

## **IRANIAN DIASPORA CHRISTIANS IN THE AMERICAN MIDWEST & SCOTLAND: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, PRESENT REALITIES, & FUTURE CHALLENGES**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Over the last few years (2009-2011) I have been able to meet with numerous Iranian Christians in various cities in the UK and the USA. I have attended their churches and gatherings, I have sat down at Starbucks or over Persian food for conversations, and even in a hot tub once. In this article I will share a few of my preliminary conclusions and mention what I understand to be some of the key issues and challenges facing the Iranian Christian community in the coming years.<sup>2</sup>

### **II. THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION, MIGRATION, AND DISILLUSION**

Western Christians do not tend to link political events and religious movements because of their secular way of interpreting history. Resisting this trend we would do well to remember the words of French historian Marc Bloch (1886-1944):

*As for homo religiosus, homo oeconomicus, homo politicus, and all that rigmarole of Latinized men, the list of which we could string out indefinitely, there is grave danger of mistaking them for something else than they really are: phantoms which are convenient providing they do not become nuisances. The man of flesh and bone, reuniting them all simultaneously, is the only real being. (1953:151)*

Taking this into account we are able to understand that both the religious shift to Christianity and the ever-growing population of Diaspora Iranians is linked to the deteriorating situation in Iran regarding political and religious freedom, and also a declining economy. In fact, one could argue that a sizeable, long-term Diaspora was directly caused by the 1979 Revolution:

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the texts of these interviews are private, but Miller 2009 contains extensive direct quotes from one such interview.

In the 1978-1979 academic year, the number of Iranian students enrolled in the United States totaled 45,340, peaking at 51,310 in 1979-1980. According to the Institute of International Education, more Iranian students studied in the United States at this time than students from any other country.

After the revolution, not only did many of these students opt to remain in the West, but many of their relatives joined them.<sup>3</sup>

As the post-Revolutionary government in Iran implemented its agenda, some Iranians both in and outside of the country became disappointed with the Islamic government, and in some cases, with Islam itself. To understand the link between politics and religion, we must remember that Islam has a strong tendency to unite or to closely link political and religious authority. This is not accidental, but rather represents the practical application of the theological principal of unity or *tawhiid*:

Perhaps the most significant reason for this cohesiveness of history, tradition and practices among Muslims is that Islam is a religion defined by unity. Unity in the oneness, or *tawhid*, of God. Unity in life between lifestyle and faith. Unity in society between politics and religion. Unity in the community defined by conformity. This can be identified primarily in the importance placed on the unity of God.<sup>4</sup>

So as some Iranians experienced the oppression of their Islamic state, the religious and spiritual claims of Islam were likewise brought into doubt. Furthermore, due to developments in communications, like the internet<sup>5</sup> and the beginning of the broadcast of Farsi-language satellite into the country, a new religious metanarrative, that of Christianity, was made available to Iranians at home and around the world. Given this confluence of factors, 'The old sign system can no longer account for the problems with which the culture has to deal, or the loyalties it demands and the codes it prescribes are no longer acceptable to the members of the culture' (Schreier 1985: 71, 72). And so many people looked for a new way to interpret life and religion and their nation.

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<sup>3</sup> Hakimzadeh 2006: NP.

<sup>4</sup> Kraft 2007:114. A large portion of Kraft's research among Lebanese and Egyptian converts to Christianity is also available in Kraft 2010, available for free online.

<sup>5</sup> 'In Muslim countries where conversion and proselytizing is illegal, cyberspace is an anonymous haven for North Africans to explore Christianity—and a means for the Gospel to penetrate a closed society.' While the quote appeared in an article about North Africa it equally applies to the situation in Iran. From 'Internet Outreach to Muslims in North Africa' in *Lausanne World Pulse*, April 2006.

As one Egyptian Christian (an ex-Muslim himself) remarked about the Revolution, it was the chance for the Islamist agendas of the world to prove their claims, ‘The decisive test was there in that revolution, which took full control of an Islamic country of great consequence, an ancient history, and a future rich in encouraging potentials’ (Rishawi 1993: 59). He concludes that if Islamism could work anywhere in the world, it would have worked in Iran. It did not work in Iran, and thus cannot work anywhere else. This sentiment is shared by many Iranians I have spoken with, both converts to Christianity and Iranians who identify themselves as ‘never having been Muslim’ as well. The conviction that the political program of Islam is erroneous has led some to search for new ways understanding the nature of politics and, consequentially, of relating to God.<sup>6</sup>

### III. CHRISTIANITY AS A RETURN TO PERSIAN CULTURE

I was recently talking with a young Iranian Christian and I mentioned that he had an Arabic name. He thought for a moment and flatly stated, ‘Yes, I must get a new name’. One church leader I spoke with explained that he had given his children names starting with the letter ‘v’, a sound which does not exist in the original Arabic alphabet<sup>7</sup>. Among the children born to Iranian Christians (born after their conversion, that is) I have yet to meet one that has an Arabic name rather than a Persian and/or Biblical name.

For many Iranian Christians, Islam is almost a form of cultural imperialism. According to the understanding of Iranian Christians, in Islam one must have an Arabic name and pray in Arabic and read the Qur’an in Arabic and face an Arab city during those prayers. This is not a satisfactory situation for some non-Arabs. One convert I spoke with explained that in his teens, before his conversion, his father would wake him up early in the morning to say his prayers. He would face the family garden and pray in Farsi. His father reprimanded him for this and he answered, ‘Well it’s better than facing the wall in my room!’

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<sup>6</sup> The fullest treatment of the topic of the growth of Iranian Christianity and its relation to economic and political shifts in Iran can be found in Bradley 2008. That volume is both difficult to find and expensive. He also published a popularized version of that research in his 2007 volume. See the bibliography for complete details.

<sup>7</sup> Persians and others have modified the Arabic alphabet so that it now has sounds like ‘v’ and ‘p’ which are not present in the basic alphabet.

Unlike the Arabizing tendencies of Islam, Apostolic Christianity clearly developed the teaching that there was no one normative culture or language that Messiah's disciples had to adopt. This was the result of a lively controversy that we find both in Acts at the Jerusalem Council as well as in Paul's letters that denounce the Judaizers. Islam, on the other hand, while being multi-ethnic, does have a normative language and pattern of life, which is the Sunna of the Prophet. Different Muslims apply this to themselves to varying degrees, but the teaching that Muhammad was the perfect man, and that a Muslim should imitate him (an 8<sup>th</sup> Century Arab) is the path to peace and salvation, is a common teaching in Islam as it has been practiced throughout time and space. Reacting against this Arabizing impetus in Islam, Iranian Christians seem to feel that as disciples of Jesus they have a cultural space to explore and enjoy their Persian heritage which is proscribed under the post-Revolutionary regime, or indeed, perhaps any form of Islam at all.

One Iranian Christian church I visited held a public celebration of Nowruz, which is the Iranian New Year, complete with Persian food, poetry, music and then a short talk from the pastor on the Prophet Jesus. The table was set according to tradition with the various symbols of prosperity and fertility which were hoped for in the coming year. Many Muslims celebrating Nowruz will place a Qur'an on the table as well, so some Christians replace that with the Bible. While the roots of Nowruz reach far back to Zoroastrian roots prior to the Arab conquests<sup>8</sup>, it has become a way for people to emphasize their Persian heritage without resorting to Islamic motifs or rituals.

In sum, Christianity, unlike Islam, offers a space for Persian language and heritage to flourish in the eyes of these Iranian believers. Or as one young woman put it, 'Islam was step forward for the Arab tribes who were fighting with each other. It brought them unity. For the Iranians, it was a step backwards.' I have argued elsewhere that the predominant theology expressed in the writings of ex-Muslim Christians can be characterized as a form of liberation theology, and this concept of being liberated from Arabizing Islam into a free cultural and linguistic space that honors Persian heritage can be so construed as well (Miller 2011).

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<sup>8</sup> Shahbazi 2009.

#### IV. CREATING A NEW CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Unlike other Muslim populations which have converts to Christianity, Iranians don't have an ethnic church they can look back to, a church to which their ancestors belonged. This marks them apart from groups like the Berbers and Palestinians. The reason for this is simple: their ancestors largely converted from Zoroastrianism to Islam. So one of the most interesting processes I have been able to observe is that of the formation of a new sort of Christianity. In this process, we can identify multiple influences. The first one, mentioned above, is Persian culture and tradition, but purged of Islamic influence. The second is the ethos of the evangelists and missionaries and ministers who have invested decades into Iranian evangelism. These influences range from the early Anglican<sup>9</sup> and Presbyterian<sup>10</sup> missions to Persia, to more recent media outreach by Baptists, the Assemblies of God, and other Pentecostal groups. Third, there is the individual context of each fellowship or congregation, which calls for pastoral creativity and flexibility. In other words, there are overarching factors common to all Iranians, and there are unique local factors which distinguish each congregation from others: 'In its globalisation, Christianity is clearly "glocalized"...' (Jorgensen 2008: 416).

Let me give a few examples of how I have seen these dynamics in play: in one northern city in the UK there are not enough Iranian Christians to form a church. So they all go on Sunday morning to their own conventional congregations—Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal—but during the week they meet for a Farsi-language Bible study and at times will have meals together. If someone is going to be baptized they will try to attend the baptism at his or her church, where the convert is baptized according to liturgy of that congregation by the regular minister in English. This represents, among other things, a flexible approach to organization, as the community is neither a 'congregation', nor is it bound by denominational affiliation, and yet does it does not cease to meet and, at times, fellowship with Iranian Christians from neighboring cities.

In a city in the US which does have a long-standing Iranian church I asked about rituals like Baptism and funerals. The church building where the Iranians meet and the pastor are

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<sup>9</sup> A key book on this topic is Vander Werff's important 1977 volume mentioned in the bibliography.

<sup>10</sup> See Seto 2009 and Miller 1969 for some historical background on Presbyterian missions in the region, though Vander Werff also covers the topic. Blincoe 1998 has information on the history of mission to Kurdistan, part of which is in Iran.

Presbyterian, so when they held a funeral the pastor (an American fluent in Farsi who was raised in Iran) simply translated the rite into Farsi. With Baptism though, the parents have the choice of following the Reformed tradition of baptizing the baby, or the more common practice among Iranians of waiting until a child or young person can request baptism for his or herself. The pastor of that church explained to me that likewise they used the Presbyterian baptismal formula, but that he had added an additional pledge based on Matt 18:15-20. He said that Iranians have a hard time resolving conflicts, so rather than going to someone and resolving the problem, they will tend to murmur about it or talk behind people's backs. Thus building in to the baptismal formula this method of conflict resolution is a pastorally-motivated alteration of the normal ritual in response to cultural habits which are not conducive to sustaining a community over the long term.

## **V. DOWN THE ROAD**

One of the main questions I ask when I speak with Iranian Christians is, 'what do you think are the main challenges facing your community in the coming five to ten years.' Based on those answers and my own observations I want to outline four key issues facing these communities in the coming years.

The first is unity and cooperation. I have seen on some occasions rifts start to develop surrounding the questions of the gifts of the Spirit and the nature of God's blessing on his children—specifically in the form of what is widely called the 'prosperity gospel.' These controversies are nothing new and Western evangelicals have been arguing about these issues for decades. Iranian Christians don't have a single church hierarchy—far from it. But they do tend to work together and cooperate across denominational lines in my experience. Will that cooperation be endangered by these doctrinal matters? Or will they find a way to continue working together while respecting various theological positions?

The second is regarding the future generations. What will happen with the generation of Iranian Christians brought up in the West and who in all likelihood speak and read English better than Farsi? One church leader I spoke with said that in her experience they feel more comfortable just

joining the local evangelical church, which is quite possibly multi-ethnic to begin with. What does this say mean for the future of Iranian churches?

Third is the question of training for ministry. Most Iranian congregations do not have the funds to pay for a full-time pastor, much less send candidates for ministry to expensive seminaries. So what kind of ministerial training can be put in place? It would need to have some material on Persian culture and language, be available to people who are working full or part-time, and be affordable. The other option is simply to rely on poorly-trained pastors or foreigners who are funded by missionary agencies, and both of those do in fact happen but of course have drawbacks of their own.

The final challenge I have observed is that of providing a balanced discourse regarding criticism of Islam and the Prophet and the Qur'an with the positive message of how these Christians have experienced reconciliation with God through his Messiah. At times one feels like the critical discourse regarding Arabizing-Islam drowns out the positive discourse about the new sense of hope and joy they experience by knowing God in Christ and participating in the life of the Church.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Iranian Christianity in the diaspora is very much a work in progress. It is not centered on any one denomination or person, there is no one model of church planting of church governance, and there are very real theological and leadership issues that seem to call for urgent attention. That having been said, the very fact that significant numbers of Iranians are converting to Christianity to the point where many Western cities have Iranian congregations or fellowships is itself historically unprecedented. One can point to developments in the arenas of politics, migration, and communications in terms of historical factors. But I suspect most Iranian Christians would ultimately agree with my Iranian refugee friend who told me several times yesterday, 'It's God's time for Iran'.

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<sup>11</sup> Note that all articles from St Francis Magazine can be downloaded in PDF form from the website [stfrancismagazine.info](http://stfrancismagazine.info).



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