Review Essay

Patricia Crone

The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism.
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The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism is an ambitious and welcome project; one that addresses a vast lacuna in Iranian studies by painting a detailed portrait of the social history of early Islamic Iran and the religious beliefs in circulation. Through methodical readings of primary sources with both direct and indirect knowledge of the Iranian religious movements, attention to Zoroastrian, Manichaean, Buddhist, and Christian primary sources, and analyses of various secondary source literature, Crone has traced the development and/or appropriation of religious ideas and notions such as the transmigration of the soul, reincarnation, and polyandry. While the book focuses primarily on the Iranian areas of the Islamic empire and on Khurramism, Crone casts the net wide to compare and contrast these ideas as they appear in various communities from Greece through Central and South West Asia to China and India.

The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran is divided into three parts with an introduction and a conclusion that ties the various strands of the book together and traces the religious beliefs and notions associated with Khurramism (Crone's designation of the religion of Khorram-dinān) down to the Safavid (and early modern) period.

Throughout the first half of the book, Crone focuses on the socio-cultural and political nature of the revolts. For the introduction, however, she sets her sights earlier to provide the relevant background and context. She begins with a brief overview of the conquest of the Sasanian empire, with an emphasis on the importance of the fall of the capital, the early post conquest revolts, the significance of the proximity to and eventual intermingling of garrison troops with local populations, and the conversion of Iranians in rural and urban settings during the first two centuries of Islamic rule. She also offers a perceptive

analysis of the social and economic realities of peasants and elites before and after conversion to Islam. She then turns her attention to the Hashemite recruitment efforts in Khorasan that resulted in the Abbasid revolution. Though this segment acts as a springboard to her two main preoccupations throughout the book—the recruits, who were from rural communities and later became the leaders of the revolts after the Abbasid revolution, and the religion they practiced, Khurramism—it is also a long overdue and refreshing reassessment of the cultural and socio-historical realities of early Islamic Iran.

Comparing the fates of converts from antiquity to the colonial period, Crone highlights the extents to which Islam's egalitarian outlook facilitated the entry of Muslim converts into the (often elite) ranks of the new polity and how that set the Islamic empire apart. Islam's egalitarian outlook, she argues, fanned the flames against the Umayyads whose prejudice against non-Arab Muslims had incited moral outrage and given the Hashemites a viable platform for recruitment in Khorasan. It is at this juncture that she introduces the multiple understandings of and nuances associated with the term "Arab", which ties into whom the Hashemites were targeting for recruitment and how. Not content with ethnic classifications alone, she pays special attention to texts that offer contrasting perspectives on who the "Arabs" were considered to be. Crone cites sources that depict "Arabs" as those who had adopted Arabic as their language and/or embraced Arab dress and customs upon converting or, conversely, characterize them as those who saw Islam as going hand in hand with a privileged position for its original carriers (or in other words the Umayyads and their supporters). The varied opinions and attitudes about who an "Arab" was reflect the complexities on the ground in different regions and locales and among succeeding generations, all of which she dexterously navigates. It also informs her assertion that the Iranian Muslims who joined the Hashemite revolt were disgruntled with the social order under the Umayyads and were responding to their call for social justice. If there were any restorationists among the recruits, they were not trying to bring back Sasanian rule. As she nimbly demonstrates, they were trying to restore leadership of the community back to the family of the prophet. Here lies the crux of her well-reasoned argument for the nature of the later revolts: Having helped wrest political power from the Umayyads, whose corruption nullified their legitimacy, the recruits revolted again, but this time against the Abbasids who betrayed the cause for which they had been called to in the first place.

The first half of part one presents a brief history of the later revolts and the leaders. She concentrates on the Mubayyida and Muhammira movements and leaders such as Sunbādh (Sonbād), Bābak, Bihāfarīdh (Behāfarid), and al-Moqanna' among others. She also explains the failures of Bābak and the

Khorramis in general to form larger political units and expand their revolts in terms of geography (mountainous regions) and social instability, and argues that whereas the Hashemites wanted to overthrow the current order, the leaders of these revolts did not. In the later chapters, Crone applies the theories of postcolonial studies with insightful examples to address the ways in which the leaders of the messianic and millenarian movements/revolts adopted Islamic terminology, language, and ideals (often in relation to the impact of Abu Muslim's death upon them) and to what possible aims.

Crone acknowledges that the materials presented in the first half have been covered extensively by others, but her work is set apart by her approach. Considering the dizzying flurry of names, dates, and movements of the leaders, her approach seems to have more to do with providing some context before moving on to her main concerns, namely, analyzing the nature of the revolts and the religious ideas and beliefs associated with Khurramism. Furthermore, the leaders of these revolts are mentioned nominally in other parts of the book as tidbits which, as tantalizing as they are, do not offer a thorough enough comparison of the ways in which the various notions associated with Khurramism are practiced by these leaders. Moreover, since the book is addressed to Iranists and Islamists of the early Islamic period, it assumes that the reader has deep familiarity with all the texts she cites. Hardly any background information is given on the primary sources used and the issues associated with them. While Crone's erudition is not in question, it would instill more confidence in the fascinating conclusions she reaches and more importantly would encourage others to pursue further those sources and many that are not cited. Nor does she make the task of the comparativist, who would otherwise benefit greatly from the work, less difficult.

In the second half of part one, Crone turns her attention to the nature of the revolts. Here, she debunks the long held and staid notion that these movements were nationalist ones whose aims were to overthrow the current order. Instead of simply basing her critique on the use of the term "nationalism" as anachronistic, Crone defines the term nationalism and systematically applies it to ascertain what aspects of the revolts fall or do not fall under its definition. After determining that nationalism, "an ideology rooted in the sense that the state is—or should be—an integral part of a person's identity, as opposed to simply a protective institution under which he gets on with life," (p. 160) does not fit the circumstances of the early Islamic period, Crone settles on the term "nativism" in its stead. Nativism, which she defines as a "different type of reaction to foreign rule . . . also used of hostility to hegemonic foreigners in societies that have been subjected to colonial rule" (p. 162) poses a problem since she does not explicitly spell out what she considers "foreign rule" to be

in this specific context and does not list one source that makes use of the term “foreigner” or its synonyms. Since in all its complexity “foreigner” often connotes ethnicity, one can only take for granted that she is not falling back on the simplistic Iranian/Arab bifurcation that Islamicists tend to prefer and that she skillfully challenges in the introduction. As she herself notes, three of the leaders of the revolts were Muslim and the term “Arab” and “Muslim” designated a complex array of meanings for different groups of people in different areas. Furthermore, the later revolts, which though they were set off by the death of Abu Muslim, were nonetheless related to the Hashemite call for a *social* revolution. However, this time, it was the new ruling elite, the Abbasids, who were seen by the leaders of the revolts as having betrayed the cause to which they originally had been called. While reading this section, one half expects that she will qualify “foreigner” to mean those who betrayed the cause for social justice and perpetrated the injustices of the former abusers. It would tie in neatly with her arguments since it has the benefit of echoing the aforementioned depiction of “Arabs” as equivalent to those abusing their power (should one choose to give heavier weight to the ethnic connotations of “foreigner”).

In order to shed some light on the situation in early Islamic Iran, Crone relies (sometimes a bit too heavily though understandably for a lack of primary sources), on the realities of the wogs and évolués of the colonial period. She focuses her comparison on the rural and religious nature of both the native responses of the colonial period and the rural revolts of early Islamic Iran. She discusses how Christian symbols, beliefs, and notions were adopted into the religions of the colonized and, in converse, the way those who converted to Christianity incorporated some of the symbols and beliefs of the religions from which they had converted and how similar they were to the ways in which Khorramis adopted Muslim terminology and adapted various Muslim beliefs to their own; a topic which anticipates much of the discussion in part two. The parallels are difficult to dismiss and one can see why the term “nativist” would otherwise be so appealing here.

Part Two is a comprehensive survey of the (often syncretic) beliefs and notions of Khurramism and of the various religions that have many notions and beliefs in common. Each chapter takes a belief or set of related beliefs, among which are God, eschatology, cosmology, antinomianism, non-violent ethos, reincarnation and divine indwelling, and presents all the information to be found on these topics in various sources from the earliest to the late medieval period. Not content with contemporary sources in Arabic alone, Crone weaves together Islamic, Greek, Syriac, Christian, Manichaean, Zoroastrian, Chinese, and Sogdian sources and what emerges is a rich tapestry of highly dynamic communities whose religious notions were in constant circulation

and absorbed or appropriated by one another and reconstituted to fit each community's own particular outlook. Crone is commendably cognizant of the highly complex set of processes involved and when others have suggested straightforward borrowings for certain beliefs, she convincingly refutes such statements by methodically combing through the sources. While the book is addressed to Iranists, considering how wide she casts the net, part two is essential reading for scholars of comparative religion in the late antique/early medieval period.

One of the more intriguing aspects of part two is the case she makes for separating official (what she calls Persian) Zoroastrianism from local Zoroastrianism, arguing that they were "subdivided along the same lines as the languages." (320) She argues that when the Iranians were ruled by Persians (people from F/Pārs) the Persian "language and religion acquired normative status" and that it is Zoroastrianism as practiced in other locales that forms the base of Khurramism when "stripped of its Islamic elements." (ibid.) Though well reasoned and insightful, there are not enough extant primary sources on "local Zoroastrianism" to substantiate it as she herself acknowledges (321).

Part Three systematically analyzes the charges, including indulging in all sorts of pleasures and natural inclinations such as drinking wine, eating carrion, wife/women sharing or *ibāhat al-nisā'* "making women lawful (for anyone to use), and intercourse with close relatives" (391), leveled against Khorrāmīs by early Muslim heresiographers. She pays closest attention to the latter of these two charges, although the most comprehensive treatment by far is given to the wife-sharing charge. In terms of the accusation that the Khorrāmīs were known to eat carrion, it suffices to state that it refers to the practice of not wishing to bring harm or to injure any living creature and that in reality this was practiced for the most part among the higher ranking members of the religion.

As for the charges of wife-sharing, Crone first delineates the terms fraternal and non-fraternal polyandry and then draws on secondary source literature on other polyandrous societies to illustrate that "[i]t is perfectly accurate to describe fraternal polyandry as wife-sharing, but it is of course misleading too: for it was not the case that men shared each other's wives as they pleased, but rather that brothers shared one wife *in accordance with custom*." (396; emphasis added) This last phrase is especially important as Crone points out that these societies were in rural and often mountainous areas where such arrangements benefitted the families and societies along economic (high reproductive costs) and/or socio-political lines (households that attracted and retained men were more prestigious) or some amalgamation thereof as best suited to each community that practiced it. In her treatment of the Iranian areas she is cautious and forewarns the reader not to "expect a high resolution picture." (392)

Her prudent approach is made all the more clear when she states that the section “is written on the assumption that even a blurry outline is better than no picture at all, and that widening the net to include pre-Islamic and non-Islamic information helps to give us a better sense of the types of practice that could be involved.” (ibid.)

For Western Iran she notes that there is no real evidence of wife-sharing and that “[t]here is no fraternal polyandry in official Zoroastrian law.” (408) She does address the few examples of temporary co-marriages, whereby men “lent” out their wives to other men for the purpose of giving birth to noble/healthy heirs and outlines some of the purposes such a custom serves. Her attention to detail for the more pervasive instances of polyandry in Eastern Iran is commendable. However, she still concludes that many of the accusations leveled against the Khorramis (in terms of guest-prostitution, defloration rituals, fraternal polyandry, and temporary co-marriages) were inflammatory and made without reference to any other primary materials. Much of the information she states is “stereotyped, distorted, uninformative, and occasionally downright wrong,” but adds the caveat that “very few of them are mere figments of the heresiographical imagination.” (p. 438) As fuzzy and distorted as the picture is on polyandry in Eastern Iran, Crone’s analysis helps the modern reader navigate the heresiographical charges made against the Khorramis by highlighting the social, economic, and political relevance of such practices both in and outside Eastern Iran.

In the concluding chapters of the book, Crone analyzes the continuity and changes which many of the Khorrami beliefs and notions underwent over time. The section is rather straight forward in its approach; she looks at the Bektashis, Horufis, Yezidis, Ahl-e Haqq, Sufis, and Shi’a and offers brief analyses of how notions such as holul and incarnation were envisaged by these various groups. However, one point of contention lies in the statement she makes regarding Shah Esmā’il’s intention to impose Shi’ism on the whole Islamic world. She states, “[b]rilliant though he was, he was a mere child. The kudak-i dānā had come with a vengeance, one could say: Iran owes its current religious identity to a delusional teenager.” (p. 490) Though it is by far her most sensationalist (it borders orientalist) statement in the book, of which there are a few, the simple fact is that Shah Esmā’il is not referred to as kudak-i dānā in the literature. The statement is a coy one as it plays on a need to connect the dots between the term used for the kudak-i dānā (Abu Moslem’s grandson and future Mahdi according to some factions of the Khorramis) (p. 45) and the relatively young age of Shah Esmā’il. I use the term relatively here since the notion that a fourteen/fifteen year old is a child (kudak) is a post-Industrial Revolution one.

In conclusion, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran* provides new insight into one of the most impenetrable periods of Iranian history. It offers new insights into the religious trends of early Islamic Iran and presents tantalizing new theories. It also provides one of the more comprehensive treatments of the belief systems of the Khorramis and other Iranian religions as it revisits some commonly held notions and misconceptions about such beliefs, the socio-cultural and ethnic make-up of the leaders of the revolts, and the accusations leveled against them. Apart from a few sensationalist and essentialist remarks, the book is an otherwise comprehensive and percipient work that counterbalances typical approaches to Iranian (religious) studies in the early Islamic period which often unquestioningly privilege the Abbasid and/or late medieval narratives.

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