

**The Secret World of God: Aesthetics, Relationships, and the Conversion of  
'Frances' from Shi'a Islam to Christianity**

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Published in "Diaspora Studies" - [www.GlobalMissiology.org](http://www.GlobalMissiology.org) April 2012

**Introduction**

On a relatively sunny, summer morning (for Scotland) I met with Frances<sup>2</sup> at a coffee shop in what I will call Castle City. We had met through a mutual acquaintance at a university and the local Episcopal parish.

She is a slight woman possessing a strong if introspective personality and at ease with words that made conversation enjoyable. She *looks* completely at home in the UK (and this would also have been the case 100 years ago) reminding us that the nation's name *Iran* is related to the English word *Aryan*. I do not claim that this is a complete picture of her conversion, which as with many conversions out of Islam—whether to Christianity, atheism, or humanism—took place over many years and I try to give due weight to the various phases in this complex process. Moreover, it must be noted that this is the account of a diaspora conversion, because many of the key events took place outside of Iran<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Not the person's birth name.

<sup>3</sup> By way of comparison the reader may want to also see another conversion narrative by an Iranian woman, but one whose conversion started in Iran and was brought to fruition in the USA: Duane Alexander Miller "The Conversion Narrative of Samira: From Shi'a Islam to Mary, her Church, and her Son" in *St Francis Magazine* 5/5 (2009), pp 81-92.

### Conversion

Before I start I want to clarify one point about the word “conversion.” In both Islam and Christianity (and I am a Christian) there is a concept of a genuine conversion v. a false conversion. For example in Islam, any conversion out of Islam is, *ipso facto*, not genuine. Real conversion is the stuff of grace, and thus always is moving towards the truth. The polytheist converting to Christianity has taken a step towards truth and has, by the will of God, moved towards the truth—a partial and misguided one, certainly, but towards truth nonetheless.

In Christianity, the main factor commonly used by missionaries and ministers has to do with motive. A person converting for political reasons (i.e. they dislike their Islamic government), reasons of migration, marriage, or financial gain are viewed with great suspicion and either as a false convert or simply a liar. In Christianity ‘genuine’ conversion is seen as flowing from a genuine change of heart regarding one’s sense of self, humanity, and God—all of these things being somehow re-interpreted through the lens of Jesus Christ and his life and teachings.

I want to acknowledge the importance of both traditions of understanding what conversion is (and is not), but my own approach here is more anthropological. If someone calls something in their own life *conversion* I am willing to accept their label, even if it is at odds with the Islamic or Christian meanings. One Muslim’s apostasy is another Christian’s entrance into the Kingdom of God.

### Narrative: events and changes

Frances’ father was born in Iran in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a small, agrarian, religious town between Tehran and Mashhad. Reza Shah (r. 1925-41) sent him to the West to study<sup>4</sup>. This was a period of ‘openness’ according to Frances. He came by rail to Britain in the 30’s. She recalls his tales of the poverty of Russia with its barefoot peasants, and the wonder he felt as he saw the streetlights of Paris—the first time he had ever seen an electrical light in his life. He sat for exams in literacy and numeracy at his

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<sup>4</sup> For a helpful history of emigration from Iran see Hakimzadeh 2006.

university in England—a mature man taking the same exams as young English lads of 16 or 17 years of age. After completing his training in medicine he returned to Iran where in 1947 he met his wife-to-be, they were subsequently married in Birmingham within a year or two after their first meeting.

Due to his Western training and intelligence Frances' father had become a respected medical authority in Iran, and was thus sent by the government to Geneva, Switzerland to work with an international medical organization in 1949. Frances was born there, as was her only sibling, a sister, and she lived there until she was 16 years old, whereupon the family returned to their homeland of Persia. This was of course a difficult transition, but Frances recalls there being 'real tolerance' and there being four official religions<sup>5</sup>. She commented that this all changed after the Islamic Revolution (1979) after which non-Muslims could not hold public office<sup>6</sup>.

In Iran she went to a French school, the *Mission Laïque*, and after that she received a degree in English Studies at the National University of Iran. In 1972 she was offered a scholarship to continue her studies in Beirut, but she opted to rather study at the University of Nottingham in England. She studied there from 1972 through 1977 and received an MPhil and PhD in Literature. Her PhD thesis was on Faith and Doubt in Poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century which included the English Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), himself a convert from Anglican to Roman Catholic Christianity. Research into Hopkins' poetry brought her into contact with brilliant Jesuits "who were also humble and wonderfully human." Here are some lines from his 1866 poem "Easter":

Seek God's house in happy throng;  
Crowded let His table be;  
Mingle praises, prayer, and song,  
Singing to the Trinity.  
Henceforth let your souls always  
Make each morn an Easter Day.

Or from his poem "As Kingfishers Catch Fire":

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<sup>5</sup> Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism—the ancient religion of Persia.

<sup>6</sup> This focus on the loss of freedoms and liberality after the Revolution of 1979 is a common theme in the discourse of Iranian converts from Christianity, see Miller 2012.

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.

After completing her degrees she returned to Iran, where she was baptized in 1978 by Bp. Hassan Dehqani-Tafti (1920-2008), Anglican bishop of the Diocese of Iran from 1961 through 1990, himself a convert from Islam<sup>7</sup>.

### **Narrative: conversion and the secret world of God**

How did all this occur? Certainly there are many Muslims who have had similar experiences—passing part of their childhood or education in the West—who do not convert to Christianity. Indeed, some of them come back from the experience disgusted by what they have seen and intent on becoming better Muslims rather than abandoning Islam altogether. That is the question I will discuss in this section.

Frances' first exposure to Christianity came in a surprising form, as she acknowledged: in Geneva—a central city for the Reformed tradition—there was a large Catholic church near her home. The aesthetic of this church which she would step into from time to time impacted her deeply. She described its dark spaces, flickering candles, holy smell, and chanting in Latin (this was before Vatican II urged churches to adapt local languages). She says was “beguiled...by this out-of-world experience,” with its clerics in flowing black robes, confessionals, nuns, and Stations of the Cross. “It was very comforting...I used to envy these people.” She felt an intimacy and connection to this, her own “secret world.” Her parents were not happy about this, particularly they objected to the images—a classical Islamic objection to Christian churches. She clarified: “It was *my* world.” There is a connection here with the theme of literature. Recall that literature would be central to Frances' life indefinitely. “I was reading books like Narnia, *Secret Garden*<sup>8</sup>, Edith Nesbit; I was an avid reader.”

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<sup>7</sup> The last ten years of his episcopacy were spent in exile after an assassination attempt in 1979. In 1980 his only son, Bahram, was murdered in Iran.

<sup>8</sup> *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, published as a complete book in 1911.

When I asked her at this point what her impression of Jesus Christ was, she responded that at about age ten or 11 she understood that Aslan (from Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia) represented Jesus. She read those books "dozens of times" and she was confronted with an intriguing figure. She recalled it as being like a doorway that one could go through, but not return from—an image from the Narnia series. There is a sense of fatalism in Islam, she explained, whereas Jesus was human, "he understands, he is there." Not only did the stories she read impact her—she also recalled the illustrations of Jesus from the children's books. Jesus was portrayed as a kind and gentle person who enjoyed the company of children. He had a "kind face." In spite of this she grappled with the language of Son of God—one of the key objections of Islam to the Christian faith and the Christian understanding of Christ in particular. She mentioned that at times she was attracted to Unitarianism but felt like that would have been a compromise, "I realized the Unitarian God was too Islamic."

On leaving for Iran at age 16 she sublimated her religious journey. She was focused on getting through school and she concentrated on that. Nevertheless, she re-read many of the books of her childhood.

It was not until she was in Nottingham, in her early 20's, that things really "took off." It was Christmas and everyone had gone home for a three-week stretch except for a few foreigners, and most of them were male, none from Iran. She recalls being in a temporary residence for the holiday break with Africans and a few Chinese, all cooking their own food and speaking in languages she did not understand at all. She describes her state as almost suicidal. But she heard a knock on the door and it was the Methodist chaplain of the university who invited her to the Christmas morning service, which she decided to attend. Significantly, this led to hospitality and companionship from a host of his parishioners.

Having been exposed to the aesthetics of the Christian faith through her unnoticed sojourns to the Catholic church in Geneva, and having been challenged with some of the key Christian concepts through her reading, she was now able to meet the world of Christians living out the Christian faith. "That was the beginning of something else...I could see the *doing* side of [Christianity]." And this *doing* side of Christianity came in the form of two old spinsters from the Methodist church who befriended her and invited her

over for meals, including Christmas lunch. From that time on she was connected to that Methodist church; she commented that the Methodist chaplain was “very good.” During this time she also visited the local Anglican church which she liked because it reminded her more of the Catholic church in Geneva. There was a point of tension though that brought about reflection on the topic of baptism: the Methodist church allowed all people to take communion, whereas the Anglican church only allowed baptized Christians to take communion<sup>9</sup>. During this period she also met other students who were Christians. She ultimately decided not to get baptized in Nottingham though, because she didn’t want it to be part of her “student experience,” that is, something that one does while away from home and family and could thus be interpreted as impetuous or irresponsible or childish.

Upon returning to Iran she reflected on the churches available to her: she was neither Armenian nor Assyrian, which are the two main Christian minorities in Iran. They have their own churches which worship in their own languages and have a history of being mistreated by their Muslim masters, because of this it is difficult for an Armenian Christian to trust an Iranian Muslim who says they are interested in the Christian faith. But Frances had a flat mate back in Tehran who was attending St Paul’s Anglican Church there. At the time it had two services, one in Farsi and one in English<sup>10</sup>. The Farsi-language congregation was mostly converts from Islam, it was at this time that Frances “realized it might be possible to be Persian *and* Christian.” An American pastor whom she respected told her that she couldn’t sit on the fence indefinitely regarding baptism; this was a turning point. And so in May of 1978 she was baptized and confirmed by her bishop. This was the year before the Islamic Revolution would occur.

How did her family react to all this? Her parents were not happy about it. But she explains that it could have been worse, from their point of view. This was during the hippie generation, and her parents “were happy I wasn’t burning my bra and drinking alcohol.” Nevertheless, the questions of belonging and family relations were clearly major issues for Frances and she seems to have thought about the events and decisions made in those days many times throughout the years. As is the case with many converts,

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<sup>9</sup> This is the historic norm.

<sup>10</sup> More details on the growth of the Iranian Anglican church can be found in Vander Werff 1977, which is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of Iranian Christianity.

she feels like being viewed by Christians as the convert from Islam, and by Muslims as “the betrayer.” One might describe this as a period of indefinite liminality—not belonging to one group completely or to the other<sup>11</sup>. She also has considered the hypothetical: what if she had not been baptized before the Revolution? Finally, there is a tension born from the discontinuity between her religious conversion and her desire to honor her father and mother—a reference to Exodus 20:12. In any case, her decision to be baptized was born from a specific desire: as she put it, “I just want to belong now.” As if all these conflicts were not enough, she also questioned her cultural identity: had she become too Western? She concludes these reflections with the comment that she was 28, and still very “idealistic.”

One common theme in conversion narratives from Islam is a time of searching, of returning to Islamic sources to find a certainty there. It is an orthodoxy in Islam that anyone who reads the Qur’an will find there a self-confirming sign from God. Indeed, when Muhammad was challenged to provide a sign by the Jews and Christians of Arabia he retorted that the Qur’an by its very nature and character is self-evidently divine (98:1-3). I asked Frances if she did not have a period of evaluating the Qur’an? She responded that some parts of the Qur’an were encouraging, like some of the material about Jesus. On the other hand it seemed like its message was “too simplistic: you’re down there, I’m up here.”

Her encounter with the Anglican liturgy in Farsi was also memorable to her. She mentioned specifically how the concept of a “cup of blood” was much more shocking to her in Farsi than it had been in English<sup>12</sup>. When she addressed the pastor about this he simply conceded her observation: it was shocking in their context, and it was shocking when Jesus said it. She also grappled with the meaning of Communion—the central act of worship within the church she was attending. How should she understand the very physical language the New Testament uses about the presence of Christ in Communion? Or for that matter, what about the Trinity? She settled the matter by adopting “symbolic” language—though what that means from the point of view of systematic theology is not clear at all.

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<sup>11</sup> For a basic introduction to the concept of liminality see Bowie 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mt 26:27, 28.

We also see here a window to the pastoral difficulties faced by Iranian converts at the time. When she was discussing baptism with her bishop he explained that in Iran there were only a handful of Iranian, single Christian men and that none of them, in his view, were suitable for marriage to her. She was in her late 20's and baptism would mean, in all likelihood, a life without marriage. She recalls how she viewed herself at the time, as not being very young, but also not being very old: "I'm on the shelf, but I'm not dusty." She decided to be baptized anyway. But as things turned out, she would return to the UK and she married a Scot in 1980. They are still married today and have a number of grown children.

### **The Present: of church and Iranian believers**

The final section of our interview was centered on Frances' present sense of identity regarding her church and the Iranian Christians she has come into contact with in Castle City. There is a small Iranian group affiliated to a church there, as there are in many major Western cities throughout the world with significant Iranian expat populations. How did Frances feel about this group? I suggested earlier that she was in a permanent stage of liminality or marginalization—surely she would find genuine community with other Iranian converts to Christianity, no?

In fact, that was not her experience, which was somewhat surprising to me. She said that on the whole she felt ambivalent about the Iranian MBC (Muslim-background congregation<sup>13</sup>) in Castle City. They had been mostly influenced by a conservative, evangelical Baptist tradition and she did not feel at home there, she felt like "a fish out of water." She expressed that she had difficulty in understanding what she called "fundamentalist", ex-Muslim Christians. On the one hand, their experience of the Christian faith is clearly different than hers, with its Catholic and Anglican roots. But

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<sup>13</sup> I define MBC in another article: "Reappropriation: An Accommodationist Hermeneutic of Islamic Christianity", in *Saint Francis Magazine* 5/3 (2009): 3-36. The discussion of MBC's is on p. 4 and following.



also, her Farsi has become weak over the years and she worried that perhaps they would not view her as a real Iranian: “They probably see me as being too westernized... Culturally I’m not Iranian really. I feel guilty about that.” She mentions that the Baptist church (who are in charge of the Iranian MBC) is not sacramental, there are guitars, new music, it’s more like a meeting place in her view and she acknowledges that many modern Iranians would find such a venue attractive. Here she mentions that many years ago she had done the spiritual exercises of the Society of Jesus<sup>14</sup>, including an extended retreat of silence. She doesn’t see Iranian converts doing things like this. Indeed, in my view, she has mentioned two of the most opposite examples of Christian faith possible: worship modeled around a Western-style secular concert (what the Baptists in Castle City do), and the example of the Jesuits’ spiritual exercises which emphasize solitude, silence, and a quieting of the spirit before God.

She also articulated a sense of dislocation regarding her very normal (by Scottish standards) Episcopal<sup>15</sup> parish: people see her life as one of adventure and daring, but “really, underneath, I’m just a middle-aged scared little woman.” She is not like the conservative, evangelicals Iranian Christians, who are intent on spreading their faith: “I just want to hide in the back pew...just want a comfortable life.” But even here she qualifies her qualification: “There’s a part of me—there’s a streak of exhibitionism.” In other words, there is an interest in conversion and extending her narrative to others—including Muslims. It is just not in the same manner as her more conservative, non-sacramental, Iranian co-religionists.

My final question to Frances was how she saw the present state of Islam. She said that she saw Islam today as being in a place similar to that Christianity in the medieval period: eventually it will evolve and become less fundamentalistic, though this may take two or three generations. This view that Islam is a fairly dynamic, progressive civilizational structure is common in the Western press.

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<sup>14</sup> The formal name of the Jesuits.

<sup>15</sup> The Episcopal Church of Scotland is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, thus she is both an Episcopalian and an Anglican. The word ‘episcopalian’ derives from the Greek ‘episcopos’ or bishop, and thus refers to a type of church government—one having elders (presbyters) lead by a bishop (episcopos). The word ‘Anglican’ is simply Latin for ‘English’, because Anglicans today find their origin in the separation of the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### Analysis and Commentary

The first thing that comes to my mind as I look at this testimony is how it is in many ways similar to other such testimonies, yet also different. The differences are what interest me most. Her account of the beginning of her conversation with Christianity is profoundly aesthetic—this is the secret world of God. It is secret from her parents because it is found in the books she reads and the pictures she sees, but also in the mysterious, heterotopic Catholic church in Geneva. When one reads conversion accounts of ex-Muslim Christians one rarely finds mention of such aesthetic elements. I can only offer two hypotheses in answer: perhaps this is because the aesthetic/liturgical is genuinely absent from most conversions. But, and this will require further research, perhaps these elements have always been there in the conversion accounts, but they have been edited out by those who were responsible for the collection, recording, and publishing of those accounts<sup>16</sup>.

Let me explain: a very large portion of the mission work going on today among Muslims is carried out by conservative American evangelicals (i.e. Woodberry and Shubin 2007). Conservative evangelicals in turn have very little concept of liturgy and/or beauty as an expression of God's gracious will for humanity. This can be clearly seen in the utilitarian architecture of the American 'mega-churches', where functionality is at a maximum and aesthetic beauty is, at best, near the bottom of the list. Another piece of evidence here is the nature of CCM, or contemporary Christian music, so popular among many evangelicals in the USA (and elsewhere). While much of it is technically accomplished, one would rarely find an album that can be described as majestic, in the tradition of, say, the requiem mass of Mozart or most anything by Bach<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> There are many collections of narratives/testimonies of conversion from Islam to Christianity. The greatest archive is on the internet, and it appears to be, fortunately, fairly pristine and un-edited. It is found at [www.answering-islam.org/Testimonies/index.html](http://www.answering-islam.org/Testimonies/index.html) [Accessed 27 July 2009]. Other examples are found in the bibliography of this article, including *Leaving Islam* which is primarily about people leaving Islam for atheism, agnosticism, or secular humanism. Of particular interest is a collection by William Miller (1969) of conversion narratives from Iran, though they are not contemporary they reveal some interesting facts about the shifting dynamics of Persian culture over the years

<sup>17</sup> One rare exception being the body of work produced by Rich Mullins, notably his album *A Liturgy, A Legacy, and a Ragamuffin Band*.

It is logical to at least propose then that these aesthetic elements, when they occur in conversion accounts, are simply edited out by researchers who do not come from a Christian tradition able to comprehend them. Such researchers have no frame of reference in the world of the recorder/editor/publisher. It is therefore not only possible but obligatory for them to remove such material because given their worldview, beautiful liturgy and architecture *qua* Christian witness do not clarify anything at all. Rather these aesthetic/liturgical elements obscure the real center of the (evangelical) conversion that is an act of volition that is primarily emotional-intellectual and must be centered around an awareness of sin and the need for a savior. I do believe that such a “hamartio-centric” account can be theologically related to Frances’ secret world of God, but it is not at all clear to me that this can be done in with the resources of conservative evangelical Christianity. In sum, is it not possible that the aesthetics and liturgics of Christianity have been present in conversion from Islam to Christianity but have been made more or less invisible because it was seen as nonsense by the researchers, and thus edited out of the scholarship of conversion?

Another interesting thing about this conversion account that caught my attention is her willingness to admit to her sense of liminality or incomplete belonging on different levels. She is too Christian for the Muslims, but as a convert from Islam she is not a normal Christian for the folks around her<sup>18</sup>. She is too sacramental for the Baptist MBC in her city and is concerned that they will think she is not a real Iranian. Finally, there is a tension between feeling she has a story that is worth telling and interesting and her desire for anonymity and normalcy.

In conclusion, the conversion account of Frances reminds us that conversion is a multifaceted process, in her case it happens over decades, in multiple countries and languages, and involves a whole host of disparate, uncoordinated elements from children’s literature, to drawings, to architecture, to relationships. How these things fit together we can only guess. Perhaps it is, in the end, just coincidence, or what perhaps is it what Frances called it: the economy of the secret world of God.

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<sup>18</sup> Something experienced by converts from Christianity to Islam or Judaism as well.

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