

**Foltz, Richard C.** *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World's Religions*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2004, xiv + 224, \$16.95 paper. ISBN 1-85168-336-4

*Reviewed by Phillip Luke Sinitiere\**

Curiously, Iran has occupied the margins of narratives in world religious history. Fortunately, this trend is changing thanks to the fruitful efforts of scholars like Richard Foltz. In his latest work, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble*, Foltz aims to illuminate Iran's "unexcelled role in influencing, transforming, and propagating" (pg. x) the world's major religious traditions. As such, Foltz offers a brief history of Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism, and the Baha'i faith before noting how Iranian ideas and traditions animated each of these faiths. Foltz opens with a helpful chapter on Iranian origins and concludes with a brief description of the current religious climate.

The opening chapter of *Spirituality of the Land of the Noble* details the complexity of unearthing the Iranian past and helpfully explains the importance of historical reconstruction from both archaeology and linguistics. While these types of historical reconstruction are often incomplete and fragmentary, they nevertheless shed significant light on ideas and customs of the past. Historians concur that languages like German, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Persian, Russian, and English all derive from an "ancestor language" (pg. 5) known as Proto-Indo-European. For instance, from the word *\*airyo*, meaning "noble" (pg. 5), we get the name for the ancient Aryans, and the countries of Ireland (Eire), Iran, and (the ancient) Aryavarta. Not surprisingly, all of these names refer to "land of the noble" (pg 5).

Scholars describe societies that spoke Proto-Indo-European tongues as PIE societies. Foltz explains that many of these societies were pastoral yet "highly authoritarian and distinctly stratified" (pg. 7). As pastoralists, the religion of these individuals was intertwined with the physicality of nature. Thus early Iranian religious belief sought to negotiate the space between the natural and supernatural by various rituals. Intended to create communion and enhance community, sacrifice (whether a human or bull, for example) sacrilized and

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\* Mr. Sinitiere is currently working on his Ph.D. at the University of Houston (Doctoral thesis: "*Rational Affection: The Religious Epistemology and Pastoral Theology of Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Edwards*"). The author of several reviews and essays on religious history, he was recently awarded the Zeta Kappa Graduate Essay prize by his university's history department for his essay "*Islam in Africa: Intersections, Negotiations, and Mystical Spaces in Sufism*"

replenished the ordinary. For early Iranian pastoralists, prayer, typically voiced three times daily, also aimed to create communion and fortify communal ties.

While the basic details of the world's major religions and texts will be familiar to readers of *JAAS*, I will note several important moments of cultural and religious exchange that illuminate Iranian contributions to the world's major faiths. Foltz first addresses Zoroastrianism because many of its foundational ideas are part of most world religions. While the origins of Zoroaster are shrouded in mystery – one scholar dates his life to around 1200 BCE and another argues that Zoroaster lived from 618-541 BCE – we do know Zoroaster came from a priestly class. Narratives of his life appear in the Zoroastrian scriptures, the Avesta, and from various Greek sources. Despite the mystery, Iranian literature paints Zoroaster as a type of reformer, even a prophet, who was ordained to “give instruction to the great community” (pg. 24). From the Avesta, Foltz attentively notes, readers see that Zoroaster assigned a singular purpose to the created world where humans had to choose between good and evil. Life was a great contest between these forces and history progressed toward a directed end (read: linear time) where a cosmic evaluation would take place. In addition, Zoroaster cast posthumous existence in eternal terms where those who chose good would receive a heavenly afterlife and those who selected an evil path would be subject to eternal suffering. Interestingly, Zoroaster described the posthumous bridge leading to heaven as wide, while those advancing toward perdition had to negotiate their fate along a narrow bridge. All told, Zoroaster believed in a type of bodily resurrection. The Avesta also reveals that Zoroaster and his followers suffered persecution and his own people ultimately scored Zoroaster.

Foltz then details how Zoroastrianism spread amongst various Persian peoples and came into contact with both Greek and Roman religious ideas. In fact, Foltz notes, recent excavations close to the Oxus River in northern Afghanistan suggest that Greeks and Iranians may have worshiped their gods in the same temple at the same time. This synthesis of Greco-Iranian religion has also been discovered in a shrine in Iran devoted to Heracles/Verethraghna and in a temple devoted to Artemis and Anahita in Kurdistan. And while cross-cultural mutations and permutations have continued since antiquity, Foltz insightfully argues that Zoroastrian religious ideas (e.g., good/evil, final judgment, bodily resurrection, and a Creator deity) preceded and thus subsequently shaped and influenced world religious traditions.

After visiting the familiar details of the Jewish Diaspora and the well known reference in Isaiah to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, Foltz learnedly notes several important Iranian influences in ancient Judaism. He contends that Jewish messianism was created from belief in the Iranian messiah figure, the Saoshyant, and that Jewish conceptions of Satan were adapted from Ahriman, an evil deity in Iranian cosmology. Foltz also reminds readers that Iran is the setting of the book of Esther, and that the Jewish festival of Purim was adapted from the Iranian springtime festival of Fravardigan. Foltz then chronicles Judaism under

Islam and points out the Muslim *shari`a* law “closely resembles” (pg. 54) Talmudic legal writings because many early Muslims converted from both Judaism and Christianity. In addition to contacts through trade, this type of cultural/religious transfer also occurred because many Jewish scholars served as scribes and secretaries in the courts of Muslim caliphs. Foltz concludes the illuminating chapter on Judaism with brief tours through the Mongol and Safavid periods.

“Iran,” Foltz begins the chapter on Christianity, “was the springboard from which Christianity spread throughout Asia” (pg. 79). While Foltz notes the familiar story of the magi who visited Christ in Bethlehem, he also points out that Iran had a Christian bishop by 104 and is home to one of the earliest places of Christian worship (*ca.* 250). Arguably the most important time for Iranian Christians came after the Council of Ephesus in 431 (and the Council of Chalcedon in 451), a meeting at which Monophysites and Nestorians were labeled heretics. Despite such developments, Iranian Nestorians made important contributions to the field of medicine, for example, and were the primary agents of Christian mission along the Silk Road. Here Foltz reminds readers of the familiar Chinese Nestorian monument at Xian that dates to 781.

While Iranian Christians engaged in impassioned polemics against Zoroastrians in pre-Islamic Iran, both groups became second-class citizens as Islam spread east in Iran. Christians, however, made important contributions under Islamic rule, as many were employed as scribes and interpreters in the courts of the caliphs. In fact, Hunayn ibn Ishaq, a Nestorian from Iran, was picked to lead the House of Wisdom in Baghdad under the Abbasids. Foltz concludes the chapter on Christianity by summarizing European missionary efforts to Iran. About three hundred years after Mongol rule in Iran, Christian missionaries were sent from Europe to establish relations with Ottoman rulers. During the seventeenth century Roman Catholics (on behalf of European countries) sought various alliances with the Iranian government and were granted the freedom to live and pursue business interests so long as proselytization was mute. French, British, and American missionaries eventually came and set up schools and hospitals. Justin Perkins, the first Presbyterian minister, settled among the Nestorians in Urmia and paved the way for subsequent Presbyterian growth in Iran. Importantly, Presbyterians were instrumental in establishing early clinics and hospitals. Other missionary initiatives included the noted Englishmen Henry Martyn who translated the Bible into modern Persian in 1812. Despite significant gains in terms of converts throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Foltz points out, by 1979 all visible (Protestant) Christian mission work ceased in Iran.

In the chapter on Christianity Foltz suggests that western missionaries assigned the historical and geographical designation “Assyrian” to modern-day Iranians, but importantly notes (without great detail) that Assyrians themselves rightly claim the term has deeper and stronger historical roots. Foltz also observes that it was the patient witness of the Nestorians in Urmia to whom

Muslims came for healing and prayer; this witness was so strong, in fact, that it was not uncommon for Muslims to praise Christian saints and kiss the cross as a display of gratitude.

Buddhism in Iran is, according to Foltz, the most “sparse and fragmentary” (pg. 63) of religions under analysis. While Buddhism is today considered a religion, Foltz carefully points out that “Buddhism was the world’s first universal philosophy...not culture-bound” (pg. 64). Buddhism’s importance for Iranian religious history comes from what is today the country of Pakistan. Here, in ancient times part of the large Indian subcontinent, Indian and Iranian merchants traded goods and ideas. This is also where Parthians, Sakas, and Kushans vied for influence, power, and stability. Evidence of Iranian culture’s confluence with Buddhism, Foltz carefully describes, comes from archaeology and linguistics. For example, the seventh-century Chinese monk and traveler, Xuanzang, provided a physical description of Bactrian Buddhist monasteries and detailed the religious life he encountered. Ruins of Buddhist *stupas* (shrines) in Iran conform to Xuanzang’s descriptions. Furthermore, Foltz persistently observes, Persian Muslim poetry makes references to the riches and adornments associated with Bactrian Buddhism, specifically the *bot*, or “moon faced idol” (pg. 70) – a Buddha figurine. Iranian influences emerged in Buddhism with references to *Buddha-datu* (“Buddha-law), adopted from earlier Zoroastrian law, in Buddhist cosmology, with references to Iranian gods and goddesses, and in Buddhist art, specifically *stupas* carved into rock. The most famous of these once stood in the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan until the Taliban destroyed these “idols” in 2001.

Foltz’s chapter on Gnosticism revisits many familiar figures and ideas (e.g., Mandaeism, Manichaeism) and explains the lofty and sometimes impenetrable gnostic ideas with notable clarity. Foltz points out that Gnosticism (and its various traditions) “was not a religion *per se*, but rather an *approach* to religion which could be expressed from within the matrices of diverse faith systems” (pg. 99). As such, this *approach* to religious thinking and living shows up, for example, in Greek religion with the tension between spirit and matter, and in Egyptian religion with baptismal rituals for purification. Gnostic traditions were widespread and powerful enough in Iran to spark responses from several caliphs and later wound themselves into the various threads of Sufi traditions.

Foltz’s chapter on Islam sets the birth and growth of this major religion in a wider context and reminds readers that Iran played an often-overlooked part in the great decades of Islamic cultural growth. The earliest Iranian influences in Islam first came through intermarriage, as both parties stood to gain from such alliances. Intermarriage gave Arabs access to the riches of Iranian cultural life while Iranians, as conquered people at this point, were able to retain cultural livelihood in a new political and social context. Iranians made important contributions to what Foltz calls “universal Islam” (pg. 123) during the second major dynastic period under the Abbasids (751-1258). According to Foltz, Iranians “were everywhere preeminent” (pg. 125) in the early years of Islam. Iranian scholars contributed to history (Tabari, Miskawayh), mathematics

(Khwarazmi), medicine and philosophy (Rhazes, Avicenna), geography (Ebn Khordadbeh), Sufism (Ghazali), and linguistics (Sibawayh), among other disciplines. Not only were Iranians active agents in shaping Muslim culture at large, many Iranians were early practitioners of Sufism. Sufis like Hasan of Basra, Sari al-Saqati, and Mohasebi were Iranian. In addition, the first Muslim colleges, *madrastas*, emerged in Iran. In sum, Foltz commandingly shows how Iranians were able to both retain and create cultural and ethnic agency under Muslim rule.

The final two chapters of *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble* ably cover the eighteenth- through twenty-first centuries. The eighteenth century, Foltz succinctly shows, “was one of frequent turmoil” (pg. 143). The Babi movement, whose high point lasted from 1844-1852, pitted Qajar political elite against mystically oriented Babis, led by religious merchant Seyyed Ali Mohammad. In time the Babi movement gave birth to the Baha’i faith, a strain of Islam rooted in mystical faith, millenarian belief, gender equality, and a vibrant missionary impulse. Brought to America in the 1890s by Egyptian-born Ibrahim George Kheiralla, the Baha’i faith has grown in recent years – with perhaps as many as 5 million followers worldwide – despite the strict persecution of Baha’i adherents in Iran.

The religious scene in Iran today is, of course, shaped by Islam, though Zoroastrian, Armenian, Assyrian, and Jewish delegates are part of the Assembly of Experts, a ruling council established in 1979. It should also be noted that “Assyrians and Chaldeans” (pg. 166) also have a seat in the Iranian parliament. According to Foltz, current estimates indicate that Iran is home to between 50,000 and 135,000 Zoroastrians, 20,000-30,000 Jews, and about 20,000 Assyrians and Chaldeans. In addition to Baha’i persecution, Iranian Protestants and Catholics as well as Mandaean are also marginalized religious groups. Foltz notes growing cosmopolitan cultural interests among the younger generations of Iran and hopes “that in the coming years Iranians will have more opportunities to pursue their curiosity about the world’s various faiths in a spirit of objectivity and respect, and to contemplate in the broadest way the immense role their own culture has played in the history of world religions” (pg. 174).

A specialist in Iranian and Muslim history and professor of religion at the University of Florida, in this work Foltz displays research abilities in diverse cultures and languages and his lucid prose makes accessible the key themes of Iran’s religious history. Foltz’s work models the latest theoretical approaches in *comparative* studies of world history and world religion, highlighting cross-cultural encounter, conversation, creation, and negotiation. Foltz’s penchant for detail illuminates rather than obscures, and his command of diverse and complex religious ideas gives his work an explanatory character. Foltz helpfully places a map at the beginning of the book and a glossary and bibliographic essay broaden the accessibility and appeal of *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble*. On this score, keen readers would have enjoyed pictures to accompany Foltz’s descriptive accounts of ancient lands and the physical evidence available for the

world to see. Those pleased with the readability and erudition of Foltz's latest work might also consult his equally innovative and interesting *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange From Antiquity to the Present* (St. Martin's, 1999). In the final analysis, Foltz commendably accomplishes his stated task, which is to explain why and how Iranian traditions and ideas influenced the world's major religious traditions. Once again, the light of the East illuminates and brightens perspectives in the West.