An Agenda for Persian Studies

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On welcoming participants from many parts of the world to our conference at Sydney, and in opening its proceedings, I intend in this introduction to suggest a working agenda for Persian Studies, that is, for studies of the kinds of culturo-religious issues we are addressing in our presentations. I do so, not as a Westerner presuming to dictate what cultural studies should entail for every thinker working in this field, but primarily in response to the range of topics being tackled by those reading papers to this seminar, and then also by imagining what a world-wide gathering of scholars might pose as key questions about the Persian heritage, for their better understanding of a rich and highly influential tradition. I will hereby reflect, in fact, on key issues that are hoary enough always to require rethinking by those within the arena of Persian scholarship, yet at the same time basic enough for non-specialists who seek clarification of Persia’s importance in world history and affairs.

I do not hesitate to orient this working agenda chronologically, and it seems natural to begin with linguistics and religious foundations. Right from the start, however, we are forced to ask questions about the nature of scholarship itself. As a globalist working in a Western-originated Australian University far from central Asia, I am bound to be strongly affected by the European tradition of comparative, critical and phenomenological studies. Yet I do not want to be blinkered by this inheritance, and in an intellectual ambience at Sydney pressed to be ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-colonial’, let alone in the company of this symposium’s eminent Persian participants, I seek to honour, learn from, and ask questions about traditions of high-level scholarship that have been established in Iran itself (and among the ‘expatriate’ Persians, from Indian Parsees onwards). To secure our bearing on questions of lingual and socio-religious antiquity, though, I will first defer to Western critical insights.

Since Friedrich Max Müller, a founding father of both comparative philology and religion, cautiously postulated the separation of north-western and south-eastern branches of Indo-European language family at ca. 3,000 BCE, it has always been of interest as to how close our earliest specimens of the ancient Avestan Language are to the as yet unplaced “original home of Aryan speech”.1 At the time Franz Bopp was working on a comparative grammar (during the 1810s), placing Sanskrit and Avestan in the same family as Greek and Latin and the Slavonic, Baltic, Teutonic and Celtic language groups of Europe,2 an extraordinary amount of German philological and cultural attention became focussed on ancient India, and this was reflected in Müller’s own career (and as a result the course of comparative religious studies generally).3 Certain German scholars were to make important contributions to the study of older Persian materials (consider von Spiegel, Haug and Geldner),4 but from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, it was not Berlin but Paris where Persia received more spotlighting. Abraham Anquatil-Duperon was earliest in

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attempting a complete translation of the *Zend-Avesta* (in 1771) for international readership, and Eugène Burnouf and his circle at the Sorbonne were first to create something like a European school of Persian Studies which had ongoing consequences. Naturally it is part of the agenda to ask questions about the relative value of this scholarship, and to enquire into any scholarly comparabilities in the East or into the nature of interactions between Western savants and Eastern custodians. Now, in the 1990s, moreover, there are many substantive matters still be clarified, especially concerning the antiquity of Avestan and its first expressers.

Part of the puzzle for our time is an archaeological one. Was there indeed a kind of Indo-European migration ‘explosion’, as Edinburgh’s Professor Stuart Piggott has imaged it, and if so, how close did it occur to Iran (since it has been common, since Müller’s cautious insistence, to place an Aryan ‘homeland’ in middle Asia)? The most crucial component of the jigsaw puzzle centres on Zarathustra (Greek: Zoroaster) as the traditionally accepted articulator of the older Gāthās in the so-called *Zend-Avesta*. Disputes continue about the dates for Zarathustra (with estimates ranging between 2,000 and 500 BCE), and if his Gāthic oracles were in a tongue closer or even older in time to the ‘unauthorized’ *Rg Veda* of India, then this would make him a much more ancient founder-figure than the other Indo-European reformers with whom he is often compared (the Buddha and Mahavira), and not part of the so-called axial age in which these reformers are set alongside China’s Confucius and the great writing prophets of Israel. High on the agenda of Persian studies should be the attempt to settle the ‘glotto-chronological relationship’ between Avestan, Sanskrit and other ancient Indo-European tongues such as Hittite, as well as efforts to provide greater security for the date and context of Zarathustra.

Such work is important at this juncture if only because various competing scholarly claims keep being made about Zoroaster’s place in the history of consciousness, and particularly religion, and it has become of pressing importance to sort out what the ingredients of his original message were and thus better assess its revolutionary character and its influence. Was Zarathustra the first known monotheist? is a question of some moment. Were the ‘twin Spirits’ of good and evil, light and darkness - Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu - coeval on his understanding, and was he therefore the teacher of a cosmogonic dualism (cf. *Yasna* 45)? Did he have in mind the transformation of the old Iranian pantheon into immortals subject under and reflective of the one Lord? with prevenient ritual forms - for fire temples apparently preceded him - being deliberately recast to illustrate his reformism? Do we have in Zarathustra the earliest ‘called’ prophet, directed to convey to his

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followers the first major revealed religion, a message of salvation through inward ethical choice that raises issues hitherto left unaddressed by what George Foot Moore described as the “natural religion(s)” of humanity? In presenting the demands for an ethical choice, was Zarathustra the first to teach a last judgement (cf. Yasna 44)? All these questions have become pertinent afresh with the recent publication of Norman Cohn’s Cosmos, Chaos, and World to Come, which argues - albeit controversially - that the Bible owes its monotheism, its Satan and its eschatology more to Zarathustra than to any other source.11

Some of these questions cannot be resolved without further debate about the meaning of key words and phases in the Avesta, and without better guidelines for detecting reactions of the Avestan material and their dates, exploring the possible rationale for the building up of hymnic and ritual texts around Zarathustra’s ‘original or ascribed’ Gāthās.12 These and other related queries cannot be settled without also addressing the great chronological gap between Zarathustra’s context and the time the latter, more systematizing corpus of Zoroastrian texts in the Pahlavi language was produced. The macroscopic vision of the Bundahishn, for instance, with its ‘cosmogeny’, great-Age theory and Last Things, presents in texts as late as the sixth century CE, long after other expanding religious influences may have been felt in Persia.13 How do we fill up this chasm? A few texts - such as those if pseudo-Heraclides and Plutarch - give aid; but scholars also want to feel more secure about inferring lack from Pahlavi texts, to make up for the textual wreckage wrought by Alexander ‘the Terrible’ (certainly not for Persians ‘the Great’).14 It has not been pleasant for Zoroastrians to contemplate their fundamental spiritual history possessing ‘a dawn’ and ‘a twilight’, with little to learn about in between and with even the latter phase being marred by rather intolerant Zurvanist impulses under later Sasanian monarchs.15

The mention of kings bring to mind the ancient dynasties for which Persian is famed - the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanid - and, considering rulers’ appeals to continuity with the Sasanians after the Islamic conquest, and their characteristic appropriation of the old title Shah( anshah) from the tenth century until the current revolution, Persia is often credited with the longest-lived of monarchical systems in world history.16 That, mind you, has been more a point of notoriety rather than fame in the West. For, given the long-term weight of the Greek classics on European intellectual life, the ‘great kings’ of Persia have become associated with tyranny - as a threat to the polis in the works of democratic-looking Herodotus and conservative Plato alike, or, under the Romans, as inimical to the better possibilities of Romanitas.17 Even defenders of European stable monarchies in the eighteenth century never imagined they were upholding institutions as bad


15 I allude to R.C. Zaehner’s The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastranism, London, 1975 (the Parsis also having expressed annoyance that they have been conceived to be in a permanent twilight), cf., A. Christensen, L’Iran sous les Sassanides, Paris, 1936.


as those of ‘oriental despotisms’, in a “Persia bleeding under the ferocious sword” or “where science is extinguished, agriculture decays, [and] ... the human race itself melts away”. After the removal of Ottoman rule from Greece itself, projecting the archetype of the ‘arrogant Persian dynasty’ was bound to receive some replay as, quite recently in an essay by the Athenian democrat and savant Angelos Blachos’ called Η Σκιά τοῦς βασιλέως (The Shadow of the Kings). At this point, Westerners will be at a loss to accommodate the common Persian claim that Cyrus, conqueror and founder of the Achaemenid Dynasty, was the first ruler to draw up something like a charter of human rights for his subjects, no better illustrated than in the letter reproduced in the Bible allowing the Jews to rebuild their temple (ca. 538 BCE). With the persisting drive towards liberal democracies, cultural forgetfulness has set in and total lack of appreciation in the West as to how such a society as Persia could be so long committed to monarchy. Various items loom on the agenda here. The task of re-appraising and contextualizing Cyrus is not unimportant and has suggestions of an Iranian contribution to the ‘global community’. Deconstruction of Greek imperialism in the Middle East will also have its role. It is salutary to contemplate Alexander ‘the Terrible’s awful destruction of Persia’s cultural achievements, and unlearn the old (Western-imbibed) legitimation of his invasion (333-2 BCE) as inevitable because the Persian royalties and courtiers were “debilitated by an effeminacy and their minds corrupted”. Not that Iranians have been and should be unrealistic and uncritical about their monarchical past, for the “lamentable, shameful ways” in which many a Shah ended his reign forces contemplation of a “quintessentially” tragic quality about the great land astride West and East. This raises to mind the strange and tangled phenomenon of Shah Nameh, the “national epic of Iran” knit together by the compositions of Ferdowsi (ca. 935 - ca. 1026 CE). To what should we liken this book? to Homer’s Iliad? or India’s epical poems? Is it critical that residual ancient elements reside in this work, as if, like old Caledonians supposed to lie behind the Scots’ Ossian, we can uncover some sadly lost ancient virtue in the world of royal courage, honour and firm resolve? Or is it more pertinent to see what mediaevals do to ancient traditions - as also in the case of Hazar Afsanak (A Thousand Tales) with the correct chronological ordering of things being quite subordinated to moral themes? However these queries are resolved, the ethos of great rulers, warriors, negotiators and mighty deeds remains, and it is worth assessing as a social mythos and for its socially cohesive force or as an index to cultural, political and spiritual identity. It is thus also worth pondering in relation to political economy, or for that matter to the geographical interface (including the silk road) between a more stable China and a more changeable West (and south-west).

This symposium was organized to focus on distinctively Persian culture. Considering the massive impact of Islam, scholars looking for some sense of the ‘spread of Muslim Civilization’ in Iran may not be realistic and uncritical about their monarchic past, for the “lamentable, shameful ways” in which many a Shah ended his reign forces contemplation of a “quintessentially” tragic quality about the great land astride West and East. This raises to mind the strange and tangled phenomenon of Shah Nameh, the “national epic of Iran” knit together by the compositions of Ferdowsi (ca. 935 - ca. 1026 CE). To what should we liken this book? to Homer’s Iliad? or India’s epical poems? Is it critical that residual ancient elements reside in this work, as if, like old Caledonians supposed to lie behind the Scots’ Ossian, we can uncover some sadly lost ancient virtue in the world of royal courage, honour and firm resolve? Or is it more pertinent to see what mediaevals do to ancient traditions - as also in the case of Hazar Afsanak (A Thousand Tales) with the correct chronological ordering of things being quite subordinated to moral themes? However these queries are resolved, the ethos of great rulers, warriors, negotiators and mighty deeds remains, and it is worth assessing as a social mythos and for its socially cohesive force or as an index to cultural, political and spiritual identity. It is thus also worth pondering in relation to political economy, or for that matter to the geographical interface (including the silk road) between a more stable China and a more changeable West (and south-west).

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be disappointed. This is perhaps because, whatever intruding culturo-religious impulses came to be felt by (Zoroastrian-effected) Persia, the Persian recipients shared their capacities for ‘re-making’ them, with important and fascinating developments resulting.

In papers that follow to do with Jewish, Gnostic and Christian strands of influence, we find signs of powerful Persian cultural ‘claims’ reacting to invasions from ‘the outside’. If Mani was by birth from a Jewish-Christian Encratitic community, for example, his Persian followers turned him into a local prince.\textsuperscript{26} As a foil to the unnerving dominance over their faith by Rome, Christians within or close to the Persian sphere of influence could react rhetorically, even credibly, that “Christ manifested himself first to the Persians (ie., to the three Magoi), and there are important Middle Eastern Christian approaches to the Zoroastrian tradition awaiting more careful analysis.\textsuperscript{27} With important centres of learning between itself and a declining Byzantium - the remarkable Christian city of Nisibis during the sixth and seventh century being one, and Jewish schools at Sura and Pumbedita in the eighth century, being others - Persia was to be the conduit for architectural, medical and cosmological knowledge important for the future of the whole globe.\textsuperscript{28}

When it comes to Islam, we should not at all be surprised to find acculturative tendencies bringing the Qur’anic impetus and prevenient Persian sensibilities into special syntheses. Thus it is that debates arise about the special qualities of Persian Sufism, or the profound inspirations of such a poet as Hafez (1325-90), with varying views as to how one decides the relative weight and impacts of ‘incoming’ or ‘indigenous’ spiritualities.\textsuperscript{29} The issue is perhaps no better symbolized than in Persian rugs, which, considering the absence of anthropomorphic motifs, we usually associate with Muslim rules of art; yet as early as the fifth century BCE, when the Athenian general Themistocles was negotiating in the court of Artaxerxes I, he “likened a man’s discourse to the beautiful figure and patterns of a rich Persian carpet”.\textsuperscript{30} This little touch reminds us all of a venerableness so many of us have been here too prone to forget: that of the ‘distinctly Persian’.

Thus our agenda will make us acutely aware of the need to improve our knowledge of the Persian past. We should duly recognize the importance of the project to edit and translate such crucial essential historiographical texts as those of Tabari (ca. 839-923).\textsuperscript{31} It is also going to be of value to search out more obscure Eastern European and South Asian material revealing neighbouring impressions of the Persian region and its peoples.\textsuperscript{32} Not only the historical differences between the vital Shi’ite Schools require attention, but also the literature of minor sectarian strands (such as those


\textsuperscript{27} See Matt., 2: 1-13, and eg., Julius Africanus [more correct Syrus] Frg. [Narr. Pers.]; and for a creed affirming Christ as a manifesting first this way, see the renowned Nestorian Stone. An important text deserving thorough scrutiny is EBERHARDT EN PERSKOM STUDIEN, cf. M. Bratke (ed.), Das Sogenannte Religionsgespräch am Hof der Sasaniden (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der alchristlichen Literatur 4,4), Leipzig, 1899, pp. 1ff.


\textsuperscript{31} For long term background eg., T. Nöldeke, Geschichte der Perse und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden, aus des arabischen Chronik des Tabari, Leiden, 1879.

\textsuperscript{32} For examples, note Adam Olearius, Opisanie Púryeshestviya v Moskovó i Cherezy, etc., Warsaw, 1656 [French: Relations du Voyage, 1666] (and, closer to the start of the Russian side of the story, R.N. Frye, “Byzantine and Sassanid Trade with Northeast Russia”, Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 26 [1972]: 271ff); Riazul Islam, Indo-Persian Relations, Calcutta, [1950s].
behind the Bahais), and both the later texts and/or disappearing folk traditions of Zoroastrian, Kurdish and other distinct communities.33

The complex history of the Persian culture and continuing tendencies within it should help to make us the better prepared to comprehend and address the issues of the present. Many of these issues are reflected in the pages that follow, and I will conclude by alluding only to a few. The ongoing tussle as to the proper character of Farsi, or the currently spoken and written Persian language, is without foreseeable end, given the entrenchment of the Islamic revolution in its Arabicizing tendencies in Iran itself and yet the recent independence of Tajikestan to the northeast, with its own new pretensions as a seat of Farsi-speaking culture.34 And there are now pushes and pulls between those who are content to encourage openness of cultural expressions and those who stress the advisability of controlling them.35 This symposium, as its organizers have envisaged it, consciously embraces the grand opportunity to celebrate and reflect on Iran’s extraordinary cultural achievements, and do so independently of politics, in an international forum, and in beautiful Sydney where a thriving expatriate Persian community has been ready and willing to play welcoming host. Mehregan, one of those old yet ongoing Persian festivals and lively expressions of folk culture also worthy of research, was the splendid occasion.

