renditions of the traditional historical accounts of one of the most powerful monarchs of the Sasanian dynasty, Khusru Anushirvan, whose institutional reforms of the Sasanian military left an indelible legacy on the Iranian political tradition. In both accounts, a high official of the Sasanian military, a paymaster named Babak, expected strict, disciplined adherence on the part of the entire military establishment to
new measures implemented by the leadership mandating a requirement to supply two bow strings upon review by the generalship, and astonishingly enough, when the king himself appeared without the requisite equipment, Babak ordered his dismissal – after which Khusru Anushirvan returned with the necessary supplies, and as opposed to any arbitrary punishment, rewarded Babak for his scrupulousness (Rawlinson 1875, 107) (In Search of My God 1978, 181).

This widely celebrated traditional account of Khusru Anushirvan, while perhaps inflected with hagiography and legend, nonetheless testifies to the valorization of strict martial discipline within Iran’s “distinct cultural tradition” (Limbert 1987, 35), and within Iran’s “political culture” or “those specific cultural patterns that influence political organization” (Limbert 1987, 35), strength, discipline, and scrupulousness remain an expected values to be exemplified by Iranian military personnel. That Qassem Soleimani expressed a disinclination to pursue the privileges of high political office, close interpersonal associations with veterans of the Iran-Iraq War, and an aloofness and simplicity of demeanor in official proceedings (Economist 2020, 78) falls in line with the traditional expectations of celebrated behavior on the part of Iranian soldiers, given that military service has been compulsory for Iranians since the days of the Achaemenians (Skeunda 1992, 4). This explains why Soleimani viewed it as “far better to work with such a citizen unit, he thought, than with a useless regular army, such as Syria’s” (Economist 2020, 78). And it is indeed the case that military authority has remained a constant pillar of legitimation in the Iranian tradition.

John Limbert notes in Iran: At War with History that, “four basic historical patterns that have endured to preserve the Iranians’ sense of national identity” (Limbert 1987, 47), it can be said that, per the account in the Economist, Qassem Soleimani exemplified three of the four,
“charismatic leadership, a deep religious impulse, [and] a concern with justice” (Limbert 1987, 47). Being a fundamentalist Muslim, it can hardly be said the Soleimani adhered to the fourth historical pattern, “acceptance of foreign ways adapted to Iranian tastes” (Limbert 1987, 47). He did, however, manifest each of the traits that Limbert identifies as having led to the success of the early monarchs of the last powerful Iranian dynasty, the Safavids, who, “because their original movement had combined religious, military, and political elements, the first Safavid officials . . . exercised authority in all three areas” (Limbert 1987, 74).

It is this tri-fold aspect of religious, military, and political authority that Soleimani exercised, coupled with the Iranian tradition’s age-old feudal practice of levying armies from ordinary citizens and the peasantry which explains Soleimani’s comparative military success in building counterstates, or “‘many Irans’” (Economist 2020, 78) as compared to American efforts in the region, especially in national contexts such as Iraq or Afghanistan – both countries being venues of significant Iranian military influence – where, per the Counterinsurgency Field Manual, legitimacy is viewed first and foremost through the lens of the ability to provide security rather than liberal political freedoms (Petraeus 2007, 16).

Indeed, given the monumental historical duration under which Iranians have operated as a feudalistic society the only way to levy armies was through raising peasant militias, which is not only the essential feature attributed to Qassem Soleimani, but also, according to Boyce, was a practice that Sasanian military officials had excelled at, with Boyce writing in a translated account from Baladhuri in reference to the Iranian resistance to the Islamic conquest that, “the marzban [i.e. Persian governor] had gathered there the militia . . . these resisted the Moslems fiercely for some days” (Boyce 1984, 115). In fact, feudalism in the Iranian experience not only
goes back to the Qajars (Saikal 1980, 15) and the Achaemenians (Sekunda 1992, 4), but in fact, goes back to at least the era of the historical Zoroaster. The Dictionary of Word Origins notes in the entry for the word fee, that, “this is one of our earliest words, for it means cattle, the primitive essential to community life, and the earliest instrument of barter – whence money” (Shipley 1975, 150), before offering a Sanskrit word for cattle, “pasu” (Shipley 1975, 150), which is precisely identical to the “traditional Avestan term for the community [which] is pasu-vira ‘cattle-(and)-men’” (Boyce 1984, 9). That Boyce notes how that attested configuration of the Iranians was such that, “their society seems to have been divided into two main groups, priests and warriors” (Boyce 1984, 9), this would date the threads of salient political continuity exemplified by this Iranian religious revolutionary, Qassem Soleimani, – specifically his tri-fold religious, military, and political authority, and his capacity to raise peasant armies and counterstates (or more fittingly, “many Irans” (Economist 2020, 78)) as is in line with traditional Iranian martial culture and feudal dynamics – not only to the oldest aspects of the Iranian tradition, but to the pre-history of the Iranians themselves.
References


