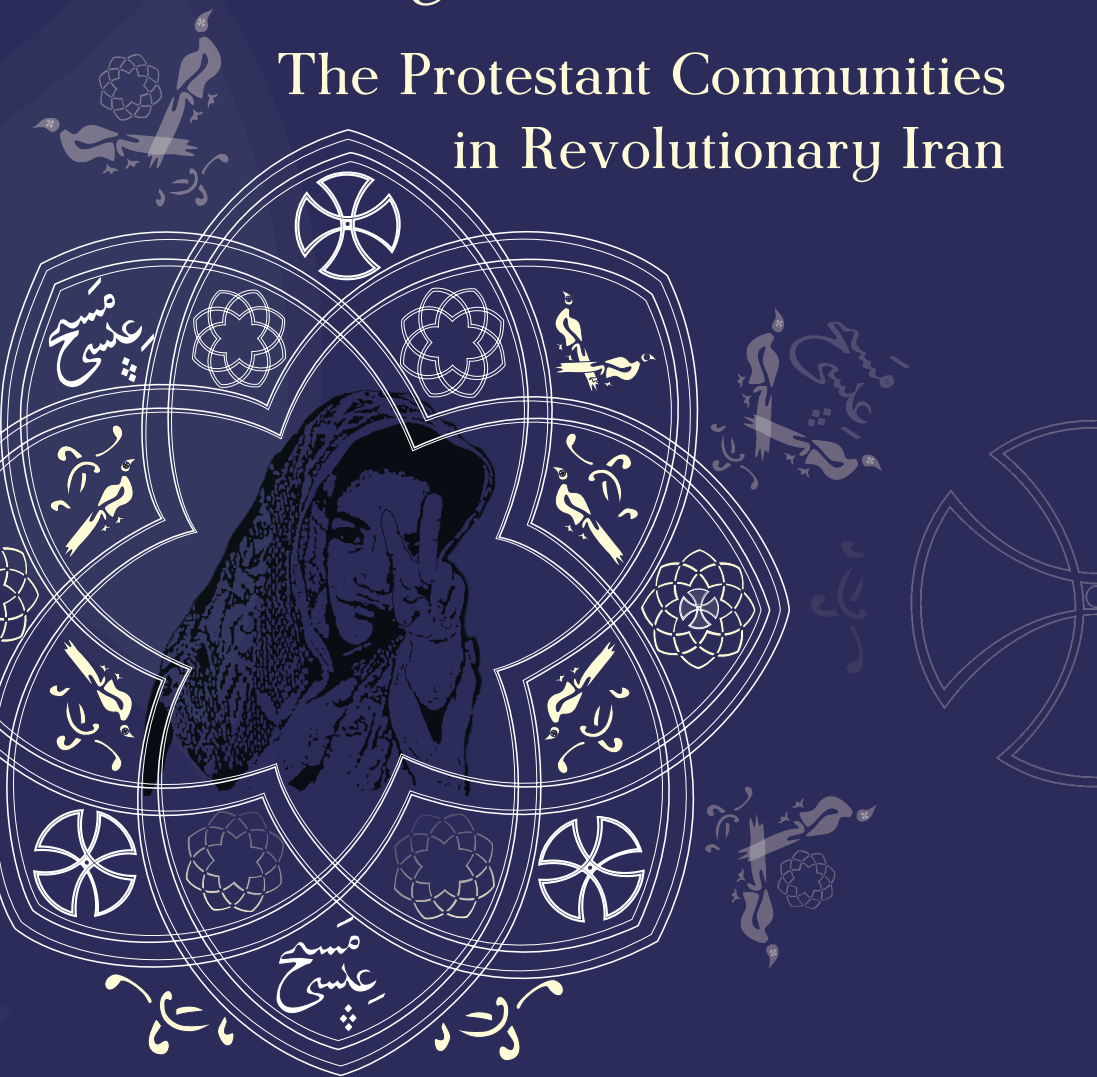


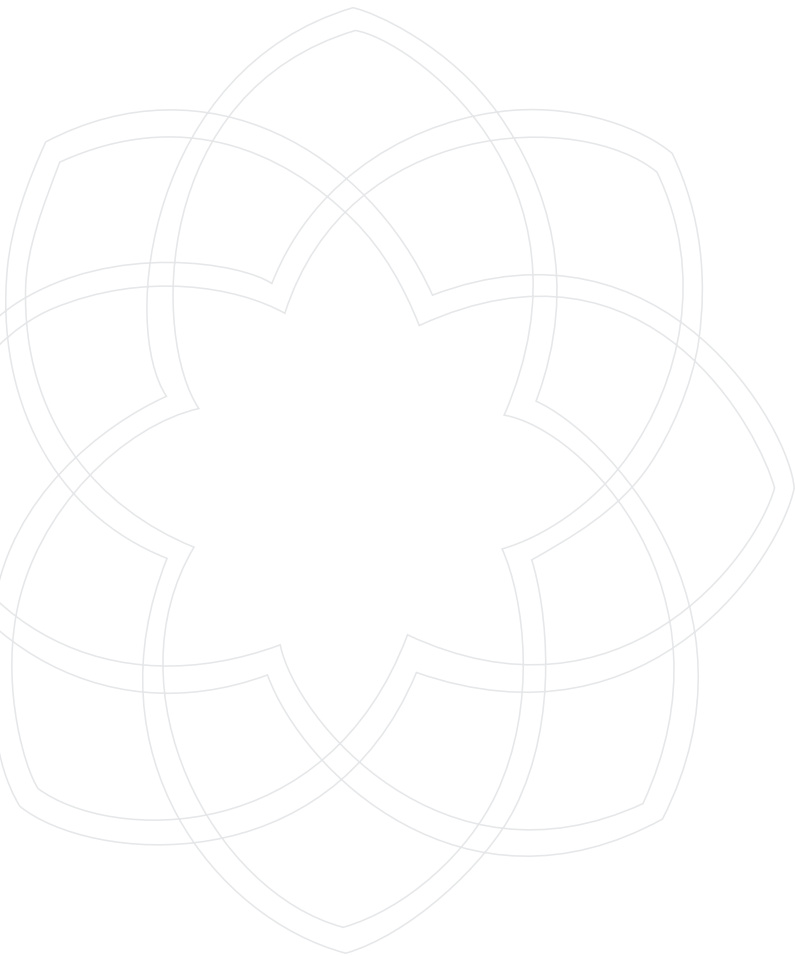
Marcin Rzepka

Prayer and Protest

The Protestant Communities
in Revolutionary Iran



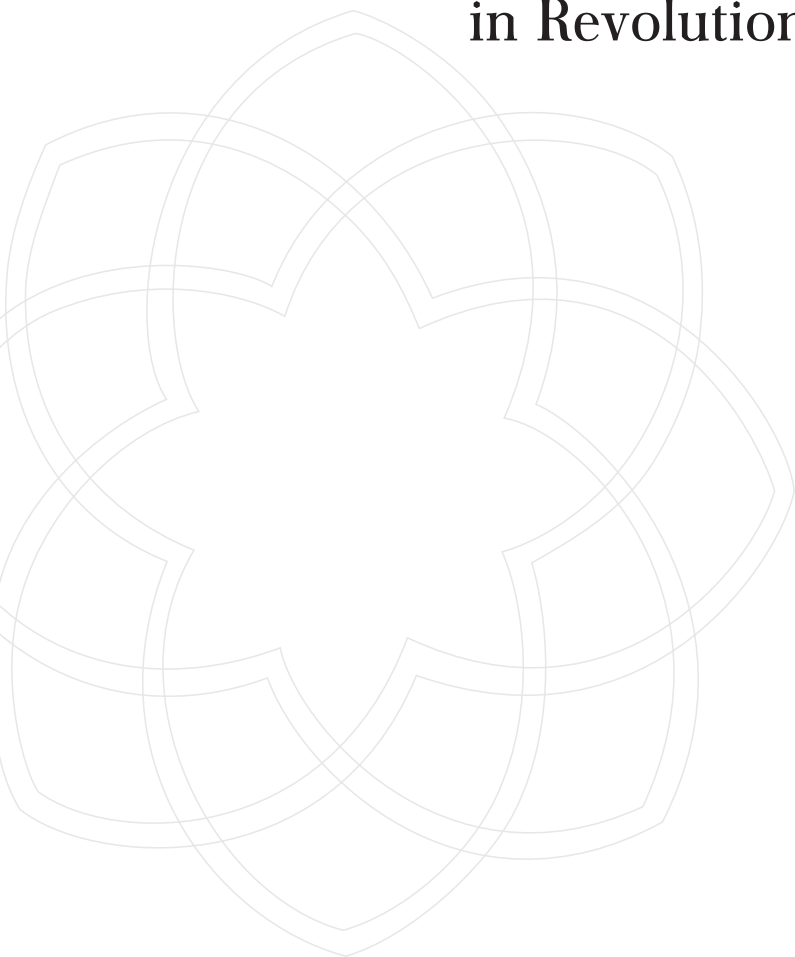
Prayer and Protest



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Unum Press
Krakow 2017

Copy-editing
Filip Mazurczak

Cover Design
Agnieszka Śmiech

Review
Prof. Krzysztof Kościelniak
Institute of the Middle and Far East
of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow



The research project was financed by the National Science Centre Poland,
decision number DEC 2013/11/B/HS1/03962.

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ISBN 978-83-7643-136-9 (print)
ISBN 978-83-7643-137-6 (online)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21906/9788376431376>

Unum Press
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31-002 Kraków
Poland

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E-mail: unum@ptt.net.pl

<http://unum.ptt.net.pl>

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Acknowledgments

This book could not have been written without the support of the National Science Centre Poland, which financed my project devoted to the study of Iranian Christians in the time of the Islamic revolution. The project was realised in 2014–2017. During that time, I visited Iran twice, in November 2015 and August 2016, and while interviewing the leaders and members of various churches I realised that writing the history of the Protestant churches in Iran was still a challenge worth taking.

I thank my interlocutors, especially the Iranian converts, who preferred to remain anonymous. I thank them for sharing their memories, testimonies, and opinions on Iran and on the future of Christianity in that country.

The vast materials used in the book were found in church archives, which without the assistance of the great librarians and archivists would not have been possible. I thank Kari Bostrom from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, for her kind hospitality and guidance in the Lutheran Orient Mission archives. I also thank her for the coffee and oatcakes that made my work easier. I would like to express my gratitude to Glenn Gohr, an archivist from the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Centre. My time spent in Springfield, Missouri, was wonderful, memorable, and fruitful. Gloria Robinett from the Assemblies of God World Mission offered me enormous help in finding the missionary records.

I would like to thank Guli Francis-Dehqani for her hospitality, conversation, and for reminding me that church history is always family history.

Introduction

After enormous changes in Iran's political scene, the dethronement of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the proclamation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, William McElwee Miller, a veteran American Presbyterian missionary to Iran, wrote a letter dated 25 April 1979, to friends in which he recalled the time he had started his missionary career sixty years before the country plunged into revolution, noting that:

In 1919, it seemed to us in Iran that Islam was a dying religion, and that the day when many people would turn to the living Christ might be near at hand. A few years ago the president of the University of Tehran, when congratulated on his building a beautiful mosque in the midst of the modern structures of the University, replied that more difficult than erecting the mosque was the task of getting any student to use it. But as you have watched the events in Iran on TV you probably got the impression that the people of Iran are passionately devoted to their national religion.¹

By contrasting the events from the end of Qajar Iran with those from the end of the Pahlavi dynasty, he posed a question on the role that Islam played among the

1 PHS, RG 360, William McElwee Miller Papers, 'Miller to Friends', 25 April 1979.

Iranians as a 'national' religion. It seems that McElwee Miller was astonished or even shocked by the Iranian Revolution and the position that Islam gained in the new political system. Is the letter evidence that the missionaries were left out of the significant cultural and social change that Iranians experienced during the reign of Mohammad Reza? Did they notice any signs of Islam's return to power?

The task of the book is to present Protestant communities in the time of revolution as well as the reactions and attitudes of both missionaries and Iranians to the revolutionary events. For many missionaries, the revolution led to the end of their missions, obliterating missionary stations and the ideas that they tried to plant among the Iranians. We have, I believe, two different narratives of the revolution among Iranian Protestants and missionaries that originated in very different perspectives on Iranian history.

The Iranian Revolution, which treated Islam as the main feature of the newly constructed state identity, redefined the social, cultural, and political scenes by putting the so-called 'religious minorities' (*aqaliyat-e dini*) in the new order. Minorities such as Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews obtained both rights (granted by the new Constitution) and limitations. Concerning Christians, the constitutional rights were preserved to the 'ethnic' Christians: Armenians and Assyrians only. As a result, the analyses and studies on Christianity in Iran are often limited to recognised Christian groups and churches based on ethnic criteria. The most valuable work offering a deep analysis of the situation of the recognised minorities during the decade of the Khomeini's

rule (1979–1989) is a book written by Eliz Sanasarian titled: *Religious Minorities in Iran*.²

However, when studying American or British missionaries, we should ask how did the Protestants perceive the revolutionary events. Did they believe that the new regime would secure their presence in the country? The missionary perception of Islam in general and Iran in particular in the context of the revolution seems to be the starting point for studies of Protestantism in Iran. However, the problem with the Protestant churches and communities is much more complex. The missionary impact is seen in the growing indigenous Iranian churches. Of course, the historical development of Protestantism gave birth to different churches with their own concepts of worship, community, and leadership. Three of them are included in this study: Anglican, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal.

When I started my research on Iranian Christians in 2000 during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, I gathered data from the Central Pentecostal Church on Taleqani Street near the University of Tehran. The Pentecostals were the first ‘western’ Christian group in Iran, which attracted my interest and determined my research. The church I visited was the main Pentecostal church in Iran. Much earlier, in the 1960s, the Pentecostal ‘place of worship’ was situated on Pahlavi Street behind the *čelow kebāb* restaurant. The street is the oldest and longest in Tehran. After the revolution, its name was changed and now it is known as *Vali-ye ašr* – the title of a hidden Shi‘a imam – The Lord of Time. On the

2 Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

micro scale, the Pentecostal church occupied physically and, to some extent, symbolically an important position in the urban space. The cultural geography of Iranian Christians is worth considering. Iranian authorities closed the church on Taleqani Street in 2014. In 2014, I had the opportunity to meet a family from that church that went to Istanbul to see their son, who had come to Istanbul from the United States, and to attend Christian worship in a small church gathering Iranian and Afghan migrants. In 2000, I also visited the Simon the Zealot Anglican Church in Shiraz, where I returned many times during my next trips to Iran. As I looked at the picture of Henry Martyn hanging in the church's niche, I began planning a book on the history of the Anglican Church in Iran.³ It is still planned.

Working on the history of Christianity in Iran for many years, my approaches and theoretical considerations changed many times. I first focused on the history of the Protestant missions from the 19th century and tried to understand what the missionaries' impact on Iranian society was. I consider missions not only in religious terms, but I also treat them as social and cultural movements and the missionaries as harbingers of modernity. The modernity introduced by missionaries can be observed on at least three levels: social, cultural, and technological. By promoting education, especially among women, they inspired some of Iran's Muslim thinkers to re-think and re-interpret their own traditions. I believe that the contacts between Western

3 Some accounts on the modern, 'revolutionary' history of the Anglicanism in Iran brings an article: Guli Francis-Dehqani, 'Dialogue under Persecution: Anglicanism in Iran engaging with Shi'a Islam', *Anglican Theological Review* (2014), 96, 1, p. 133-146.

missionaries and Iranians constituted the crucial moments in cultural transactions and in the exchange of ideas. Along with technology, the missionaries brought education and culture: the printing press, for example, transformed Iran's society.

When working on the cultural and social impact of the missionaries' activity in Iran, I saw the history of the translations of the Bible into the Persian language as a space for cultural and social interactions unveiling many contexts in which the Christian message was interpreted, rejected, or accepted by Iranians. The Bible as a material object was printed, sold, or burned. Thus, the history of Protestant missionary activity is interweaved with the production of books. The Bible was at the centre. But along with the Bible, books of prayer or articles of faith were translated and popularised among the Iranians, which provoked the reactions of the state and religious authorities while it was read by Iranian converts, for whom it secretly became a form of silent protest. The reaction to the Bible and the cultural practices connected to it are still part of my interest in Christianity in Iran. New social trends, new cultural values, and technological development were all factors that shaped the Iranian protest movement in the 1970s. If I am obliged to clarify my sources and approach to the study of the recent history of the Christianity in Iran, I can say that I use historical methods with anthropological inclinations.

Although it is hard to describe the exact date of the revolution, as it was a phenomenon rooted in many particular events, we should focus on the years 1978 and 1979 to describe the shifts in the cultural, social, and political development of Iranian Christians. Descriptions, conclusions, and,

of course, theoretical approaches to the revolution have been developed mostly after the events. Sometimes they neglect the progressive nature of the revolution, which was manifested on many different levels, while the revolutionary ideas were spreading unevenly in different parts of the country among various social groups. Thus the interpretation of the revolutionary events also changed during the revolution; that is, people did not have enough knowledge to recognise them as revolutionary. This seems to be very true when we try to find out how Iran's Christians responded to the mass protests against the Iranian monarchy. The Iranian Revolution should be understood as a form of the expression of Iranian identity. It raises a question on the interrelations between Iranian identity discourse and the particularly Christian sense of belonging. It is obvious that to give an answer to such a question the analysis of that crucial moment in the modern history of Iran should take into concern the perspective of the minority group living in that country: Protestant Christians. The revolution had a great impact on all of Iranian society and on the situation in the region and the globe. It gave birth to a globally oriented militant Islam. We see two dimensions of the Iranian Revolution: internal and global. The situation of Iranian Christians before, during, and after the revolution is strictly connected to the development of internal Iranian institutions and pressure from the internal community. The Christians in Iran constituted transnational nets of believers immersed in the Iranian national and cultural context.

The term 'revolution' is similar to many other concepts widely used in academic discourse, like nation, society, and culture, in that it has no single definition. It is a phenomenon

involving sociologists, anthropologists, and historians in a common effort to make this term a little more clear. What is more, it is used also in conversational, everyday meaning to describe important or unexpected events. Of course, almost all research on revolution is based on a particular social, cultural, and political movement from the past described as a revolution. The task is to find some features separating such a movement from others, such as revolts and rebellions. Comparative studies offer some help. By taking into account the French, Russian, Chinese, and other revolutions, researchers are able to identify some common characteristics of movements and events depicted as revolutions and the context in which they happened. Nowadays, comparison is a method used by both historians and sociologists. However, in all academic disciplines we observe the tendency to cross the limits of one particular discipline. Especially in the field of cultural studies, we see the interdisciplinary approach in the study of revolution. Still, the explanation for revolution in the academic world depends on understanding both society and historical determinants. The Iranian Revolution is no exception. The explanation of the events happening in Iran in 1978 and 1979 is constrained by theory and the approach adopted by scholars. It raises questions on whether the Iranian Revolution can be compared to other revolutions and about what really makes the Iranian Revolution unique.⁴ Theda Skocpol, a well-known

4 There are, of course, plenty of books, articles, and materials concerning the Islamic revolution in Iran, written from different perspectives. The most general I used, in addition to that mentioned in the text, are: Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran. Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Heaven–London: Yale University Press, 2006); Said

sociologist, tried to present the Iranian Revolution in a comparative perspective. Her book *States and Social Revolutions* is the most influential sociological analysis of revolution written to date.⁵ She makes a distinction between ‘social revolution’ and ‘political revolution.’ The latter is limited just to state structures and a change of power, while the former causes social transformation, ‘the coincidence of societal structural with class upheaval.’ Political revolution occurs in a relatively short period of time while a social revolution can last for many years, changing the social structure only gradually. However, her structural explanatory model was criticised as not fully applicable to the Iranian case. Three years after the revolution, she clarified her position by writing a paper titled: ‘Rentier State and Shi’a Islam in the Iranian Revolution.’⁶ Skocpol asserts that revolutions rarely begin with the intention of becoming revolutions. She notes that in the case of the Iranian Revolution, ideas played an important role and the Shi’a religious culture encouraged Iranians to oppose the shah.

Farideh Farhi develops Skocpol’s thoughts, but unlike other scholars she highlights the urban nature of the Iranian Revolution.⁷ In fact, the Iranian Revolution was forgone by

Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

5 Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

6 Theda Skocpol, ‘Rentier State and Shi’a Islam in the Iranian Revolution’, *Theory and Society* (1982), 11, p. 265–283, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00211656>.

7 Farideh Farhi, *Urban-Based Revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

intensive urbanisation and cultural change rooted in mass education. Farhi takes into account not only economic and political factors but cultural ones as well. It is crucial to understand cultural motivations and cultural context defining Iranian political behaviour both in domestic and foreign affairs. She also uses Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony to analyse Iran's dependency on or rather political subordination to the United States in the 1970s. Subordination is a meaningful term in postcolonial theory. It indicates the importance of cultural practices and whole systems of meanings and values of a dominant group in a society that has enough power to disseminate them among the subordinated social classes. Farhi is convinced that in societies where the elites are weak – like in pre-revolutionary Iran where the elites were connected to the shah – their actual influence is limited. The members of a divided society create quite different cultural codes, or even a counterculture opposed to the elites. A widening gap between the elites and the rest of a society creates a climate of separate co-existence in one society with two different cultures that have nothing in common. I suppose that such a belief is useful for researching how Christianity in Iran is affected by different Iranian cultural codes. Farhi emphasises the importance of ideas in the Iranian Revolution. Of course, religion is one of them. Moreover, religion itself is a carrier of political and social meaning. As such, religion helps to re-interpret modernity, revitalising a particular tradition in the face of cultural relativism. Thus fundamentalism is an outcome of modernisation caused by clashes between different forms of implementing it. An interesting approach to the Iranian Revolution taking into account modernisation

and globalisation was proposed by Peter Beyer, a scholar working mostly on the interactions between religion and the process of globalisation. He is convinced that the Iranian Revolution was a protest against globalisation or rather the way in which Iran was globalised. Soon, however, the revolution became a part of globalisation, as it tried to export Iranian religious values.⁸

Most of the explanations of the Iranian Revolution are of a retroactive character, which means that they have tried to systematise the revolutionary events from the certain posterior period of time. In his valuable study *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, Charles Kurzman tries to avoid retroactive predictions of the revolution by incorporating ‘unpredictability’ into an ‘anti-explanation,’ which he understands as an attempt at understanding the experience of the revolution in all its anomalous diversity and confusion. ‘Anti-explanation begins,’ he argues, ‘by comparing the lived experience of the event.’⁹

How, then, can we study Iranian Christianity during the time of the revolution? Concerning the Christians themselves, we should estimate their gains and losses. At this point, the reactions of Western missionaries and the Iranian Christians to revolutionary ideas were quite different, especially from the beginning. I suppose that the revolution caused the necessity of re-defining Christianity in the Iranian context, making it more Iranian in style and depriving it of Western influences. The revolution was

8 Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), p. 160–184.

9 Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, Mass.–London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 5–6.

a process of the reproduction of ideas, which, as Farideh Farhi has successfully demonstrated, played a crucial role in it. My assumption is that Iranian Christians, Protestants, and converts have reproduced and transferred the revolutionary ideas among their communities by making an alliance between protest and prayer. It is worth noticing that the revolution could be seen as both a practice and a communicative strategy that introduced an interpretative cultural frame for the Iranians. By disseminating texts, the people became familiar with the revolutionary ideas that involved them in practices like expressing grievances in public and protests.

Kurzman's observation that the 'revolution may seem – retroactively – inevitable'¹⁰ but was not categorised by the observers and participants as such is highly significant and leads the researcher to seek an answer to the question of how the 'revolutionary events' were categorised at the time when they occurred. How, then, did Protestant Christians in Iran respond to the revolution when it started as a mass protest? This book tries to answer that question. To do so, materials from church archives have been used, probably for the first time, to describe the reactions and expectations of Christians belonging to the main Protestant churches operating in Iran: the Presbyterian (*Kelisā-ye Enjili*), Anglican (*Kelisā-ye Osqofi*), and Pentecostal (*Kelisā-ye Jamā'at-e Rabbāni*) churches.

The materials related to the activity of the Presbyterian missionaries are preserved in the Presbyterian Historical Society (hereafter: PHS) in Philadelphia. With regards to the

10 Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution*, p. 10.

Anglican Church, various materials such as official notes, personal letters, lists of properties, and diocesan newsletters are kept in the Lambeth Palace Library (hereafter: LPL) in London and in the Archives of the Church Missionary Society (hereafter: CMSA) at the Library of the University of Birmingham. British policy towards church issues at the time can be analysed using the records of the National Archives (hereafter: TNA) at Kew, London. The situation and development of the Pentecostal Church in Iran as part of the Assemblies of God headquarters in Springfield, Missouri, is presented according to the records that are kept in the World Missions division (hereafter: AG, WM). The materials preserved in Springfield offer deep insight into the revolutionary events and the church's unpredictable growth, struggle, and prayer and protest. The book also contains some materials from the Archives of the Lutheran Orient Mission (hereafter: LOM) in Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

The data and statistics concerning the Protestant churches in Iran and the Iranian Protestants during and after the revolution are far from complete. Despite that, a number of estimates, academic papers, and reports have been systematically published. We can divide them into several categories. The first include materials published by Iranian Christian organisations operating out of Iran. Naturally, they tend to overestimate the total number of Iranian converts but at the same time give a very good account of the motives and expectation of Iranians who embraced Christianity. They also use professional and attractive web sites and satellite channels providing insight into missionary strategies. They include, among others, Elam

Ministries from the UK, Iranian Christians International from the US, or Iran Alive Ministries. The informative websites include: mohabatnews.com and farsinet.com. This category of sources also includes reports by Christian organisations such as: The Voice of the Martyrs, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and others. The second group comprises the reports and analyses of non-Christian authors and institutions. Such materials concern: 1) Iranian migrants, 2) violations of human rights in Iran, and 3) the reasons for religious conversion. A good example is a paper written by Turkish sociologist Sebnem Köser Akçapar on conversion as a migration strategy based on research conducted among the Iranians in Turkey.¹¹ Generally, the problems of conversions to Christianity among the Iranians are nowadays studied with a great interest.¹² Useful materials and data come from publishing institutions, organisations, and immigration services and contain analyses of the situation of the Iranian converts both in and outside Iran.¹³ Such reports are based

11 Sebnem Köser Akçapar, 'Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey', *International Migration Review* (2006), 40, 4, p. 817–853, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2006.00045.x>.

12 Johan Leman, 'A "Lucan Effect" in the Commitment of Iranian Converts in Transit. The case of the Pentecostal Iranian Enclave in Istanbul', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (2007), 119–120, p. 101–114, <https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.4323>; Duane Alexander Miller, 'Power, Personalities and Politics: The Growth of Iranian Christianity since 1979', *Mission Studies* (2015), 32, 1, p. 66–86, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341380>; Duane Alexander Miller, *Living among the Breakage: Contextual Theology-making and ex-Muslim Christians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), p. 175–204.

13 *Report Iran: Christians and Converts* (Oslo: Country of Origin Information Centre, Landinfo, 2011); *Update on the Situation for*

on both public and non-public sources, yet the main core of the studies consists of semi-structured interviews with church leaders and members. The abovementioned materials focus mostly on the present situation of Protestantism in the context of conversion. However, they rarely make an attempt at explaining the changes and transformations that the Protestant churches faced during the revolution.¹⁴

This book is divided into three chapters. The first depicts the historical spectrum of the presence and activity of the Protestant churches in Iran with a special emphasis on the 1970s, when expatriate British and American communities in Iran inspired church strategies but also influenced the way in which Iranian authorities perceived the Protestant churches during and after the revolution. The second chapter is focused on the years between 1978 and 1981 and analyses the situation of the churches on two levels: internal and external, with special reference to the Iranian hostage crisis. The end of the chapter brings some considerations on ‘traveling’ memories of the Christians from the time of

Christian Converts in Iran, 2014. Report from the Danish Immigration Service's fact-finding mission to Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey and London, United Kingdom 25 March to 2 April 2014 and 10 April to 11 April 2014 (Copenhagen, 2014); *Iran: House Churches, Situation of Practising Christians, Treatment by Authorities of Christian Convert' Family Members* (Vienna: Austrian Red Cross/ACCORD, 2017).

14 On history and present situation of the Christianity in Iran see: Mark Bradley, *Iran and Christianity. Historical Identity and Present Relevance* (London–New York: Continuum, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472549082>; Mark Bradley, *Too Many to Jail. The Story of Iran's New Christians* (Oxford–Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2014); A. Christian van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia and Status of Non-Muslim in Iran* (Lanham–New York–Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010).

the revolution focusing on Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, who proposed theoretical fundamentals for re-thinking the Iranian Christian identity. The concept of ‘Persian-speaking Christians’ appears on the book’s pages many times. The third chapter follows the events after 1981 to describe the appearance of exiled Iranian Protestant communities and mechanisms for the adoption and assimilation of revolutionary ideas among the church members. In a way, it returns to the problem of geography underlining the dynamics of spread the Christian message through the Internet and satellite television, making Iranian Christianity really a global phenomenon.

*

The Persian words in the book are written using the transliteration system proposed by *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.¹⁵

15 See: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/pages/guidelines>.

1

Constructive Revolutions: The Protestant Churches in Pre-Revolutionary Iran

The term ‘constructive revolutions’ was used by Samuel Jordan to describe the changes and transformations that occurred in Iran in the first half of the 20th century.¹ He referred to the architecture of schools designed and built in Tehran by Presbyterian missionaries. Alborz College, the name given to the school previously known as the American College of Tehran during Reza Pahlavi’s reign,² was in the missionaries’ eyes purely Persian, even more Persian than other buildings constructed at that time (figure 1). It symbolised the return to the Iranian style and culture and to the glorious past; it removed the seeming contradiction between Christianity and Iranian culture. Jordan represents the generation of missionaries who perceived themselves as agents of social and cultural developments, harbingers of modernity, and efficiency engineers,³ while the schools opened

1 Arthur C. Boyce, ‘Alborz College of Teheran and Dr. Samuel Martin Jordan, Founder and President’, unpublished paper (Duarte, Calif., 1954), p. 26.

2 Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran. Culture, Power and the State, 1870–1940* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), p. 93.

3 Samuel M. Jordan, ‘Constructive Revolutions in Iran’, *The Muslim World* (1935), 25, 4, p. 347–353, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1935.tb00098.x>.

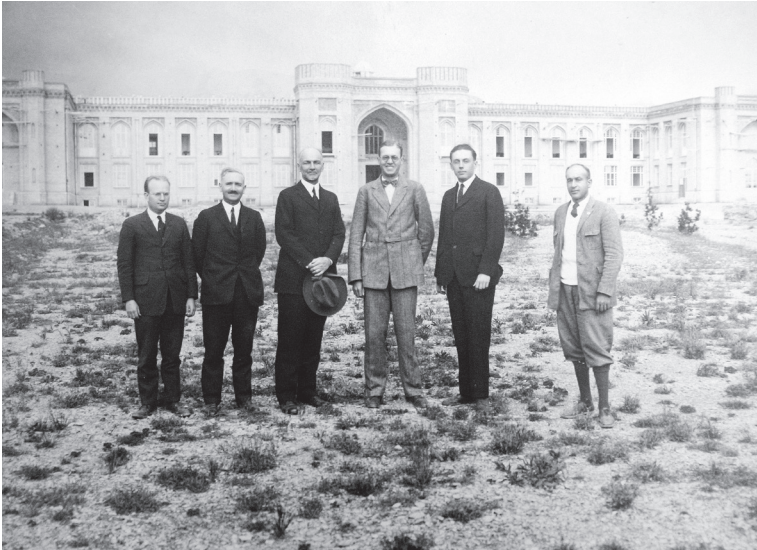


Figure 1. Alborz College and its staff, Samuel Jordan third from the left
(Presbyterian Historical Society)

and run by them seemed to be ideally suited to turning the Iranians into a progressive, moral, and educated nation.

The missionaries were convinced that their work initiated and conducted in Iran was linked with modernity. Such a conviction is well documented in their letters, reports, articles, and texts that circulated on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. It is necessary to evaluate the role of the Christian missionaries in pre-revolutionary Iran in order to understand how they categorised their activity and portrayed themselves as missionaries under changing political and social circumstances. It is a question of self-consciousness. Modernity as understood by Jordan became an Iranian reality after the First World War, when the Iranian Shah Reza Pahlavi introduced a programme of modernisation. At that time, missionary activity owed a lot to the ideas of progress, cultural development, and moral improvement revealed among certain Evangelical groups. In Iran, however, the missionary concept of modernity was confronted with the state notion of progress that engaged missionaries in state affairs and in closer relations with Iranian government authorities, monarchs, and religious leaders. When describing how the missionaries saw themselves, it is difficult to avoid the topic of their attitudes towards and relationship with the monarch and Islam, which was and is practiced by most Iranians. It seems quite natural that the monarch who limited the influence of Islam in Iranian society, Reza Pahlavi,⁴ and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi were treated positively.

4 See: Michael P. Zirinsky, 'Render Therefore unto Caesar the Things Which Are Caesar's: American Presbyterian Educators and Reza Shah', *Iranian Studies* (1993), 26, 3–4, p. 337–356, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869308701805>.

This chapter's purpose is to briefly outline the historical evolution of Protestantism in Iran from the time it appeared among the Iranians to the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty. I will discuss processes, developments, ruptures, and continuations rather than specific events. Throughout its historical development, Protestantism in Iran changed its character from being a missionary religion to being a religion chosen by the Iranians. This indicates that it is necessary to combine two different perspectives and Christian Iranian narratives: a missionary one and a native one represented mostly by converts and partly by 'ethnic Christians,' namely Armenians and Assyrians, who entered the Protestant community. We observe tensions or even conflicts between the missionaries and a growing indigenous Iranian church that was from time to time strengthened by Iranian nationalism and tendencies towards self-determination that went unnoticed or were neglected by the foreign workers. In this exploration of the history of Protestantism in Iran, special place is given to relations with the shah and the emergence of the idea of a national Iranian church. The period prior to the revolution is analysed in greater detail at the end of the chapter with an attempt at answering questions on statistics and church records that arose from time to time.

1.1. Facing and Struggling with History

Revolutions always change the course of history by reshaping the idea of the past, indicating the importance of orientations, beliefs, opinions, and emotions in constructing the meaning of the events that have already happened. The

history of the Protestant churches in Iran as a part of Iran's general history was and still is re-interpreted in light of political currents and cultural factors. On the political level, the history of Protestantism in Iran is about diplomatic and official relations between Iran and the United States or Great Britain. Some patterns are noticeable. When the relations between Iran and these countries were getting worse, British and American missionaries were expelled from Iran. Thus, we can assume that from the historical perspective the attitudes towards the Protestants reflected the political climate in Iran. This was, of course, clearly visible during the revolution of 1979. In Iran, however, politics is inseparable from religion.

The early Protestant missions conducted in Iran were integrated with politics and were politically oriented and supported by the great powers. What seems to be even more important is the process of the assimilation and indigenisation of Christianity or, rather, efforts to make Christianity more Iranian undertaken by the Iranian converts who kept their political, social, and cultural dispositions yet changed their religion. The Iranian converts to Protestantism anchored Protestant practices to Iranian culture, including intermingling reading practices focused on the Bible with a deep sense of the poetic word capable of changing one's life. Conversion, a particularly interesting topic for the Iranians, is in a sense revolutionary: it inaugurates the historical investigation of the encounters, transfers, and negotiations inside both the Protestant community and Iranian society. They are related to Protestant institutions – schools, Biblical colleges, and publishing houses – that were first transplanted in Iran by missionaries and then integrated by

the Iranians. The Protestantism of the Iranians is marked by constant negotiation in the areas of leadership, sponsorship, and membership between mother church institutions located in the US and Great Britain on the one hand and the churches in Iran on the other.

When analysing the growth and development of Protestant Christianity in Iran, we touch upon many complex problems, some of which are of great importance, including the place of religion in Iranian culture and its role in shaping the social and political values that were fully manifested during and after the Islamic revolution. The relationship between ethnicity and religion seems to be a difficult task to study particularly in the context of Christianity in Iran seen through the prism of ethnicity. Thus, in the dominant political discourse the Iranian converts – especially during and after the revolution – were categorised as suspicious citizens with a hybrid identity who were ‘intoxicated by the West.’ The topic of the relations between Iran and the West helps to place Protestantism in the cultural and political course of modern Iranian history.

Iranian Protestantism could be seen as a reproduction of Western Christianity through the lens of Iranian culture accommodating the cosmopolitan aspirations of the Iranians.⁵ It is necessary to look at historical events to define the significant moments when the ‘Iranisation’ of Protestantism occurred in the broader context of encounters and negotiations with the West: debates, assimilation, and the rejection

5 I owe to Hamid Dabashi’s considerations of the Iranian culture. See: Hamid Dabashi, *Iran Without Borders. Towards a Critique of the Postcolonial Nation* (London–New York: Verso, 2016), p. 7.

of Western culture; and the modifications or hybridisations of its various aspects.

By studying the modern history of Iran, we can discern several periods of influence when the West became a benchmark for the Iranians and when the Christian missionaries from the West brought ideas, concepts, solutions, and resolutions to Iranian society. In the book *Mablegāt-e masiḥi dar Irān. Az Šafaviyeh tā Enqelāb-e Eslāmi (Christian Missionaries in Iran. From Safavid Period to Islamic Republic)*, Iranian author Vidā Hamrāz covers the long stretch of Iranian history and analyses the work and activity of Western missionaries in Iran. The book gives a rather official post-revolutionary interpretation of the work of Western missionaries, which is perceived as the realisation of ‘political goals in Third World countries.’⁶ Throughout the centuries, Iran developed as a global problem and established a powerful position among the nations. Perhaps the verb ‘transfer’ suitably describes Iranian contacts with the outside world. Nevertheless, starting with the Safavid era we can distinguish between three periods of contact between the West and Iran shaped by the successive Iranian dynasties when the contacts with missionaries intensified:

1. During the Safavid period, which lasted from the 16th to the 18th centuries, Iranian history truly became a part of world history. Intensive political and trade contacts with Europe allowed missionaries and diplomats from various European countries to settle among the Iranians and

6 Vidā Hamrāz, *Mablegāt-e masiḥi dar Irān. Az Šafaviyeh tā Enqelāb-e Eslāmi* (Tehrān: Sāzmān-e Enteshārāt-e Pažuhešgāh-e Farhang-o Andiše-ye Eslāmi, 1391), p. 11.

convey the missionary message to the religious minorities. Although the late Safavid era was not a period of intense Protestant missionary activity, some Moravian Brothers appeared in Persia.⁷ The period can be characterised as the transfer of goods.

2. The time of Qajar dynasty, which ruled from the 19th to the early 20th centuries: This is the period when modern political, social, and educational institutions were introduced in Iran and the first groups of Iranians travelled abroad to study. Furthermore, this is the period when the modern press was established, which facilitated the spread of national consciousness. Benedict Anderson ties the modern press and more broadly ‘print-capitalism’ with the development of national consciousness;⁸ this seems to be very true in the Iranian context. What is more, the development of the press occupied a special position in Protestant missionary activity, defining the concept of modernity strictly connected to education and literacy. The long 19th century was definitely a time of intensified Protestant missionary activity. The Qajar period can be described as a transfer of ideas, including: nationhood, nationalism, modernity, and social and political reforms.
3. The rule of the Pahlavi dynasty between 1925 and 1979 was a period of social and cultural transformations, which allowed the splintered Iranian culture to split into a religious and traditional one and a modern,

7 John Holmes, *Historical sketches of the missions of the United Brethren: For Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen, from Their Commencement to the Present Time* (Dublin, 1818), p. 456.

8 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London-New York: Verso, 2006), p. 37–46.

progressive, and secular one. By creating a modern society, the Pahlavi era became the basis for the Iranian Revolution, which shook the political pillars of the country and undermined the dominant model of identity. This can be categorised as the period of the transfer of protest and anger.

All of these three periods, which have been briefly outlined above, correspond to different stages of the development of Christianity in Iran. At the risk of simplification, we can assume that during the Safavid period Christianity was seen as an alien religion, both in its internal and external dimensions. Meanwhile, during the Qajar period some political measures were undertaken to recognise Christianity in domestic politics, while it was still associated mostly with the foreign powers and modernity because of foreign missionary activity. Finally, the Pahlavi period introduced some qualitative changes with respect to Christianity. Iranian Christians – mostly converts – have described themselves using terms expressing common Iranian national feelings and national belonging. We can say that the onset of the reign of Reza Pahlavi initiated the process of the indigenisation and Iranisation of Christianity; paradoxically, this process intensified after the Iranian revolution. History has played a role in the construction of Iranian Christian identity indicating the moments of transfer as gradual qualitative and also quantitative changes within the churches existing in Iran.

Nonetheless, some questions have yet to be answered by researchers: How did history shape Iranian identity and determine how Iran was perceived by the outside world? How did Iranians remember and forget their past? Under what

political and cultural circumstances did they construct their memories of the past? What made the Iranian Christians really Iranian? What place did Iranian mythology, pre-Islamic Iranian traditions, rich poetic practices, and, finally, Iranian nationalism occupy in constructed and imagined Christian identities? We can expect that by synthesising the elements composing Iranian culture and identity, they shaped the interpretative frame for Christianity in Iran. The famous Iranian thinker Ramin Jahanbegloo identifies three ‘modes of thought’ among the Iranians: pre-Islamic Persian, Islamic, and Western.⁹ Throughout Iran’s long history, they opposed, contradicted, or interwove with each other, but it was only in the 20th century that they intensified the process of the creation of their new identities, shaping new forms of protest and affecting all social and political groups in Iran, including Iranian Christians. With different degrees of intensity, they are remembered or rejected in the Christian discourse in Iran. Pre-Islamic Iranian traditions, which inspired modern political ambitions and crafted political myths, are used as a point of reference by Christians to underline continuity rather than rupture in the nature of conversion. Islam interpreted and reinterpreted by the Iranians became the main source of their identity. The last total interpretation of Shi’a Islam was made during the revolution when the concept of an Islamic government on which Ayatollah Khomeini had been working before his exile in the 1960s was implemented. Of course, the converts replaced Islam with Christianity, but in fact the Christian tradition

9 Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Time will say nothing* (Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2014), p. 30.

was interpreted and reinterpreted in the same way as Islam had previously created 'Iranian revolutionary Christianity.' With regards to Western traditions, it is difficult to point to any single period in modern Iranian history when the Iranians did not refer to the West as conflicting with their values and rejecting them or, on the contrary, imitating them and imaginatively assimilating Western thoughts and concepts. One of the characteristics of Iranian culture is its ability to absorb different cultural codes. Western traditions are fully manifested among Iranian Protestants.

Recalling the idea of transfer in the context of Protestantism in Iran, we can assume that the early Protestant missions had a kind of intuition for using modern technologies to spread their message. Print was one of them, and thus print itself became a missionary idea.

Henry Martyn and the Idea of Missionary Work in Iran

The Protestant missionaries entering Iran in the 19th century conveyed their ideas in printed form. They represented a developed print culture focused on the Bible. The significance of the Qajar period in studies on Christianity in the time of the Iranian Revolution relays the historical importance that the founding missions had for the inspiration of future generations of missionaries. In their beginnings, the missions met with obstacles, advantages, and successes, while the missionaries who initiated and conducted work were idealised. The list of the most important and influential Protestant missionaries who ever worked in Persia opens with Henry Martyn, an Anglican clergyman who spent his missionary life translating the Bible. His influence is

measured mostly by the number of references to his life in the missionary literature.¹⁰ He became a missionary icon in Victorian England¹¹ and a guiding light for dozens of missionaries. His writings, letters, and journals were read and reprinted many times in the 19th century. Moreover, they had an enormous impact on the missionaries' portrayal of Persia and Islam.

Henry Martyn was born and raised in Truro, Cornwall, in 1781, when the region underwent religious transitions as a result of the ideas of John and Charles Wesley. They stressed the importance of self-devotion and the necessity of a personal relationship with God. They also emphasised the value of repentance leading to a spectacular change of one's life; theirs was categorised as a born-again movement and emphasised reliance on the Scripture. This was an innovative movement inside the Anglican Church, but it soon transformed into an independent religious structure called Methodism. Although Martyn never changed his Anglican affiliation, he was impressed by Methodism, which undoubtedly shaped his missionary character. Dreaming of going on a mission, Martyn went to India in 1805 as an ordained Anglican priest. In India, however, he was a chaplain of the

10 Just a few years after the Martyn's death his diary was published, see: John Sargent, *Memoir of Rev. Henry Martyn* (London, 1819); George Smith, *Henry Martyn, Saint and Scholar: First Modern Missionary to the Mohammedans, 1781–1812* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1892); Constance Padwick, *Henry Martyn. Confessor of the faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1922).

11 Mary E. Gibson, 'Henry Martyn and England's Christian Empire: Rereading Jane Eyre through Missionary Biography', *Victorian Literature and Culture* (1999) 27, 2, p. 419–442, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s106015039927204x>.

British East India Company, which at that time prohibited all missionary activity. This was due to the company's regulations that opposed Christian converts among the peoples in India. Martyn mastered his language skills and learned three languages used in India by the Company's employees: Arabic, Hindustani, and Persian, which was used in a vast area stretching from Damascus to Delhi. In India, Martyn began to translate the Bible into Persian, but after being disappointed with his effects he decided to move to Persia and work on the final version of that translation with the Persians.

What is important is that he became familiar with different forms of Islam and Islamic traditions both in India and Persia. One of them was Sufism, a form of Islamic mysticism. He tried to find common elements between Sufism and Christian practices. In his diary, he described Muslim mystics as:

These Soofies [*sic*] are quite the Methodists of the East. They delight in everything Christian, except in being exclusive. They consider that all will finally return to God from whom they emanated, or rather of whom they are only a different form. The doctrine of the Trinity they admired, but not that of atonement, because the Mahommedans, they say, consider Imam Hosyn as also crucified for the sins of men.¹²

He categorised Sufis as the 'Methodists of the East,' which demonstrates his unique attitude to their practices and beliefs. In his diary, he also introduced a great Muslim

¹² Henry Martyn, *Journal and Letters of the rev. Henry Martyn*, ed. Samuel Wilberforce (London, 1837) vol. 2, p. 383.

figure: Hussein ibn Ali, the third Shi'a imam, who was martyred during the battle of Karbala in 680 and was admired by the Iranians.

We can compare the image of the Islam professed by the Indians in his writing with that he described while he was among the Iranians. After leaving India in 1811, he reached the Iranian seaport Bushehr, from which he soon moved to Shiraz, a glamorous Iranian city noted for religious schools and tombs of two famous Iranian poets: Sa'di and Hafez. As described by Martyn, the Iranian Muslim tradition was intellectual, reflective, and speculative. In the atmosphere of the city, he worked on his Biblical translation, from time to time debating with Shi'a scholar Mirza Ebrahim Fasa'i and Hakim Molla Ali Nuri, who wrote a polemical tract (figure 2) debunking Martyn's idea of Islam.¹³ The uniqueness of Martyn's short stay in Iran attracts attention. Here was a single foreign missionary entering Iranian territory with the Persian Bible in hand discussing core Islamic beliefs with the Iranian Shi'a scholars. His work made a great impression on both the Iranians and missionaries, to whom he came across as an eccentric missionary via his writings and stories based on his life. Moreover, Martyn's diary is a fascinating source for the analysis of cultural changes in the early Qajar period, including the language and its usage in social and political contexts. Also, the language of Persian literature was modified under the shah's initiative to establish the royal court's society of scholars and poets, *anjoman-e kāqān*, which was responsible for early language

13 Hakim Mollā 'Ali Nuri, *Hujjat al-Islām (Burhān al-Millah)*, ed. Hamed Naji Isfahani (Tehrān: Mirāt-e Maktun, 1390).



Figure 2. The first page of the polemic tract by Hakim Ali Nuri
(Presbyterian Historical Society)

policy and a 'modernisation' of Persian poetry, making it more communicative and simpler in style.

While in Shiraz, Martyn started re-working his Persian Bible translation to make it as understandable to as many sectors of Iranian society as possible. He referred to tendencies he observed in Iran:

The king has also signified that it is his wish that as little Arabic as possible may be employed in the papers presented to him. So that simple Persian is likely to become more and more fashionable.¹⁴

The problem he faced planning to present his final work to the shah was vocabulary and the excessive Arabic words he used in translation while he had been in India. He was also aware of the social stratification of society and the problems caused by a very high rate of illiteracy among the Iranians. Nevertheless, he predicted that:

By and by, perhaps, when Persia shall become a Christian nation, and a synod of her bishops shall be held at Teheran, a translation more adapted to the capacity of the lower people will be deemed advisable, but at first, their ridiculous prejudices require to be humoured, and we may do it innocently, we may become all things to all men, that we may gain some.¹⁵

He supposed that the impact of Christianity on Iranian society would increase in the future. Although Iran had not yet become a Christian nation, in the 20th century, 100 years

¹⁴ Martyn, *Journal and Letters*, vol. 2, p. 368.

¹⁵ Martyn, *Journal and Letters*, vol. 2, p. 269.

after Martyn's death, synods of bishops were held and many new translations more suitable for the 'lower' classes of society were completed after the revolution.

The first and most lasting effect of his missionary career was the translation of the Bible into Persian. One cannot overestimate the role of a translation of the Bible into a local language in spreading the Christian message. Martyn's translation was, however, the first of its kind: modern, eloquent, and, in spite of some errors, influential. It is among the first books printed in the Persian language. The Martyn translation opens another chapter of missionary history related to the Bible: its cultural history corresponds with reading practices, distribution, and selling.

In the missionary literature, we can find some evidence that Martyn's translation was read by the Muslims. Joseph Wolff mentioned in his journal an interesting example of the use of his translation:

The Mussulman mullahs are in possession of the Arabic Bible, and the Persian New Testament of Henry Martyn; they have marked passages with red ink throughout, which proves that they had been reading it diligently.¹⁶

Surely, the Bible was read, used in polemics, and sometimes rejected, but it did not pass without comment. Martyn wished to send the translation to the shah as a present, but could not do so due to his illness. He decided to go back to

16 Joseph Wolff, *Researches and Missionary Labours Among the Jews, Mahomedans, and Other Sects During his travels between the years 1831 and 1834* (Philadelphia: Orrin Rogers, 1837), p. 257.

England, but on his way back he died in Tokat, Turkey, on 16 October 1812, and was buried in an Armenian cemetery. The translation prepared by him was given to Fath Ali Shah by Sir Gorge Ousley. In 1814, he received the shah's letter admiring the Persian Bible translation. In fact, the shah's letter was noticed by the missionaries who, relying on its English translation,¹⁷ imagined Muslim Persia as missionary territory. It is clear that the picture of Iran as a country open to evangelisation was recorded in the early missionary writings. As an example, we can read the following statement made by Stuart:

The freedom of speech allowed in Persia is extraordinary: it seems to be a safety valve for the discontent of people, and seldom leads to harm. As long as the brave Iranees [*sic*] do nothing, they may say what they please.¹⁸

As we have suggested above, Martyn's influence on global missionary work in the 19th century can be measured by a number of references made to his life by other missionaries. But what is still immeasurable is the emotional impact on the missionary movement of Martyn, who gave an impression of romanticised missionary fieldwork. Concerning Persia, the letter of Fath Ali Shah praising Martyn's work

17 In the first half of the 19th century the text was translated twice and published in: *The conversion of the world* (Andover, Mass.: Flag and Gould for the ABCFM, 1818), p. 34; George Fowler, *Three Years in Persia; with Travelling Adventures in Koordistan* (London: Henry Culburn, 1841), vol. 1, p. 126–127.

18 Charles Stuart, *Journal of Residence in Northern Persia* (London: Richard Bentley, 1854), p. 235.

was translated and circulated in the missionary press and thus undoubtedly played a role in ambitious plans to Christianise the Muslim lands. Martyn, in fact, discovered in Persia an intellectual Islam and believed that the Iranian Muslims would not reject the Bible.¹⁹ This was the hope that American missionaries expressed a decade after the Martyn's death when they came to Persia.

In the whole history of Protestant missionary movements and initiatives addressed to the people living in Iran, the most important were the Presbyterian, Anglican, and Pentecostal missions. We will briefly focus on their history in the period prior to the revolution on the following pages. Of course, there were several other groups and churches operating in Iran, like the Lutheran Orient Missions, but their impact was limited to certain regions or ethnic groups.

The Presbyterian Missionaries and the Evangelical Church in Iran

The beginning of the Presbyterian mission is connected to the work of Justin Perkins, who established a missionary station among the Assyrians in 1835 on the Urmia Plain in Iran. This work was preceded by research made by Eli Smith and Harrison Otis Dwight.²⁰ For many years, the missionary initiative was called 'the Mission to the Nestorians,' which precisely described its goals and efforts. In 1870, however,

¹⁹ Christine L. Heyrman, *American Apostles. How Evangelicals Entered the World of Islam* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), p. 112–113.

²⁰ Eli Smith, Harrison O. Dwight, *Researches in Armenia Including a Journey through Asia Minor and into Georgia and Persia* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1833), vol. 2, p. 164.

the mission was transformed from being previously limited just to the Assyrians into the mission to Persia, underlying the importance it placed on work among the Muslim population in the country. Such work gave birth to the Evangelical Church of Iran in 1933, which was organised and divided according to geographical criteria: North (Tabriz and Urmia, which during the Pahlavi time was called Rezaiyeh), East (Tehran, Mashhad, and Rasht), and West (Kermanshah, Hamadan). At the end on the 19th century, Presbyterian work was moved from the western part of Iran to the eastern edge of the country, to Mashhad.

James Bassett, an American missionary who documented the development and progress of church activity, noted that exactly on 26 March 1876, the first Protestant church, comprising twelve members, including one convert from Islam, was erected in Tehran.²¹ Missionary work in the city got off the ground in 1872 when the first missionary station was opened close to the Qazwin gate, in the area inhabited by Armenians. In March 1873, missionaries opened a boys' school, and in the following years a chapel and a school for girls – located in the same building as the boys' school but with a separate entrance – were established. The Americans ran a hospital in the north-eastern part of the city. As the capital of Iran, Tehran was growing at that time, and the presence of Protestants missionaries in the city was both symbolic and pragmatic.

21 James Bassett, *Persia: Eastern mission. A narrative of the founding and fortunes of the Eastern Persia Mission, with a sketch of the version of the Bible and Christian literature in the Persian and Persian-Turkish languages* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1890), p. 168.

Describing the events in which he participated at that time in Iran, Bassett underlined that in 1880 the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement prohibiting missionary activity among the Muslim population, requiring that Muslims participating in Christian services be denounced to the appropriate state authorities. It was obvious that the proselyting work among the Muslims was prohibited, but in practice it did not interfere with the spread of the Bible. Bassett wrote:

No objection is made by the authorities to the sale and circulation of the Scriptures in the Persian language, and Christian books receive the sanctions of the censor of the press. These books are also published by Mohammedan printers in Tehran.²²

He pointed out what in fact became a main missionary concern: a Christian book, printed in Persian and distributed among the Iranians. The book itself was a missionary that created a community of readers. In Bassett's writings, we can find almost the same opinions expressed by Henry Martyn concerning language. He wrote:

The Persian tongue is known by all classes of the people, but there was the possibility that the authorities of the State would forbid the use of the Persian language, owing to the fact that it is not the tongue of non-Mohammedan races, and the use of it might be thought of as evidence of an attempt to proselyte the Mohammedans to the Christian faith. It was determined, however, to make the Persian

22 James Bassett, *Persia: the Land of the Imams. A narrative of Travel and Residence 1871–1885* (London: Blackie and Son, 1887), p. 338.

tongue the medium of missionary effort in teaching, and especially in preaching.²³

Undoubtedly, the acquisition of language was the main missionary concern and also the main missionary goal. Bassett was aware that language itself is a political, and not only cultural matter. He emphasised the symbolic function of the Persian language as a religious and communicative tool used by the Muslims. To use it by the non-Muslim groups in Iran – especially for religious purposes – was treated with suspicion by the government and even forbidden. We can easily understand this in relation to the 19th century, but the same problem was faced by the Iranian Christians after the Islamic revolution. This indicates that the history of language reflects both the idea of mission and the process of indigenisation of Christianity in Iran. When discussing language, it is difficult to avoid another aspect of missionary activity: education. In fact, prior to the modernisation project of Reza Pahlavi the modern schools in Iran were in the hands of missionaries.

After the arrival of the Presbyterians, a school for boys and girls was opened in Tehran. In the 1930s, at the time when Samuel Jordan, a great educator and one of the founders of the American College, came to Tehran, the American mission was moved to an undeveloped land near the Ministry of Wars. The street was named ‘Marshal Stalin Street.’

In the 1930, when communication became easier in Iran, the mission was simply called ‘The Iran Mission’ and was supervised by the Americans. At the time, the Presbyterians

23 Bassett, *Persia: the Land*, p. 329.

were working in nine Iranian cities and 21 villages, and the total number of Church members was approximately 2,500, more than half of whom were Armenians and Assyrians who joined the Protestant church. They ran six hospitals and 10 schools, among which *dabirestān-e Alborz* (Alborz College) in Tehran was the most important. In total, 101 missionaries were involved in various forms of missionary work, including the Inter-mission Literature Committee of Iran, which sold 30,000 Christian books in Persian each year. Between 1940 and 1950, some Iranian converts who became church members clearly made a division between ethnic Presbyterian groups and the growing importance of the capital of the country (table 1). Later, in 1965 the American Mission was dissolved and proselytising and educational work was placed under the Iranian workers' leadership. The Church's central office was located in Tehran.

Table 1. Statistics of communicant members of the Presbyterian Church in Iran during the years 1940–1955

Name of Church and its location and ethnic composition	1940	1945	1950	1955
Tehran Evangelical (Persian)	455	587	826	547
Tehran St. John (Armenian)			69	225
Tehran St. Thomas (Assyrian)			262	475
Tabriz Evangelical (Azeri)	214	244	105	137
Rezaiyeh Churches (Assyrian)	954	878	1,023	882
Hamadan Evangelical (Persian)	179	206	286	141
Hamadan St. Stephan (Armenian)	83	119	123	58
Kermanshah (Assyrian, Persian)	248	206	200	176
Arak, Lilahan (Armenian)	365	328	177	78
Rasht Evangelical (Persian)	53	71	81	58
Mashhed Evangelical (Persian)	70	84	87	43
	2,621	2,723	2,977	2,820

Source: PHS, RG 360, William McElwee Miller Papers.

The history of the Presbyterian Church in Iran shows the tendency to move the responsibility for missionary work from the Americans to the Iranians. Such a process can be understood only within the context of the political and social development of Iran. Pahlavi's projects of modernisation made society open to Western influences, while the nationalist and religious Iranian movements neutralised it by the assimilation or rejection of its values.

The Anglican Church in Iran

Protestant missionary work was based on the fundamentals laid by Henry Martyn, a missionary, scholar, and saint, as he was called in the 19th century. In 2012, the Anglican Church celebrated the centenary of the formation of the Diocese of Iran as well as the 200th anniversary of the death of Henry Martyn, the first Anglican missionary to work in Iran. But the formal Anglican mission in Iran was established much later than the Presbyterian one: in 1869, Robert Bruce of the Church Missionary Society arrived in Isfahan and organised missionary work, which comprised translation, education, and, later, medical care. He made a revision of Martyn's Bible translation and initiated the work on the Persian version of the Book of Common Prayer. He also baptised several converts.²⁴

Compared with the Presbyterian mission, the Anglican venture was from the outset much more concerned with reaching Muslims, Zoroastrians, and Jews, who constituted

24 LPL, Davidson 107, ff. 245–251, 'Bishop Stuart to Archbishop Davidson', 17 February 1905.

a great number of Church members. In 1912, it was decided to organise the Anglican diocese in Iran, which gave impetus to the development of Anglican institutions in the country. Like the American missionary projects, they ran schools and hospitals. The most important school was the Stuart Memorial College in Isfahan. The city was a centre of the Anglican missions and the seat of the Anglican bishop. In order to not compete with each other, the Anglicans and Presbyterians divided the area of the country in a line of the parallel of latitude 34° N. Americans dominated in the northern part of Iran in the area between Urmia in the west to Mashhad in the east, while Anglicans operated in the south in the cities of Isfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, and Kerman.

The history of the Anglican (Episcopal) Church in pre-Revolutionary Iran should be divided into four periods, each of which is tied to the leadership of a different bishop. They were: Charles Stileman, James Linton, William Thompson, and Hassan Dehqani-Tafti. The bishops faced different problems and needs in significant moments of Iranian history. Each period can be briefly characterised in relation to the developments and changes in the country.

1. Bishop Charles Stileman, 1912–1916: This was a hard time for the Iranian nation, which experienced atrocities and losses during the First World War. The establishment of the diocese was more an act of faith than a response to a real need. During the war, almost all missionaries decided to leave Iran.
2. Bishop James Linton, 1919–1935: Bishop Linton restored the Anglican diocese and with the new vision extended the missionary work symbolically and physically to even inaccessible regions of Iran. The missionary work

was addressed to Muslims and Zoroastrians. Special initiatives were undertaken to reach Iranian women.²⁵ The church dealt with the nationalist policies of Reza Shah.

3. Bishop William Thompson, 1935–1960: Ordained in the 1920s, he was initially was the principal of the Stuart Memorial College in Isfahan, the best-known Anglican school in Iran. His daughter Margaret, born in Iran, married Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, who succeeded Thompson as bishop in Iran. During that period, the Church faced two waves of nationalism: during the reign of Reza Shah and premiership of Mohammad Mosaddegh (1951–1953), respectively. At that time, the idea of the appointment of an Iranian bishop matured among Iranian Anglicans.
4. Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, 1961–1986: He was born to a Muslim family in a small village Taft in the central part of Iran. Under the influence of his mother, who had been working in the Christian hospital, as a young boy he decided to become Christian. He was baptised in the Anglican Church, and was later ordained an Anglican priest. In 1961, he was appointed as the first native bishop in Iran. With Dehqani-Tafti, we entered a new era not only of Anglicanism but more broadly of Christianity in Iran, which was then ripe for revolution.

The history of the Anglican Church in Iran is strictly connected to the institutions through which it interacted with people, governments, and other churches existing in the country. Looking at the structure of the diocese, we can understand who governed, financed, and represented the Church.

25 By Church Missionary Society and also the Mothers' Union.

During the meeting of the Diocesan Conference held in Isfahan from 30 November to 1 December 1922, the ‘provisional constitution’ was presented.²⁶ The text is interesting as evidence of the early formal action undertaken to build an indigenous Church with strong pressure to include the native representatives into the Church structures; it transacted all business of the Diocesan Conference in Persian. Concerning the executive body, it proposed a diocese’s council composed of: a bishop, archdeacon, chairmen of the pastoral committees, secretaries of diocesan conference, secretary of the Church Missionary Society, and secretary of the London Jews Society. These were the last two Anglican organisations working in Iran. The council of the diocese would work for a year, or until the next meeting of the diocesan conference. The equal number of male and female representatives was emphasised. Concerning the diocesan fund, it was suggested that the Church of Persia should aim at being self-supporting; it was also expected that every baptised church member would participate in Church expenses according to his or her income. Moreover, only those who had received the sacraments of confirmation and communion and who gave the church at least 6 kran²⁷ yearly could vote in elections to the diocesan council. It seems that the Anglican Church created a socio-religious space hitherto unknown to Iranians, introducing new forms of participation, management, and leadership. Moreover, the Church regulations indicated the importance of maintaining

26 CMSA, G/Y/PE/8, *Proposed ‘Provisional’ Constitution and Organisation of the Diocese of Persia*.

27 Currency in Iran used till 1932.

balance in the representation of women and men in the diocesan structures. The Church also used the Persian language for both liturgy and communication. Self-sufficiency and self-financing required many efforts from the Church members but guaranteed them independence from the Lambeth Palace in making decisions. By the 1930s, the diocese consisted of the church board and educational, medical, industrial, and financial institutions. The early Pahlavi period was for the Anglicans (like for the Presbyterians) a time for the re-organisation of Church structures and extensive work. The numbers are also impressive:²⁸ at that time, 65 Anglican missionaries were working in Iran, and 75 Iranians were involved in the work in four missionary stations in Isfahan, Kerman, Yazd, and Shiraz. Also, work was initiated in the villages of Qalat and Rafsanjan. The total number of baptised members reached 600. The Anglican Church ran a school in Isfahan, the Stuart Memorial College for boys (its Iranian name was: *dabirestān-e adāb*), and the Stileman Memorial School for girls (*dabirestān-e behešt āyin*). In Kerman, a school for boys, *dabirestān-e jām*, was opened, as was one for girls (*dabirestān-e etteḥādiye*). Meanwhile, in Yazd a school for girls, *dabirestān-e ized paymān* was founded, as in Shiraz: *dabirestān-e mehr āyin*. Hospitals were established in Isfahan, Kerman, Yazd, and Shiraz. Additionally, the Garden of Arts (Bāḡ-e san'ati) for girls and women was created in Isfahan.

The Anglican Church operated through societies: the Church Missionary Society; the Church Mission to the Jews

28 John N. Hoare, *Something New in Iran* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1937), p. 64 ff.

(which started work in in Isfahan in 1847 and later in 1888 in Tehran); Jeleynoos Hakim (Iranian Jewish Christian), founded by bishop Linton in 1934; and the Bible Churchman's Missionary Society, started in 1928 with a missionary station and hospital in Zahedan.

It seems that the early Pahlavi period was relatively favourable for the development of the British missions. However, at the time of Mohammad Reza's rise to power, American missionaries were mostly welcomed. In the history of the Anglican Church, we observe the same processes as among the Presbyterians. The changing character of the Church was connected to the Iranian converts, who took responsibility for many Church initiatives. However, there was one important difference between these two churches: practically from the beginning of their work, the Anglicans relied on the converts and not on Assyrians or Armenians, as the Americans did. The appearance of the third branch of Protestantism in Iran is related to both the Americans and the Assyrians.

The Pentecostals in Iran

Pentecostalism was founded and developed in Iran in the first two decades of the 20th century as a result of the activity of Andrew David Urshan, who was of Assyrian origin, and his co-workers from the Urmia region in the north-western part of Iran. Urshan received his early education in a Presbyterian school established by American missionaries. His father, a former member of the Assyrian Church of the East, accepted the Presbyterian creed and became a minister of the Church. Andrew grew up in a family that

was under the influence of American books and education. Like many Protestant Assyrians at that time,²⁹ he went to the United States in order to continue his studies in 1902. After becoming familiar with the Pentecostal experiences, he established the so-called Persian Pentecostal Mission in 1908, which extended his activity among the Assyrians in Iran (which sent the first group of missionaries to Urmia that year) in Chicago, where he lived. Andrew Urshan decided to go to Iran in 1914. That was a very hard time for the Assyrians living in Urmia, as the region was invaded by Turkish troops in 1915, causing an incredible outflow of people and depopulation of the region. Urshan escaped to Tiflis in 1916 and later went to Saint Petersburg, establishing contacts with Russian Pentecostals.³⁰ At that time, we can observe the split between Trinitarian Pentecostals and those who insisted on baptism in the name of Jesus.³¹ We can observe such a split even today among the Iranian Pentecostals.³²

The history of the Pentecostalism in Iran can be divided into four periods:

29 Yoab Benjamin, 'Assyrians in Middle America. A Historical and Demographic Study of the Chicago Assyrian Community', *Journal of Assyrian Academic Society* (1996), 24, 4, p. 18–46.

30 Tatiana K. Nikoľskaia, *Russkii protestantizm i gosudarstvennaia vlast v 1905–1991 godakh* (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo Universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2009), p. 77.

31 Douglas G. Jacobsen (ed.), *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology: Voices from the First Generation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 151–159.

32 Armān Rošdi, 'Ferqe-ye monḥaref yegānebāvarān – ta'lim-e nādorost dar moured-e Taḥlīt', *Kalame* (2012), 71, p. 12–14.

1. 1908–1916, lasting from the establishment of the Persian Pentecostal Mission in Chicago until the work of Andrew Urshan in Iran, corresponding with the pre-institutional development of the Pentecostal movement: In Iran, no attempt was made to convert Muslims, partly because the main idea was to address the Pentecostal message to the Assyrians and partly because of the political situation and the threat of war.
2. 1924–1938: The institutionalisation of the Pentecostals in Iran: From 1924 to 1938, missionaries were sent by the General Council of the Assemblies of God in the United States. Nineteen thirty is regarded as an approximate date when an independent community was established. Missionary work was limited to the Assyrians.
3. 1959–1979: Nineteen fifty-nine seems to be a symbolic year: Pentecostalism was limited to the Assyrian community and crossed ethnic borders, attracting Armenians who tried to win over Iranian converts.
4. The development of Pentecostalism in Iran during and after the Islamic revolution.

We should place the history of Pentecostalism in the context of Iranian Christianity and Protestant missions dating back to the beginning of the 19th century. The Pentecostals brought a new vision of mission contrary in its nature to some activities of the old missionaries. The statement of John Warton published in the Pentecostal journal *Later Rain Evangel* gives some insights into the relations between missionaries and their expectations and limitations.

There is a great opportunity for Pentecostal missionaries in Persia. There are other missionaries here but they do not teach nor preach

even the doctrine of salvation. I am sorry to say they are teaching Modernism and a social gospel, but the Persians are a religious people and do not care about these things.³³

Like Urshan, Warton was an Assyrian from the Urmia region. Warton was convinced that the Gospels should be preached not only to the members of old churches existing in Iran for centuries, but also to the Muslim community. His words, initiatives, and activity could be understood as an attempt to deconstruct the idea of the missionary movement evolving from a purely religious to a mostly social enterprise during the century of missionary presence in Iran. The Pentecostals took a position against the ‘teaching of modern missionaries’ (as Warton admitted), believing that returning to the ‘signs and wonders’ described in the Bible was the only way to bring Muslims to Christ. In fact, we should stress Warton’s idea of Pentecostalism as a religious movement that responds to Iranian expectations. Truly, the attractiveness of Pentecostalism among the Iranians might be the result of its highly emotional and ‘mystical’ character. Once more, we should underline the importance of the 1930s for the growth of missionary activity in Iran. Although missionaries faced the obstacles caused by Iranian state policy, which was highly nationalistic at that time, by using the developed infrastructure they were able to open new churches, schools, and hospitals. Despite the lack of sufficient funds, in the 1930s the Pentecostals established three missionary stations and 15 outstations (eight in 1933 alone) in cities and villages like Abajaloo, Abdulah-Kandy, Adda,

33 ‘Warton’s letter’, *The Later Rain Evangel* (November 1928), p. 14.

Dizatakah, Hamadan, Karajaloo, Kermanshah, Sultanabad, and Tabriz, all of which were in the northern part of Iran.³⁴ It is worth mentioning Hamadan, the city of Esther and Mordechai where Warton started to work after his arrival to Iran in 1924. It was a place mentioned in the Bible, which in fact influenced the Pentecostal concept of mission as a return to primitive and pure Christianity. Along with Warton, two other missionaries from the United States were working in Iran at that time. They were Samuel Kamber and Philip Shabaz, who with the assistance of fifteen native ministers and women who were engaged in missionary work tried to address the Pentecostal message to Assyrians, Jews, Armenians, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, and Muslims. Although the Pentecostals had been supervised by Assembly of God, they grew in Iran until the middle of 20th century, although the impact of missionaries was limited to just the Assyrians. In the following years, the responsibility for the Pentecostal work among the Assyrians was taken over by Tooma Nasir (Thomas Nasseri) and witnessed political changes in Iran and the dawn of the revolution.³⁵

Until the middle of the century, the Pentecostals in Iran were mostly Assyrians. The situation changed when ethnic Iranians became attracted to Pentecostalism through the ministry of Pentecostals of Armenian origin. In 1959, two young Armenian brothers, Haikaz and Hrand Catchatoor (Khachatoor), established a Pentecostal community in Tehran operating through many informal meetings and

34 *Constitution and By-Laws of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (Springfield, Missouri, 1935), p. 83.

35 Thomas Nasseri, *The Rocky Road of My Christian Life* [s.l.: s.n.], p. 216–219.

house churches. The community, which was called the Philadelphia Assembly, aimed at reaching the Muslim people.³⁶ In 1965, it became affiliated with the General Council of the Assemblies of God, and an official agreement was signed. Apart from some financial aspects, the proposal concerning language seems to be important: 'In the meetings, the Persian language will be emphasised and in common use the Armenian and Assyrian languages may also be used in scheduled meetings if desired.'³⁷ The statement concerning language is important as evidence of the change the missionary strategy; the priority given to the Persian indicated planned work not among the ethnic Christians but Iranians. It is worth recalling Seth Yaghnazar, whose work dated back to the 1960s. In the following years, Pentecostal churches that used the Persian language in church services were established in different parts of Iran: Tehran, Gorgan, Rasht, and other cities.

In the 1960s, some American missionaries came to work among Iranians, and in fact formal ties between Assemblies of God and the Iranian Pentecostal community were established. Mark Bliss was appointed as a missionary to Iran. In the 1970s, when Iran attracted the attention of international oil companies, the community of foreign workers in Iran grew rapidly. Mark Bliss and other Pentecostal workers of Armenian and Iranian origin, like Haik Hovsepian Mehr, who after the revolution was appointed as a superintendent

36 AG, WM, folder: Iran (-1969), 'David Thomas to Elton G. Hill', Tehran, 20 May 1964.

37 AG, WM, folder: Iran (-1969), *A Written Agreement Between the Assemblies of God USA and the Iranian Assemblies of God (and Philadelphia Assemblies of God in particular)*.

of AG in Iran, were responsible for missionary work among the Iranians. Some pastors and ministers like Mehdi Dibaj, Arman Roshdi, and Farrideh Ershadi were involved in translating the New Testament into Persian; this was the so-called Living Bible version. In the years before the revolution, two branches of the Pentecostal church were developing: the Assyrian and the Persian-Armenian branches. Tooma Nasir was superintendent of the Assyrian branch, while Levon Hairapetian headed the Iranian branch.

With regards to the Pentecostals, we can see that before the revolution the community was divided along ethnic and cultural lines: Assyrian, Iranian, and American (or, rather, English-speaking). Paradoxically, after the revolution the Iranian community was the strongest. However, the ethnic and cultural diversity of the church's members was not typical only for the Pentecostals, but was common among the Presbyterians and Anglicans, whose history was shortly presented above, as well. We should not forget about the other Protestants, such as Lutherans and Baptists, who also contributed to the history of Protestantism in Iran.

1.2. The Churches and the Shah

The history of missionary activity in Iran is interwoven with the political history of the country. The question we should answer is: how did the missionaries react and respond to the revolution as a political, social, and cultural event? But still, it is enormously important to deal with other questions: how did they perceive the pre-revolutionary era and how did they relate to the Iranian monarch, king of kings, *šāhenšāh*?

Seeking the origins of Protestantism in Iran, we identified its beginnings with Henry Martyn, a missionary whose work inspired generations of Christians. His activity undoubtedly gave the impression that the missionary initiatives would attract the Iranian monarch. From what we know, he planned to offer his Persian translation of the Bible to the Iranian king, Fath Ali Shah, but could not do so due to his illness. Nevertheless, Fath Ali Shah was given Martyn's translation and issued a *farmān*, a royal edict prising Martyn's work. Soon afterwards, the edict was translated into English and immediately appeared as headline news in the US and Great Britain. Not surprisingly, some news took on a life of its own. In reference to Henry Martyn, the king's approval of his work created unrealistic expectations of missionary work in Iran. Most important, however, was the impression that the Iranian monarch would be able to change his religion and lead the whole country to Christianity. It was, of course, impossible to conduct missionary work without any contacts with the Persian authorities. What is more, from the life of Henry Martyn we learn that the Persian king took a special interest in Christian writings and Christian practices in Iran. The problem it might cause in a certain period of history was the missionaries' concern about the Iranian elites and the shah's court rather than about ordinary people.

Studying the history of Protestantism in Iran, we find evidence that missionary work was under political influence, but by no means was the work politicised. Rather, it seems that the general political context determined both the development of the Church and its reception among the Iranians during the Qajar and Pahlavi periods. The

relationship between the Church and the Iranian monarchs was scrutinised by the revolutionary government and was used to expel missionaries and penalise church members.

During the second half of the 19th century, when Protestantism made progress in Iran and the country stepped onto the path of reforms, Iran became much more open to Western ideas and technologies. When Naser al-Din Shah came to London during one of his travels to Europe for the propagation of the Gospels, he issued an appeal to the shah for greater religious tolerance in Iran.³⁸ During his reign, the Church Missionary Society started to officially work in Isfahan, the former capital of Persia, and at exactly that time the shah paid a visit to Europe. Robert Bruce was engaged in a revision of Martyn's Bible translation. He also initiated the process of translating the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, in which the special prayer for the king appeared. In the Iranian context, it should be of course a prayer for the shah.

The Prayer for the King and the Nation

One of the most interesting aspects of the history of the Protestant churches in Iran is undoubtedly the issue of relations with the Iranian authorities. How can we measure the intensity and quality of such relations? We can get a partial answer by taking into account church worship treated not only as a religious, but also as a social practice. Before the revolution, the churches offered a special prayer for the

³⁸ *Classified digest of the records of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts 1701–1892* (London: SPGFP, 1895), p. 729.

king and the country. With regards to the Anglicans, it was prescribed by the Book of Common Prayer, a symbol of both Anglican unity and identity. The Book of Common Prayer was first translated into the Persian language in 1828, and in the following years it was re-translated and re-revised many times. In Bruce's version titled: *Ketāb-e namāznāme-ye ām* ('Book of Common Prayer'), we can find the prayer for the shah Naser al-Din: *Pādšāh-e pādšāhān va rab-e ar-rabān (...) bar pādšāh-e kaim-e mā Nāṣer al-Din Šāh nazar-e lotf be-farmā-y-i* ('the king of kings and the lord of lords... bless our king Naser al-Din')³⁹. The translation was in use from 1894, but shortly after, in 1901, it was revised by Rev. C. H. Stileman, the first bishop in Iran (from 1911), and printed in Jolfa in Isfahan.⁴⁰ As mentioned above, because of his relations with European monarchs the Naser al-Din was also regarded as a protector of missionary initiatives. Generally, the Protestants treated the Iranian monarchy with reverence, and the positive attitudes towards the shahs were maintained even when the latter undertook nationalistic or even chauvinistic policy, as was witnessed during the reign of Reza Pahlavi. From the time of Naser al-Din, the Iranian monarchy had been categorised in terms of the pre-modern concept of sacred kingship manifested in the title 'Shadow of God on Earth' claimed by Naser al-Din; meanwhile, Mohammad Reza proclaimed himself 'Light of the Aryans,' a modern and nationalistic term.⁴¹ In the

39 *Ketāb-e namāznāme-ye ām*, trans. R. Bruce (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1898).

40 LPL, Lang 63 (1932–1942 'Reunion: Persia'), f. 95, *Notes on the Bruce and Stileman versions of the Liturgy*.

41 Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, p. 5.

process of transformation from the pre-modern into the modern state, the royal court rituals became official and were celebrated publicly. What is more, the king's birthday also became a public holiday. In 1934, Adelaide Kibbe, an American missionary physician working in Mashhad, described how the celebration looked:

The shah's birthday was yesterday and the whole city celebrated the day before, the day itself and today! Wednesday evening, the eve of the holiday, we were all invited to the Governor's mansion to a big shindig – evening affair. The streets were crowded with revellers – every little shop or big store had rugs hung out in front, lamps and candles or electric lights (really quite dim – the lamps make much more of show) aglow. Tea was being served, dancers in costume, *droshkys* all decorated up with flags...⁴²

That same year, in his letter to Archbishop of Canterbury Bishop Linton claimed that the prayer for the king of England in the *Book of Common Prayer* as completely impractical in a non-Christian country, suggesting that the Iranian Anglicans should pray for the Persian monarch instead.⁴³ This caused, in fact, a discussion about the validity of such a prayer in Iran, where the king was a Muslim. In spite of that, the Anglican Church in Iran kept the prayer for the Persian king in its book of prayers published in 1935 during the reign of Reza Shah and in text published in 1963 when the Church was praying for Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

42 Margaret A. Frame, *Passage to Persia. Writings of an American doctor during her life in Iran, 1929–1957* (Summertime Publishing, 2014), p. 128.

43 LPL, Lang 63, 'Linton to Archbishop of Canterbury', 17 January 1934.

We can consider the prayer for the king by Protestants in Iran to be a customary expression rather than a religious or political orientation, but we should also remember that in revolutionary Iran such a prayer was treated as a form of rejecting the revolutionary values and evidence of belonging to pre-revolutionary order.

What seems to be obvious is the impact of the Christian liturgy and Christian prayers for the Iranians attending Church worship. On the other hand, the Church in Iran was split between the necessity of the Iranisation of its practices and the influence of Western culture. With regards to church service, Bishop Thompson remarked: 'I will remember when we all used to sit on the ground in church here, but that would be quite impossible now. With this invasion of Western customs, there can be no question of sitting on the floor.'⁴⁴

Taking into account the varieties of Protestantism in Iran, we should try to avoid generalisations, however. The Protestants introduced some practices among the Iranian Christians, which created the impression of loyalty towards the government. Loyalty, however, was placed among duties and obligation with regards to the monarch. In missionary writings, we can find many examples of positive attitudes to the Iranian shah. This is certainly true in relation to the last shah, Mohammad Reza.

In his autobiography written after the revolution, William McElwee Miller recounted numerous political and social events he was involved in when explaining his life after finishing his missionary career in Iran. While analysing

44 LPL, Lang 63, 'Thompson to Archbishop of Canterbury', 22 November 1939.

the revolutionary fever in Iran, he tried to portray the last Iranian shah as a reformer and persuaded his readers that before the revolution Iranians generally liked Americans.⁴⁵ He was convinced that the seizure of the American embassy in November 1979 was led by just a small, marginal group of Iranians, and that the revolutionary students responsible for takeover of the embassy made a simplification by connecting the American presence in Iran with the missionary efforts. For them, any mark of loyalty to the last shah was treated as a betrayal of what they defined as being Iranian. The prayer for the king was replaced with a protest against monarchy by the revolutionary activists.

The relations between the shah and the churches as well as the political context in which the Protestant churches were operating should not be merely reduced to foreign missionaries. In fact, it is the problem of Iranians who embraced Christianity and entered the Protestant world. How did the Iranian Protestant church emerge and under what circumstances? Who were the Iranian Protestants? How did they define and interpret their Iranian culture in the Christian Protestant context?

1.3. Iranian Protestantism: The Roots of Indigenous Churches

Although the Protestant churches conducted charitable work by running hospitals, orphanages, and schools in Iran,

⁴⁵ William M. Miller, *My Persian Pilgrimage. An Autobiography* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1995), p. 359.

they were, in fact, seeking converts. Conversion is the measure of success of missionary work. At the beginning of the 20th century, the archbishop of Canterbury responded to a letter from a missionary from Iran, reminding that:

I do not clearly gather from you whether at this moment there is much actual conversion from Mohammedanism to Christianity going on in Persia. The record you give of what has been done in former years is stimulating and useful, but I am constantly met with the statement that no visible result follows from the devoted work which is being done by yourself and others in Persia now.⁴⁶

The visible results of missionary work mentioned by the archbishop were understood as the Church abounding with Iranian converts, former Muslims. The converts made missionary work rational and worthy of being supported. Of course, work among the Muslims encountered many obstacles of a social and even political nature. It seems that the transformation of Iran from a pre-modern to a modern state with the affirmation of secular and national values gave some opportunities to change religious affiliations.

The Pahlavi period (1925–1979) was categorised above as the period in Iranian history when missionary work accelerated. At that time, at least two moments conducive to the growth of the Iranian Churches could be distinguished: Reza Pahlavi's early reign and the time just after the collapse of the Mohammad Mosaddegh's government, when the national feelings and anger towards foreigners were shared by

46 LPL, Davidson 107, f. 252, 'Archbishop of Canterbury to Stuart', 22 March 1905.

Iranian Christians who were converts from Islam. Despite the fact that the total number of converts did not exceed 1,000 in the time before the revolution, the Church in Iran experienced qualitative internal changes, which affected the missionaries, who took greater care in preparing reports and analysis to try to find out the real reasons why Iranians decided to be Christians or, on the contrary, they prevented themselves from being Christians.

While asking questions about the missionaries and their attempt to make Christianity acceptable to Iranians, it is hard to avoid another one: how they categorised Iranian culture and what tasks they supposed to be obligatory for the potential converts.⁴⁷ Such problems correspond with the knowledge of the mechanism of conversion and the missionary understanding of its cultural and social conditions. It seems that missionaries relied mostly on their intuition rather than on proper research in this field; in fact, the concept of contextualisation and contextually oriented missions belong to the later period. However, they tried to get some proper information about the purposes of conversions and the social background of the converts already in the 1930s. The changes among the Iranians were clear to the missionaries. In the 1930s, Bishop Linton considered the idea of a Christian ministry led by Iranians. He wrote that: 'The present growth of national sentiment is bound sooner

47 Among the missionary writings we can also find documents and materials indicating the missionary attempt to understand the needs of the converts, in the meanwhile is a good example of the missionary self-conciseness, see: John Ch. Wilson, 'Love must win Persian Converts (An Interesting Survey)', *The Muslim World* (1926), 16, 1, p. 25–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1926.tb00600.x>.

or later to affect the Church, and it may be serious if there should be a reaction in the Church against a foreign ministry or foreign control. The whole of the East is warning us of this danger. Also, the growth of the Church through the converts from Islam is necessitating an indigenous ministry. And further, it is at least possible that only through an indigenous ministry we hope to arrive at a United Church.⁴⁸ The problem that Linton intended to solve as an Anglican was that of the expectations expressed by Iranians that the Church in Iran should not be divided between Presbyterians and Anglicans. Religious conversion always occurs in a certain communicational context and in its nature is dialogical. In this case, the relations between missionaries are very important. In other words, conversion created a network of dependencies, which caused a problem of authority. It also involved missionaries studying and analysing both the converts and the missionary strategy. It is an attempt to conceptualise 'an ideal Christian' and, to some extent, the 'ideal missionary' as well. Let's look at the two complementary processes of studying and making the converts in relation to the emergence of indigenous Iranian Protestant churches.

Studying the Converts

In his article 'Love Must Win Persian Converts,' which was published in 1926, Christy Wilson suggested that: 'If we find the things that failed to satisfy these people in Islam and

48 LPL, Lang 63 (1932–1942 'Reunion: Persia'), James H. Linton, 'A Suggestion Towards Removing Difficulties in the Path of Progress of a United Church of Persia', 22 July 1931.

what attracted their attention to Christianity and brought about their conversion, these facts should be a guide and help in winning other Mohammedans to Jesus Christ.⁴⁹ It is interesting that he pointed out ‘satisfaction’ and ‘dissatisfaction’ with regards to religious doctrines and practices as the motivation for changing religion or at least its redefinition. He also listed some questions he asked the converts to understand their motives in changing religion and expectations with respect to the new one. From today’s perspective, however, the conclusions are disappointing. They show the superiority of missionary presence and work rather than the universality of the Christian Church. Nevertheless, the survey indicated the necessity to include the opinions of the local church members in crafting missionary strategy. The survey inspired other missionaries, who by using questionnaires in a basic or more sophisticated form tried to figure out the ‘convert’s mind.’

At the Christian Study Seminar held on 20–21 November 1959, at Princeton, Cady Allen, an American Presbyterian missionary, presented a paper concerning opportunities and obstacles in work among the Muslims. The paper titled: ‘Muslim Responses to Christian Witness in Iran’ discussed various criteria that should be taken into account while studying Muslim attitudes towards Christianity.⁵⁰ Comparing many different Muslim societies, he found the Iranians to be the most willing to accept Christianity. In his view, this

49 Wilson, ‘Love must win Persian Converts’, p. 25.

50 PHS, RG 360, William McElwee Miller Papers, Cady H. Allen, ‘Muslim Response to the Christian Witness in Iran consisted the various criteria which should be taking into account while studying the Muslim attitudes towards Christianity’.

was because of their 'racial and cultural background.' As an Indo-European people, they seemed to be more culturally westernised than Arabs or Turks and, what is more, they had constructed their national feelings through their language (Persian, of Indo-European origin), which distanced them from the Muslim idea of the superiority of the Arabic tongue. Some years later, Cady Allen contributed to the work 'Converts from Islam to Christianity,' a general remark on conversions from Islam. It provides probably one of the first reports addressed to evangelical about the 'loss of converts'⁵¹ in the church. Based on a questionnaire distributed among some 450 Muslims of different cultural backgrounds who had made a confession of faith in Christ and were baptised within a 20-year period before the report was completed, the second part of the report dealt with the loss of converts. The report revealed that more than 40 per cent of converts lost their interest in Christianity and returned to Islam. A relatively small number of such re-conversions occurred among the Iranians, as just one in fifteen returned to Islam. However, among Arabic speakers the rate was higher: one in three rejected Christianity. The reasons for this were complex, but the largest number of respondents answered that marriage with a Muslim played a decisive role. In Iran, the percentage of those who gave marriage as a reason for their return to Islam was twice as high as in Arab countries. Generally, the study emphasised the social context of conversion and quite visible differences among the converts in

51 PHS, RG 360, William McElwee Miller Papers, Cady H. Allen, E. Everett Grice, Kenneth E. Nolin, 'Converts from Islam to Christianity. A Survey Prepared for the Christian Study Seminar on Islam' (March 1963).

Iran and the rest of the Muslim world. This study inevitably leads us to a contextually oriented approach.

Harvie M. Conn, who studied conversion in the Muslim context, pointed out the inadequacy in Western categories of religious change. He found three categories useless to the Muslims: 1) the understanding of conversion as a one-step decision; 2) the understanding of conversion as an individual decision; 3) and the understanding of conversion as 'purely' spiritual.⁵² In 1979, when Conn's article appeared in print, another study on the Iranian converts was prepared just before the Iranian revolution. Patrick Cate, the initiator of the research, distributed the questionnaire among church members in Urmia, Tabriz, Mashhad, Shiraz, Abadan, Isfahan, and Tehran 'to find better ways to bring Muslims to Christ and to help them remain faithful to Christ in His Church,' like Christy Wilson in 1926. Today, this material is historically significant, and its value lies mainly in the attempt at identifying the most susceptible groups to work among them in the period preceding the Islamic revolution. The questionnaire, which included 65 questions, was answered by 55 persons. With regards to the profile of converts, most of them were under the age of 30. Overwhelmingly, they were educated white-collar workers who worked for international corporations and oil companies and city dwellers declaring Persian as their mother tongue (73 per cent of the respondents). On the question of who was most willing to accept Christianity, the overwhelming majority responded

52 Harvey M. Conn, *The Muslim Convert and his Culture*, in *The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium*, ed. D. M. McCurry (Monrovia, Calif.: MARC, 1979), p. 97–113.

that liberal and open-minded Muslims were, and 9 per cent of the respondents emphasised that it was easier to embrace Christianity for Shiites than for the Sunnis. As an explanation, the idea of Imam Hussain's passion, which functionally resembled Jesus' martyrdom, should be outlined. It resembled the revelation made intuitively by Henry Martyn almost two centuries before. Another important question was related to the ideal portrait of the missionary among the Iranians. In addition to some universal moral character traits, the respondents desired perfect knowledge of the Persian language and of Iranian customs.⁵³ They expected that a missionary from another county would leave his or her own culture behind and fully accept Iranian values shortly after coming to Iran. The respondents indicated that Iranian converts might accept a missionary who was culturally transformed and symbolically converted to what should be called Iran-ness. Implicitly, it proved that Iranians could accept the Gospel preached by Iranians.

By placing the studies mentioned above on a broader spectrum of twentieth-century studies on Protestant missions in the Muslim world and conversions from Islam, it is worth noting the changing portrait of both the convert and the missionary in the reports from the 1920s through the 1970s. Thus, relations between them were also changing, and missionary influence was diminishing prior to the Iranian Revolution. The 1979 report also gives us a picture of Iranian church members as mostly educated and westernised Iranians.

53 Patrick Cate, 'A Survey of Muslim Converts in Iran' (Spring 1980), p. 15.

Making Converts and Citizens

In the history of the modern missionary movement, two main aspects played a crucial role in transmitting Christian religious values and transplanting the new social demands. They were: education, which can be considered to be an initial step towards religious conversion,⁵⁴ and the emancipation of Iranian women as a mark of deeper social and cultural changes.⁵⁵ Education was connected, especially in the missionary presumptions, with the Bible itself, and its printing, distribution, and popularisation might have created rather novel attitudes towards the knowledge among the mostly illiterate Iranian population, offering them a self-converting tool accessible just through reading. Therefore, the Iranian government aimed at doing the same. Prior to a new regulation abolishing the missionary schools issued in 1927, the total number of the schools established by British and American missionaries was 2,620.⁵⁶ The connection between education and the Bible involved missionaries in seeking the modern technologies that improved the distribution of the printed texts. In fact, from the early beginnings of missionary activity we observe the tendency to develop nets of colporteurs and ways in which the Bible

54 James H. Linton, 'Evangelism through Schools in the Near East', *The Muslim World* (1932), 22, 1, p. 5–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1932.tb02855.x>.

55 Gulnar E. Francis-Dehqani, *Religious Feinism in an Age of Empire. CMS Women Missionaries in Iran 1869–1934* (Bristol: University of Bristol, 2000).

56 LPL, Davidson 215, 'Memorandum on Missionary Freedom in Persia', 9 November 1927.

was disseminated among the Iranians. Emancipation, however, was not only related to the new perception of women in Muslim society but also to the new idea of the Iranian family. The former changed mental and intellectual capabilities, while the latter changed social and cultural habits.

We can assume that the early converts from Islam who belonged to one of the Protestant churches were treated as a 'reproduction' of the cultural and social ideas of the missionaries. Missionary attitudes towards the Iranian converts depended on at least two aspects: 1) the association of missionary work with social activity such as establishing hospitals and schools, promoting social mobility, and emphasising women's role in society; and 2) perceiving literacy as both a tool and a result of missionary activity. It seems that the first converts were granted benefits from missionary social work and previously belonged to marginalised or poor social groups, including women. For them, conversion might have meant the improvement of their social status. The second group of converts were Iranians involved in British or, later, American enterprises in Iran; for instance, in the first half of the 20th century the refinery in Abadan established and run by the British and South Persian Rifles was very important in making Iranians familiar with Christianity.⁵⁷

The modernisation experienced by the Iranian people under Reza Pahlavi had a practical impact on missionary work. That is why we should keep in mind the forms and conditions of the mutual relationship between the state

57 At least one example of an Iranian who converted to Christianity as an office in South Persian Rifles, was given by bishop Linton: LPL, MU/OS/5/29/5, 'Copy of Letter from Bishop Linton of Persia At Baghdad on tour', 16 April 1921.

and missionaries. Missionaries made use of state policy in every form. The roads and railroads built during the Pahlavi era facilitated communication between cities and linked inaccessible areas, but they also influenced the self-image of the Iranians, who showed deeper national consciousness. Changes and the development of Iranian society made the missionaries hopeful in spreading their message. They expressed such hopes and expectations in their letters and books. One of them, *Something New in Persia* by Hoare, brought a detailed description of the country with useful information on missionary work.⁵⁸ However, it was the Bible in the Persian language that was still seen as the best missionary among the Iranians. The missionary beliefs that the Bible in a native language was able to bring people to Christianity showed the common presumption of the importance of the Persian language in their work among Iranians. What was not expected by the missionaries was the fact that the Persian language became the tool of the nationalistic policy conducted by Reza Shah; it became the object of inclusion in or exclusion from the so-called the Iranian nation.

The Persian Bible was connected to many social and cultural initiatives as well as religious ones. The Bible itself created the networks of entrepreneurs dealing with its distribution and sale. One of the first known Bible colporteurs in Iran was Benjamin Badal, who was of Assyrian origin. His life concentrated on the book was popularised among the Iranian converts by booklets such as that entitled: *Yek*

58 J. N. Hoare, *Something New in Iran* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1937).

qahremān-e masīhi. Sar-goḏāšt-e Benyāmin Badāl ketāb-foruṣ-e maʿruf-e masīhi dar Irān ('A Christian Hero: The Life of Benjamin Badal, the Famous Christian Bookseller in Iran'). He rode on a donkey across Iran, making the Bible available to city dwellers, villagers, sedentary groups, and nomads.

Years later, in the 1960s, Mohammad Reza inaugurated the so-called 'white revolution' and its great reform package. Meanwhile, missionary activity including sales of the Bible was intensified. Concerning the distribution of the Christian message, two developments should be mentioned: Christian radio programmes launched in Persian and the 'mobile' sale of Christian literature. In 1962, 'bookmobiles' (figure 3), cars providing Christian literature, appeared on many Iranian streets.

Agha Moshiri, a distributing manager working within the Presbyterian Church, evangelist and colporteur took part in the first ride of the 'Bible car.'⁵⁹ This shows that the social reforms to diminish illiteracy among the Iranians undertaken at that time facilitated Christian efforts to sell Christian literature in the Persian language. In the following years, some Christian bookstores were opened in the major Iranian cities, offering a new space apart from the churches to discuss religious and social issues (figure 4). One of them was the bookstore Nur Ayin, opened in Isfahan by Bishop Dehqani-Tafti. We can consider the Bible as the element defining the scope of activities among the Protestant communities in Iran, giving rise to an indigenous Iranian Church.

59 PHS, RG 360, Elder Family Papers (1925–1979), 'Ruth and John Elder to Friends', Tehran, November 1962.

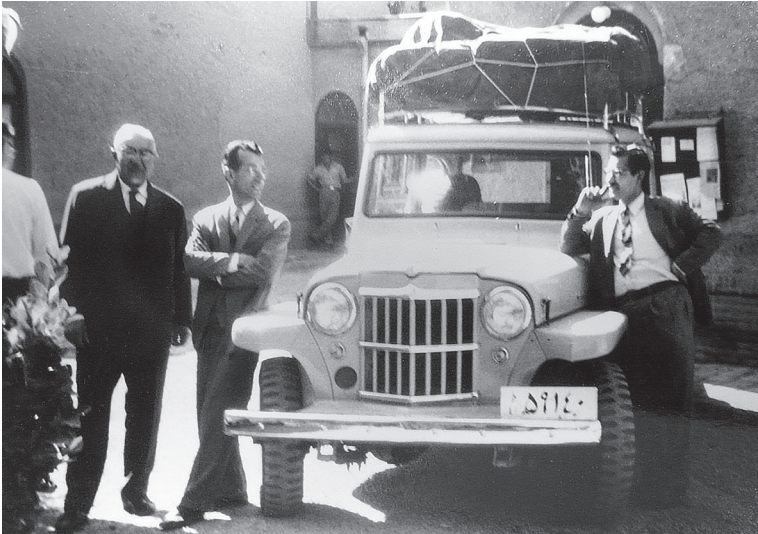


Figure 3. Christian 'bookmobile,' 1963 (Presbyterian Historical Society)



Figure 4. Christian bookstore named after the American missionary Samuel Jordan (Presbyterian Historical Society)

The Indigenisation of Christianity among the Iranians: Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Pentecostals

Analysing the missionary reports, we can imagine how the missionaries perceived their work and what they focused upon arrival in Iran. The Bible was at the centre. From the first decade of the Reza Pahlavi reign, some 40,000 Bibles were distributed in Iran every year, making Iranians acquainted with the Christian message. Missionary press and reports from the 1930s abound with stories of Iranian converts. How did the Iranian converts – very few in number before the revolution – subsequently define their identity and culture? How did they perceive Christianity as it became the religion of their choice? What was their social background? To which class or group did they belong? What was their response to missionary initiatives?

In trying to portray an Iranian Christian convert in the early 1930s, we can start with Hajji Hassan, who changed his name to Mansur Sang ('Stone the Conqueror').⁶⁰ To make Iranians familiar with the Bible, he worked with the British and Foreign Bible Society, selling the Bible for a reasonable price of 1 penny.⁶¹ Interestingly, this man who worked every day with the printed word was illiterate and could not write or read a single word from the book he was selling. However, he would open the Bible and – in the words of one missionary – 'read' it from his mind. He read or rather recited Biblical verses as Persian poetry. His work indicates

60 Miller, *My Persian Pilgrimage*, p. 64.

61 CMSA, ACC 254 Z2, 'Mansur Sang'; William M. Miller, *The Muslims Meet Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p. 113–124.

the importance of not only the spoken language but also the written words positively valorised by the Iranians. In an oral rather than literary society, words play a crucial role in constructing one's self. John Richards, a British missionary of the Church Missionary Society, called persons like Mansur Sang 'living epistles.' Richards counted several converts who immediately changed their names after conversion to manifest their new identities. Some of them were easy to understand, such as: *Masih* (the Arabic term for Christ) or *Salibi* (from *salib*, the Arabic term for cross). Others might cause some confusion, like the name *Prot* (which was a short form of 'Protestant').⁶² What is described above is typical for Reza Pahlavi's reign, when names and surnames became part of state policy.

We can assume that the Persian language helped the Iranian converts keep their cultural identity when they became Christians. Generally, in the Iranian context, the Christian message is interiorised by poetry. Bishop Dehqani-Tafti, born in a Muslim family, indicated the power of poetry in transmitting Christianity among the Iranians. Another way to make Christianity more Iranian was artistic expression. A good example is the Iranian artist and miniature painter Agha Hossein Behzad, who joined the Evangelical Church in Tehran. His widely known miniature presenting the Three Wise Kings kneeling before new-born Jesus (figure 5) was awarded by the Committee on World Literacy and

62 John R. Richards, *Open Road in Persia* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1933), p. 36.



Figure 5. Agha Hossein Behzad's Wise Men
(Presbyterian Historical Society)

Christian Literature and in 1958 distributed as a postcard in 300,000 copies.⁶³

It is obvious that the Iranian converts to Christianity started to define themselves through the lens of the Bible using poetry and miniatures – two very important elements of Iranian culture – although not exclusively so. From the 1920s, when the nationalist idea became very strong among the Iranians, national tendencies were also observed among the Iranian church members. James Linton referred to this in his letter:

The same National Consciousness which is showing itself in the political sphere is equally evident in the Church. Persian Christians are going to show themselves intolerant of outside control, and this comes out in the findings in one or two places. For example, in the desire to get a Form of Worship 'better adapted to the Persian genius,' and in their feeling that the United Church of Persia should not be subject to the jurisdiction of any existing part of the Church.⁶⁴

It is clear that such feelings were expressed mostly by educated Iranian members who were ready to accept state policy. Linton added that: 'Some of very best Persian Christians showed the most revolutionary spirit in this matter,' proving that acceptance of Christianity also influenced a Western orientation among the converts. The idea of nationalism – which was implicitly expressed by the Christian converts – led them to desire one united Iranian church

63 PHS, RG 360, William McElwee Miller Papers, 'Miller to Friends', Philadelphia, Christmas 1964.

64 LPL, Davidson 215, 'Linton to Archbishop Davidson', 27 August 1927.

without confessional borders and division along doctrinal lines. Responding to such tendencies, both the Presbyterians and Anglicans made some efforts to make the Church united. During the first half of the 20th century, we notice many initiatives undertaken by them to solve the same conceptual and practical problems. We can suggest that the Iranian Christian converts postulated the structural ‘revolution’ within the Protestant Churches operating in Iran. The necessity of a deeper collaboration between the Presbyterians in the northern part of Iran and the Anglicans operating from the south led to the organisation of inter-church initiatives. One of them was the idea of conferences as a platform of exchanging thoughts and opinions between missionaries and converts, which at the same time were a mode for strengthening their faith, creating what we can call their Christian identity.⁶⁵

The inter-church conferences were held several times in the early Pahlavi period: in 1925, 1927, and 1931, respectively. The dates are important, as the first corresponds to the formal change of the dynasty in Iran whereas the second one was organised as a response to the shah’s plans to nationalise schools in Iran. In 1927, Bishop Linton shared his opinions on the situation in Iran with the archbishop of Canterbury, touching on two quite important problems: ‘The first is the recent expression of the National Consciousness of Persia in announcing the abolition of the Capitulations, and the second is the Findings of the recent Inter-Church

65 J. Ch. Wilson, ‘The All-Persia Church Conference’, *The Muslim World* (1928), 18, 2, p. 159–166, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1928.tb00715.x>.

Conference on the subject of a United Persian Church.⁶⁶ He placed the political development of the country and national feeling among the Iranians converts on the same level. Although the idea of a united Iranian church was not realised before the revolution, after 1979 it was revitalised under the new political and social circumstances. Yet in the 1930s church leaders, mostly recruited from foreign missionaries, felt that the changes would be inevitable. Bishop Linton pragmatically declared:

[T]he present growth of national sentiment is bound sooner or later to affect the Church, and it may be serious if there should be a reaction in the Church against a foreign ministry or foreign control. The whole of the East is warning us of this danger. Also, the growth of the Church through the converts from Islam is necessitating an indigenous ministry. And further, it is at least possible that only through an indigenous ministry we hope to arrive at a United Church.⁶⁷

The pressures on the missionaries from the ‘ethnic’ Iranian church were intensified during certain political moments, including the implementation of Pahlavi’s reforms and the policy of oil nationalisation during the short but important premiership of Mohammad Mosaddegh. This primarily affected the Anglican Church in Iran, which compared to the Presbyterians comprised more converts from Islam. That is why the Anglican archives dive deeper inside

66 LPL, Davidson 215, ‘Linton to Archbishop of Canterbury’, 27 August 1927.

67 LPL, Lang 63 (1932–1942 ‘Reunion: Persia’), James H. Linton, ‘A Suggestion towards removing difficulties in the path of progress of a United Church of Persia’, 22 July 1931.

into the successes and failures in granting the Church union. Bishop Thompson, who succeeded Linton, tried to keep the idea alive; however, many obstacles concerning ordination and church government arose at that time. He perceived a desire for unity also as the result of the improvement of infrastructure and communication systems in modernising Iran. He saw the growth and development of Tehran, the capital of the country, in psychological terms, insisting that Anglicans open and run a church in that city.⁶⁸ Such a demand was contrary to the agreement between Anglicans and Presbyterians on sharing the country, dividing it into zones of influence. In the 1950s, it became clear that the agreement was no longer kept. Thomson suggested that:

It is unrealistic to think and talk in terms of twenty or thirty years ago – or even of five years ago. The greatly improved means of communication and the drift of population from every centre to the capital, Teheran, makes the division of ‘North’ and ‘South’ out of date. It is no longer possible to think of the Episcopal and Evangelical churches as occupying different areas. We are all inescapably thrown together so that geographical boundaries no longer divide us. Apart from this the rise of Nationalism has developed the sense of unity amongst the Christian Iranians themselves so that the fact of our disunion has become a matter of embarrassment for them and for us all.⁶⁹

Iranian policy, which led to an open conflict with Great Britain after the nationalisation of the oil sector in

68 LPL, Lang 63 (1932–1942 ‘Reunion: Persia’), ff. 164–169, ‘Memorandum on the Union of the Church in Iran – April 1937 by the Bishop of Iran’.

69 LPL, Bell 219 (1923–1957 ‘Church Unity’), ff. 236–239, ‘Memorandum on Church Union in Iran for the consolidation of the C.C.I.’, March 1955.

1951–1953, had a tremendous impact on British citizens, including missionaries living in Iran at that time. Among the Anglican authorities, concerns about the future leadership of the church arose. Having been in close consultations with the archbishop of Canterbury, Bishop Thomson wondered if the time had come to appoint the first Iranian bishop. That happened almost ten years later, in 1961, when Hassan Dehqani-Tafti was given a post. In the 1950s, however, there was opposition to electing a native bishop.⁷⁰

The middle of the 20th century is important for understanding the tendency to re-define the Protestant presence in Iran. The idea of the Church union – requested by the converts – became less attractive in a new political reality and in light of the social changes that followed the collapse of Mosaddegh’s government. Instead of the Church union, inter-church initiatives like the Committee of Inter-Church Literature were prioritised. The activity of new Protestant Churches, mostly Pentecostals, who extensively worked in Iran caused some worries among the ‘traditional’ Protestants. The Anglicans and Presbyterians put some effort into keeping their ecclesiastical identity. Bishop Thompson referred to this:

We are unfortunately finding that Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other sects of the extreme Pentecostal type are becoming much more in evidence out here. I look back to the happy days when we were largely free from such complications, but the tares are being sown today and we cannot hope to uproot them; but it does emphasise

70 LPL, Fisher 87, ff. 3–5, ‘Thompson to Archbishop of Canterbury’, 14 August 1951.

the importance of our following up our own members wherever they are otherwise they drift off into such sects.⁷¹

In fact, the Anglican Church gave room for greater representation of Iranians in Church structures. In 1961, the first Iranian bishop was appointed. Dehqani-Tafti should be remembered not only as a churchman, but also as an Iranian thinker who proposed a coherent vision of Iranian Christian identity. He wrote an article titled: 'The Art of Being a Christian Minority.' The text was published in 1965 in Iran's Diocesan Association Publication and comprised Dehqani-Tafti's understanding of Christianity in Iran. He wrote:

Practically the whole membership of the Episcopal Church of Iran is made up of ex-Muslims, ex-Jews, and ex-Zoroastrians. In the team of our clergy at the moment we have a priest from each of the above religions. The Episcopal Church of Iran may be very small as far as numbers are concerned, but it has a unique position in the Christian world of the Middle East and therefore a unique role to play.⁷²

Dehqani-Tafti laid the ground for defining a new Christian identity in Iran. What is more, his idea was a counterproposal to Ali Shariati's understanding of the Iranian self. An influential thinker, Ali Shariati linked the so-called Iran-ness with Shi'ism; in fact, he re-conceptualised Islam by emphasising its revolutionary capability. Dehqani-Tafti

71 LPL, Fisher 174, ff. 211–213, 'Thompson to Archbishop of Canterbury', 16 October 1956.

72 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, 'The Art of Being a Christian Minority', in *Hassan Dehqani-Tafti 1920–2008*, compiled by Margaret Dehqani-Tafti (Basingstoke: Sohrab Books, 2008), p. 120.

opposed such simplifications and expressed his disapproval of categorising Christians as a foreign entity in Iranian society. For him, the Persian language used by Christians was powerful evidence of their integration with Iranian culture. Moreover, he was convinced that Iranian Christians were in an even better position than Muslims using Arabic in their prayers. He says:

Fortunately, we have the Bible and the Prayer Book in Persian which is more than our Muslim brethren have! Our aim should be to keep abreast with the changes in the language, and always resist wrong conservatism which will lead to stagnation and clannishness.⁷³

The bishop insisted on maintaining the Iranian habits among the converts as *nouruz* or *sizdebedar* and on keeping the Persian language as a source of identity within the new category of ‘Persian-speaking Christians.’ To whom, then, does the category of ‘Persian-speaking Christians’ refer? First of all, it refers to the Iranians, both ex-Muslims and ex-Zoroastrians, and then to all Iranian citizens using the Persian language regardless of their ethnic origin.

By offering a broad platform for the representatives of all of Iran’s ethnic and religious groups, the Anglicans likely saw themselves as those who united Iran’s divided society. Truly, there were no contradictions between Christianity and Iranian culture. What is more, they believed that Christianity helped to preserve their culture. Dehqani-Tafti insisted on a Christianity that should transform the person, not his or her culture. He insisted on a Christianity that does

73 Dehqani-Tafti, ‘The Art of Being a Christian Minority’, p. 125

not have to have a de-nationalising and de-personalising effect on the convert. It seems that during his tenure, the Anglican Church achieved such a goal. But in the second half of the 20th century, the Protestant churches competed more with each other. The Pentecostals entered such a religious scene.

The Pentecostals mentioned in the letter of Anglican Bishop Thompson in 1956 were mostly Assyrians. At the time, when some of the Anglicans expressed their concerns about the haemorrhaging of church members to other Protestant communities, Tooma Nasir, an Assyrian responsible for the Pentecostal churches in Iran, informed the head of the World Missions of the Assemblies of God in the US about his eleven-month evangelisation campaign and his visits to Tehran, Hamadan, Abadan, Ahwaz, Kermanshah, and Masjed-e Soleiman.⁷⁴ Although the work was limited to Assyrians and Armenians, the progress and dynamics were visible and treated with suspicion. Soon, the Pentecostal Church in Tehran was constituted and starting campaigns to reach Muslims.

The converts made missionary zeal alive, while their biographies were circulated in the press and reports, undermining the strict confessional borders and giving evidence of Church unity. At the end of this section we should recall Mehdi Dibaj, the ideal Iranian Christian convert, who was murdered after the revolution.

He was born in Isfahan to religious family. His grandfather was a religious leader, and Mehdi also intended to

74 AG, WM, folder: Iran (-1969), 'Tooma Nesser (Nasir) to Mrs. George Carmichael', Teheran, 17 December 1955.

become a mullah. At the age of twelve, he went on a pilgrimage to Mashhad, where he understood that Islam had no meaning for him.⁷⁵ He joined the Evangelical Church and worked as the manager of a Christian bookshop in Tehran for five years. The Evangelical Church sent him to India for his theological studies. He spent two years at the Union Biblical Seminary in Yavatmal (Maharashtra, India) to obtain his degree in theology. Afterwards, he went to study at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut under the supervision of Kenneth Cragg. He spent a few months at L'Abri Fellowship in Switzerland. His Christian career accelerated in the 1960s. He spent two years visiting churches all over Iran and was co-pastor in the Oil Fields. Mehdi Dibaj prepared tapes for Christian broadcasts on the radio stations of Addis Ababa to Persian speaking listeners. In the period before the revolution, he taught English at a technical school in Babol.⁷⁶

The main problem in researching Iranian Christian converts lies in the lack of self-representation of the converts in the archives, which makes the study of the converts' narratives practically impossible. The representation of the converts was typical of the early Pahlavi period, but that changed later, in the 1940s, when the Christian press was circulated in Iran in the Persian language, and the first converts' testimonies written by them appeared. A good example was the testimony of Mehdi Dibaj, which circulated among the missionaries from different agencies. It is necessary to

75 LOM, Box 10, Correspondence 1968–1973, *God speaks to-day. The Personal Testimony of Mr. Mahdi Dibaj from Iran.*

76 LOM, Box 10, Correspondence 1968–1973, 'Gardiner to Jensen', 6 November 1971.

compare the quantity and quality of conversions in two periods of the modern Iranian history, that before and that after the Islamic revolution of 1979. Nevertheless, before the revolution in the 1960s we observe a common turn towards new phenomena in the Iranian Church led by the Iranian converts among the Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Pentecostals. It not baseless to say that the church structures were ‘converted’ by the Iranian converts.

1.4. On the Eve of Revolution: The Protestant Communities in Iran in the 1970s

James Buchan opens his book *Days of God: The Revolution in Iran and Its Consequences* with the suggestion that ‘the Revolution cannot be understood unless the Pahlavis are understood.’⁷⁷ He insists that one studies the Pahlavi dynasty in order to understand the process of the differentiation of the Iranian society and its split into two parts, the first orientated at secular modern society and the other focused on traditional and religious values. Regarding his opinion on Christianity in Iran, it is difficult to understand the attitudes towards the Protestant churches after the revolution unless their position is understood in the Pahlavi period. Processes and changes of the nature and character of Christianity in Iran – briefly mentioned above – took place in the 1970s. This time is crucial to the history of Protestantism in Iran. We can assume that this cumulated in historical developments

77 James Buchan, *Days of God. The Revolution in Iran and its Consequences* (London: John Murray, 2013), p. 3.

and spread ideas to the Iranians with the assistance of new technologies. This was also the period when the shah's authority grew with the assistance of a revival of pre-Islamic Iranian pride and, on the other hand, growing religious Shi'a sentiments and finally the collapse of the monarchy. Concerning the Protestant communities, we should take into account technologies of mass communication and the diversity of church members, consisting of missionaries, foreigners, expatriates working in Iran, and Iranians of various ethnic and religious backgrounds.

The period of 1971–1979 can be treated as a summarised history of Protestantism in Iran before the revolution with its main features: a focus on the Bible, the development of charitable work, the building up of an Iranian church, and the pursuit of relations with the shah.

Let's start from the beginning, from the celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the Iranian monarchy, an event that was not strictly connected to religion, but in fact had religious consequences, atomising Iranian society.

The Year of the Cyrus the Great

The churches in Iran took part in ceremonies dedicated to the monarch. On 9 October 1971, an ecumenical Christian service conducted by the leading bishops from various churches, such as: Archbishop Youhannan Semaan Issayi from the Chaldean Catholic Church, archbishop Artak Manukian from the Apostolic Armenian Church, and Bishop Dehqani-Tafti from the Episcopal Church was held in Tehran. The celebration, which gathered Roman Catholics as well as Orthodox, Armenian, Assyrian, Evangelical, and

Episcopal Christians, was organised in the Chaldean cathedral in Tehran.⁷⁸ During the service, Dehqani-Tafti delivered a sermon on Cyrus the Great in which he pointed out that the Persian king was anointed, portraying him as an example for all rulers.⁷⁹ Despite the events aimed at gathering the representatives of different churches, some of them organised days of prayer for the king and nation on a smaller scale. Such a service was held in the Pentecostal church in Tehran, strategically located next to the University of Tehran (figure 6).

On the day of dedication of the new Pentecostal evangelistic centre in 1971, which also became an opportunity to commemorate the glorious Iranian past and bless Iran's glorious king, more than 500 people attended the church service. Among them were Armenian, Assyrian, Presbyterian, and Anglican ministers as well as a Roman Catholic priest. The dedicatory message was preached by Morris Plotts, who served at the Assemblies of God Division of Foreign Missions.⁸⁰ Also in smaller cities, Christian services devoted to 'Persia's 2,500-year anniversary' were conducted. In Gorgan, for example, the Pentecostals organised a special service in which the king's representative and a governor of the province took part.⁸¹ For Protestants, the 'Year of Cyrus' gave an opportunity to preach the Christian message based

78 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design of My World. A Pilgrim in Exile* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2000), p. 175.

79 *Episcopal Church News* (November 1971), 16, p. 1.

80 Morris Plotts, 'In the year of King Cyrus 2500', *Good News Crusades* (July–August 1972), p. 2–7.

81 AG, WM, folder: Iran (1970–1989), 'The Blisses Circular', November 1972.



Figure 6. The central Pentecostal church and evangelistic centre in Tehran (Assemblies of God World Missions)

on the Biblical fragments where the Persian kings are explicitly mentioned. Once more in history, Protestantism was linked with the Persian monarchy, and the point of contact became the Bible, not unlike in the time of Henry Martyn.

The ceremonies inevitably led the Church leader to personal contacts with the governors, ministers, and the shah himself. Bishop Dehqani-Tafti was by nomination of the Archbishop of Canterbury the official representative of the Anglican Communion at the celebrations organised by the shah in Shiraz and Tehran. He attended ceremonies at Pasargadae and Persepolis. Years later, he recalled the meeting with the shah in his autobiography:

We were invited to be seated and I found my chair was next to the Shah's. I responded to his words in Persian. Astonished, he asked if I was Iranian. I said: 'Yes. I am a current Bishop of the Diocese of Iran whose institutions in Isfahan Your Majesty visited at the time of Queen Elizabeth's visit.' After that, the exchange ceased. It was as if he was disappointed to find that I was Iranian.⁸²

Recalling the conversation with the shah, he mentioned that he informed His Majesty about the training farm for the blind in Isfahan⁸³ and the work which was under the patronage of the shah's sister, Princess Ashraf. However, the bishop's concluding remarks give the impression that the shah was rather uninterested in the internal problems and achievements of the Christian churches inside Iran. It seems that the events gathering the Church leaders were organised

⁸² Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design*, p. 175.

⁸³ *Iran Diocesan News* (April 1972), p. 2.

instead to promote the idealistic vision of the shah's prosperous and tolerant state rather than to recognise and respect the religious groups in Iran. Nevertheless, the work conducted by the foreign missionaries was secured, especially those under American leadership. Before the 'Year of Cyrus,' Cady Allen, a well-respected American missionary, wrote the paper 'The American Mission and Its Relation to the Iranian Government,' which drew a picture of mutually cordial relations between American missionaries and Iranian state representatives throughout history. The text, which was to be published in *Vox Persica*, was read by the Iranian ambassador in Washington, Dr. Amir-Aslan Afshar, who praised it in a letter sent to Allen.⁸⁴ Taylor Gurney, who had been a faculty member at the Alborz College before he started his career in diplomacy working at the American embassy in Tehran and later as an advisor to the Iranian embassy in Washington, confirmed the ambassador's interest in the text⁸⁵ and indirectly made it clear that especially during the reign of Mohammad Reza the American missionaries hardly experienced trouble from the Iranian government.

The celebration of the year of Cyrus the Great seemed to be very important for the Protestant churches inside Iran and were of no less importance for Protestant missionary agencies planning to work in the country. This was above all because the Bible and Biblical events were at the centre of public attentions, but also because the church went public by organising and holding special services – with the

84 PHS, RG 360, William McElwee Miller Papers, 'Afshar to Allen', 29 June 1970.

85 PHS, RG 360, William McElwee Miller Papers, 'Gurney to Allen', 1 June 1970.

attendance of local authorities – devoted to the shah and the country. In the meantime, some local Protestant communities began the special prayers for the shah, which had been publicly announced. Contrary to the Protestant or generally Christian churches' contributions to commemorating the 2,500 years of the Iranian monarchy, some Iranian Muslim clerics, including the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, criticised the shah's initiatives. The criticism gradually intensified in the following years. However, it is puzzling how the Church prayers for the shah influenced attitudes toward the Protestants in that time of revolution, which were interpreted after the revolution by the ayatollahs marginalised by the shah.

Technology in the Service of the Church

Due to political changes such as modernisation and economic development, at the beginning of the 1970s Iran became an attractive field for missionaries thinking about work among the Persian-speaking people in the country or in bordering states, especially in Afghanistan. In Iran, the noticeable progress of missionary work was manifest in the new churches opened across the country. A good example was a Pentecostal church in the city of Gorgan, located relatively close to the Iranian-Soviet border. Under the leadership of pastor Haik Hovsepian Mehr, the Gorgan Pentecostal community was exceptional (figure 7). First, this was because it held a number of church services to which the shah was invited during the 1970s. In 1975, Mark Bliss wrote about this event: 'Again this year Pastor Haik had many of the officials present for the special church service

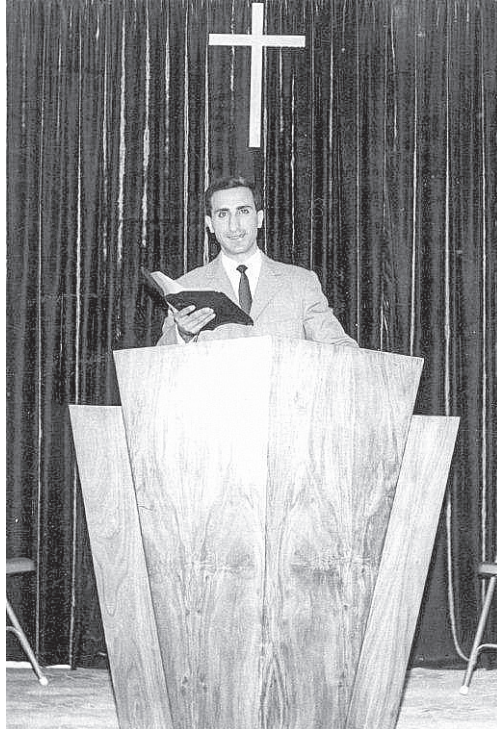


Figure 7. Haik Hovsepian Mehr
(Assemblies of God World Missions)

in honour of the King. The service was taped and broadcast over Radio Gorgan. This is the second time on the air this year.⁸⁶ At the same time, Bliss kept his readers aware of the acts of vandalism from the group of ‘fanatical Muslims’ in the city. There is a correlation between the Christian prayers for the shah and the growing protests against the monarchy spreading among the Muslim communities, especially in the regions far from Tehran, which tended to be rural rather than urban and more conservative.

Haik Hovsepian-Mehr should be remembered not only for his initiatives in Gorgan, but also as a representative of a new generation of church leaders in Iran. An Iranian of Armenian origin, he was a proponent of the new missionary strategy addressed to Iranians, which brought together Persian poetry, music, and new technology. Technology should be emphasised in the modern history of the church, as Mark Bliss pointed out when informing about the broadcasts of the church services from the city of Gorgan.

Before the revolution, the new ways of spreading the Gospel – such as radio broadcasting, correspondence Biblical courses, and television advertising of church events – became common among Protestants. In his 1972 circular letter, James Neely noted that the Pentecostal Church was able ‘to buy time on Iran’s largest television station in order to advertise the meeting.’⁸⁷ He was convinced that technology helped them to make their ministry ‘fuller’ and more

86 AG, WM, folder: Iran (1970–1989), ‘The Blisses Circular’, April 1975.

87 AG, WM, folder: Neely, James (Eloise) (–1999), ‘Neelys to Friends’, April 1972.

effective. He was certainly right: as evidence, we can recall the statistics indicating the growth of the Church (table 2).

Table 2. Growth and development of the Pentecostal Church in Iran (1963–1972)

	1963	1967	1968	1972
National workers	13	16	16	15
Organised churches	9	11	11	16
Preaching points	5	2	2	–
Active adult members	704	510	547	688
Other believers	815	462	546	1,013
Baptised in the Holy Spirit	548	291	321	355
Sunday school enrolment	349	297	292	–
Bible schools	–	1	1	–
Bible school enrolment	–	10	8	–

Source: AG, WM, folders: Iran (–1969), Iran (1970–1989).

In the middle of the 1970s, Iranian Pentecostals also launched the so-called cassette tape ministry. Christian worship, prayers, and sermons were taped and distributed among the Iranians. In a circular missionary letter of Mark Bliss dated on March 1976, we can find an interesting illustration of that that kind of Christian ministry:

Since receiving our speed-the-light high-speed cassette copier about 600 cassettes have been distributed. We recorded Bro. Haik singing on the first cassette with spiritual words and 1/2 hour of Persian scriptures which he had put to music. He accompanies himself on the guitar, organ, and accordion.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ AG, WM, folder: Iran (1970–1989), ‘The Blisses Circular’, March 1976.

One more time we face Haik Hovsepian Mehr and his incredibly simple but efficient way of spreading the Christian message: personal contact with a preacher and the Church attendance just through a cassette. A year later, Bliss wrote in another circular that around 2,000 cassettes with music and 18 different sermons in the Persian language were distributed. Also at around that time, Bible correspondence courses were thriving and the Christian radio programme were being broadcasted. In general, by making Iranians informed about Christianity the Christian radio stations played a similar role as today's Christian satellite channels.

These Persian radio programmes were first broadcast from abroad. With the support of the Council of Middle Eastern Protestant Churches, the Radio Voice of the Gospel, operating from Ethiopia, launched programmes in Persian, airing them from 1964 until 1977. At the Presbyterian centre in Tehran, a radio was inaugurated in 1962 and in 1964 half-hour programmes started.⁸⁹ Voice of Gospel (*Şedā-ye Enjil*) soon became an institution offering a deeper contact with listeners through the exchange of mail and by sending Christmas cards. The correspondence was used for preparing statistics, prognosis, and developing programmes. The annual report of the radio programmes from 1975 titled: *Gozāreš-e Radio-ye Şedā-ye Enjil. Bağš-e Nāme-negāri dar sāl-e 1975 millādi* presented some numbers. That year, the radio editors received 920 letters in the Persian language, most of which were sent from Iran but also from

⁸⁹ Hansjoerg Biener, 'The Arrival of Radio Farda: International Broadcasting to Iran at a Crossroads', *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (2003), 7, 1, p. 15.

neighbouring countries. Of them, 810 were written by faithful listeners and the rest by new ones.⁹⁰ The reports allow us to imagine how Christian radio was perceived and how it really worked. The following years brought some problems for the staff of Voice of the Gospel. The year 1977 was rather difficult for them, resulting from internal problems in Ethiopia and some financial difficulties. It was, in fact, the last year of its activity.

Radio created a kind of community of listeners, activating them by organising meetings and conferences. In spite of some problems, in 1977 the annual conference was organised on 11 July with 50 non-Christian participants in attendance. This was possible thanks to the common effort of many Protestant churches and institutions. Among them were: the Council of the Evangelical Church of Iran, the Evangelical Church of Tehran on Qavam-Sultaneh Avenue, the Evangelical Church of Tehran on Pahlavi Ave., the Armenian Evangelical Church (St. John's), the Assyrian Evangelical Church (St. Thomas'), the Episcopal Church of Tehran (St. Paul's), the American Community Church of Tehran, the German Lutheran Church of Tehran, the French Protestant Church of Tehran, the Ahwaz Church, and the Action Chrétienne en Orient.⁹¹ Radio and, more generally, technology symbolised the changes occurring among the Protestant communities in Iran, indicating new forms of activity as well as new waves of cooperation. The Protestant

90 PHS, RG 189, Miscellaneous Items (1920s.–1970s.), 'Gozāreš-e Radio-ye Šedā-ye Enjil. Bağš-e Nāme-negāri dar sāl-e 1975 millādī'.

91 PHS, RG 189, Miscellaneous Items (1920s.–1970s.), Allahyar Mirzai, 'The Radio Voice of the Gospel conference of 1977 at the garden of evangelism at Tehran'.

communities listed above also gave an idea of how different the Protestant communities in Iran were.

Foreigners, Strangers and Native Church Members

In the 1970s, Iran abounded with oil and maintained friendly relations with the US, thus becoming an attractive place for foreign investors. In 1977, some 35,000 Americans worked in the country (all but 2,000 were employed in private American companies). The number rose to 50,000 at the beginning of 1979. The increasing number of foreigners in Iran mostly from the English-speaking countries was a challenge to the Protestant churches, inducing them to launch special English-speaking services for expatriates. All the main Protestant churches in Iran – Anglican, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal – were supported by English-speaking missionaries working with them, but from the beginning of the 1970s American and British missionaries coming to Iran decided to set up an English-speaking ministry.

Regarding the Pentecostal Church, some information conveyed by James Neely, an American missionary, clarifies the internal situation in Iran and the church's needs:

We started an international church in the latter half of the 70s as the Shah was bringing in many internationals to advance the technology and economy into 20th century levels. At its peak, which quickly dwindled during the Islamic revolution, it had reached approximately 175 on a Friday morning, which was the day of worship in Iran.⁹²

92 From the private correspondence with James Neely, 19 June 2016 [in author's archive].

James Neely and his wife started their work at the beginning of the 1970s (figure 8). Shortly after, they took responsibility for ministry among the English-speaking community. In his circular letter from April 1977, Neely gives more details about the church members and their background:

People from all corners of the world are flocking to the countries of the Middle East, attempting to secure their share of 'petro-dollars.' This is true of Iran as it is of its surrounding neighbours who happen to have an abundance of 'black gold.' Along with the problems that are created by such a tremendous influx of people from such varied backgrounds, there are opportunities for the spread of the Gospel. Every week we have people from the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Canada, and of course the United States attending our services for the English-speaking community.⁹³

The church was growing as an international community with a cosmopolitan culture, which also reflects tendencies in the part of Iranian society that was oriented to the West. The Pentecostal Church is also a good example of internal divisions based on the ethnic lines.

Regarding the Anglican Church before the revolution, around half of regularly attending members were American and British citizens, who were under the pastoral care of Paul Hunt, who had arrived to Iran in 1974. The same situation was observed in the Evangelical Church. According to David G. Cashin, in total about 170 foreign missionaries were

93 AG, WM, folder: Neely, James (Eloise) (-1999), 'Neely to Friends', April 1977.

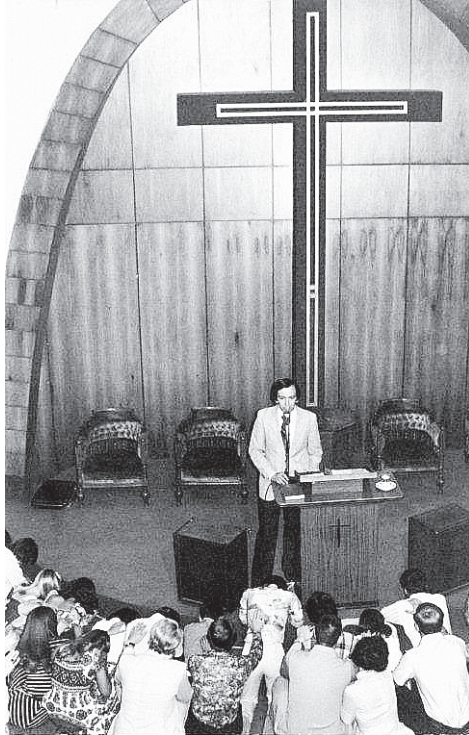


Figure 8. James Neely in the Central Pentecostal Church in Tehran (Assemblies of God World Missions)

involved in work in Iran before the revolution.⁹⁴ Among them, he counted 124 Americans. Regarding the relatively small Protestant communities, the numbers are impressive.

Researchers who study the political and social changes that occurred in Iran in the 20th century must analyse the process of westernisation (and, more specifically, Americanisation in the 1970s) of Iranian society and the polarisation of Iran culture between a religious, Shi'a, and popular dimension and the official, monarchical, and mostly secular one. The following questions arise: Who were the Iranian Protestants? Which 'culture' did they belong to? Which social or ethnic groups did they represent? What made Protestantism attractive to them? How did they respond to official state policy glorifying the Iranian monarch? How did they relate to both Muslims and Christians living in Iran? Some of the answers given in the chapter depict the Protestant churches as an active segment of Iranian society before the revolution. Despite their small numbers, the Iranian Christian converts constituted a cosmopolitan community of educated and mostly urban citizens of Iran. In conclusion, we should also underline the variety of Protestant communities and their different narratives intermingling each other: missionary and convert, Iranian and foreign, exclusive and inclusive. However, one of the most important phenomena of the pre-revolutionary period was the appearance and growth of an indigenous Iranian

94 David G. Cashin, 'The Comparative status of Christianity and Islam in Iran', in Don M. McCurry (ed.), *The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium* (Monrovia 1979), p. 293.

Protestant church immersed in the Iranian culture whose voice became audible, distinguishable, and inspiring.

In a letter written at the beginning of 1979, Richard Gardiner, a medical missionary, wrote about his little ‘discovery’: despite the political situation, the Christian broadcast of the half hour programme in Persian was heard again. What surprised him was the voice of an Iranian convert to Christianity with whom he had been working some years before. ‘Once again,’ he wrote, ‘the beautifully clear voice of our former hospital evangelist Mehdi Dibaj spoke out a lovely Gospel message easy to understand.’⁹⁵ It was the time, however, when another voice was heard by the Iranians via recorded cassettes and radio stations: the voice appealing for revolution; the voice of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

95 LOM, Box 6, Correspondence 1978–1979, ‘Gardiner to Pulus’, 17 January 1979.

2

An Unpredictable Revolution: Revolutionary Fever and the Protestant Churches

In the 1960s, the last shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, wrote a book that was something of a memoir titled: *My Answer to History*.¹ His answer to history was affected by his concept of the future that was to come, a future that would be as glorious as the Iranian past. The shah's idea of prosperity was based on the restoration of the glorious past, as seen in the splendid celebration of 2,500 years of the Persian monarchy in 1971. The admiration of the pre-Islamic past and replacement of the Islamic calendar with an 'imperial' one in 1976 led him to open conflict with the Iranian Shi'a clerics, who strongly rejected both the shah's reforms and his vision of history. They took a step further, however. The Shi'a thinkers re-interpreted their own Islamic Shi'a tradition in light of the Third World revolutions. Thus the project of Iranian secular modernisation implemented by the shah was broken or, rather, replaced by religious modernity, a phenomenon inseparable from the Iranian Revolution.

The reaction of the traditional sectors of society to the secular culture and secular modernity of the 20th century was a return to religion understood as a reservoir of pure

1 Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Pāsok be tārik* (Entešārāt-e Šahrāb, 1371).

Iranian culture along with its progressive and mobilising potential. The Iranian scholar Hamid Dabashi elaborates the idea of Shi'ism as a religion of protest,² arguing that it should be interpreted on two levels: individual and collective. We can assume that the Iranian Shi'a tradition cumulated not only religious but also cultural codes influencing the Iranian concept of identity, which, in fact, could be reproduced without Shi'a elements in other religious traditions, as in the case of Iranian Christianity's becoming more revolutionary in practice and style at the time of revolution.

In the 20th century, Iran was seen as the most westernised country in the Middle East, including by part of the international Protestant community, which described it as the best place to undertake missionary work. Assuming that all of intellectual history of Iran was determined by constant discussions with the West, we should accept that Iranian Christians were split between the desire to define or preserve their own culture and the necessity to discuss, negotiate, or adapt the Western Christian model of church structure and leadership. We see, however, that the revolution released the social potential of protest as, on the one hand, a way to revert to religious identification and, on the other, to introduce a new concept of the categorisation of the minority and the majority in political and cultural contexts.

This chapter focuses on the reactions and expectations of Protestant Christians during the revolution, mostly covering the period from 1978 to 1981. It describes Church and state relations; the internationalisation of the situation of

2 Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism. A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, Mass.–London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

the Church in Iran, which faced obstacles and persecutions; and, finally, the process of memorising and remembering the revolutionary events by the Church leaders.

2.1. Redefining and Rediscovering History

After his arrival in Iran on 1 February 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini announced his own vision of history during his speech delivered in the *Behešt-e Zahrā* cemetery.³ It contradicted the shah's concept of the Iranian past. Iran's glorious history, as Khomeini persuaded his audience, was rooted not in the ancient monarchy but in Islamic events, such as the death of the third Shi'a Imam Husain, commemorated every year by pious Shi'a Muslims.

During his visit to Iran a year earlier, Michel Foucault tried to compare the political aspects of the Shi'a rituals he observed among the Iranians to the Christian rite of penitence, saying:

On December 2 [1978], the Muharram celebrations will begin. The death of Imam Hussein will be celebrated. It is the great ritual of penitence. But the feeling of sinfulness that could remind us of Christianity is indissolubly linked to the exaltation of martyrdom for a just cause. It is a time when the crowds are ready to advance toward death in the intoxication of sacrifice.⁴

3 'Soḡanrāni-ye tāriḡi-ye Emām dar Behešt-e Zahrā', in *Şakife-ye Emām*, vol. 6: *Majmu'e-ye âḡâr-e Emâm Komeyni* (Tehrān: Mo'assese-ye tanzīm-o naşr-e âḡâr-e emām-e Komeyni, 1389), p. 10–19.

4 Quotation from: Janet Afary, Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago

This quote appeared in the article ‘The Revolt in Iran Spreads on Cassette Tapes.’⁵

When reading this quote, we should take into consideration at least two aspects: the concept of martyrdom and sacrifice rooted in sacred history or, rather, a functional and emotional understanding of history and the dissemination of cassette tapes as an example of revolutionary communication strategy.

These two elements synthesised the Iranian revolutionary mix of religious values with technology and tradition with modernity, interweaving history with the present time. Foucault pointed out the Muharram ritual as a starting point of the Iranian Revolution. From the outset of 1978, the international public was concerned about the internal situation in Iran and its possible external consequences. Like probably many other representatives of states maintaining foreign relations with Iran, British diplomats and politicians started to collect materials and analyses related to the Ayatollah Khomeini’s speeches and public announcements,⁶ realising his growing position among the Iranians. The religious categories used by Khomeini to describe the political situation were symptomatic of the change that was to come. Khomeini had perceived himself as the martyred Husain,

and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 49, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226007878.001.0001>.

5 Article originally published as: ‘La rivolta dell’Iran corre sui nostril delli minicassette’, *Corriere della serra* (26 novembre 1978), p. 1–2.

6 TNA, FCO 8/3208, ‘The message of the great leader, ayatollah emem Khomeini to the noble and brave nation on the occasion of the formation of a military government’, 7 November 1978.

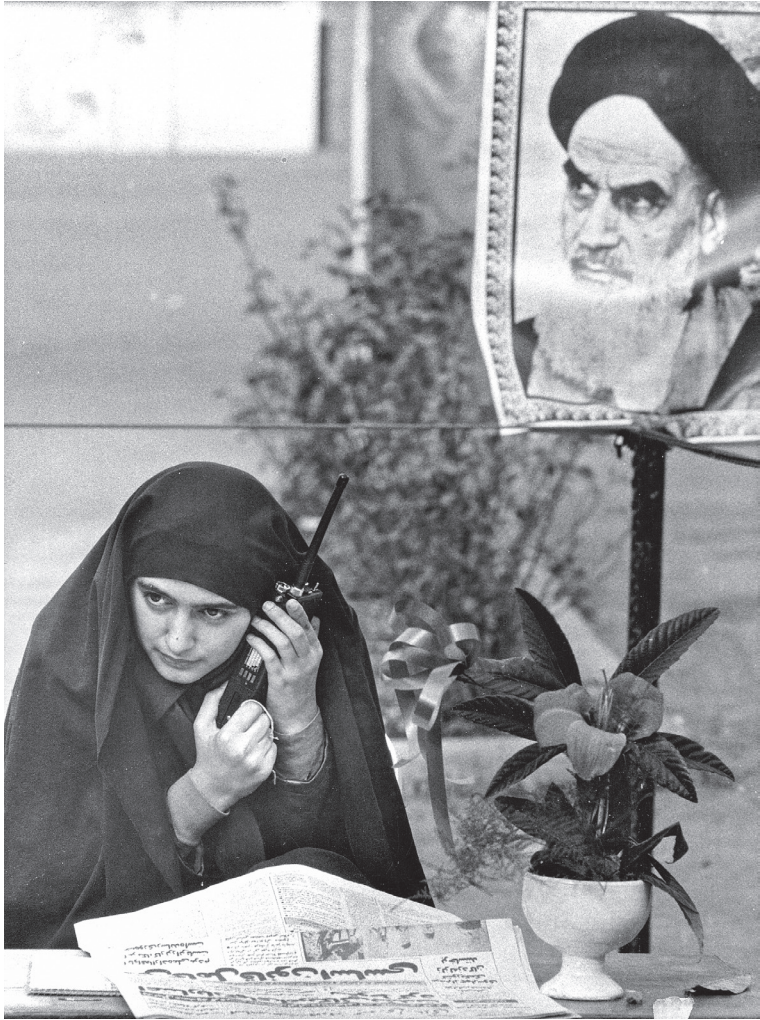


Figure 9. Listening to Khomeini's voice (Danmission Photo Archive)

and the shah was compared to the caliph Yazid, a murderer.⁷ In this way, the commemoration of the death of the third Shi'a imam became a political manifestation. He revised history and re-interpreted the contemporary situation in light of the Shi'a tradition of martyrdom and repentance. Thus, the month *muḥarram* and the *'āšurā* commemorations celebrated in December 1978 shaped the history of the Iranian Islamic awakening leading to the revolution. The question we must answer is whether Protestant Christians in Iran recognised this as a moment of great social and political change.

Concerning Protestantism in Iran, we have identified the two contradictory narratives: one that was conceived by the foreign missionaries and the other that was developed by the Iranian Protestants themselves. The missionary reports are interesting in the way they gathered information about the Iranian Revolution occurring in different parts of the country, from the capital to the small cities of Kurdistan. These reports depicted the revolution in its chaotic and contradictory actions undertaken not only by the followers of the Ayatollah Khomeini but also by Marxists, Sunnis, Kurds, and other ethnic and social groups. They are interesting because of their emotional and fervent contents showing the missionaries as bystanders and observers, participants and judges of the revolutionary events. As it was portrayed, the revolution was unpredictable but inevitable, inexplicable but pervasive.

In September 1978, David Thomas, a pastor of the Central Pentecostal Church in Tehran, expressed his hopes

7 TNA, FCO 8/3208, 'Grier to Gorham'.

for the planned evangelisation campaign, which was supposed to be held during the upcoming Iranian New Year on 21 March 1979.⁸ The Iranian Pentecostals, like other members of the Protestant communities, lived seemingly normal Christian lives in the shadow of strikes and protests, holding events, meetings, and Bible study courses. They responded to the growing unrest in the country by intensifying missionary efforts. In the meantime, however, the letters sent by the missionaries posed the questions about the future of the country and expressed some concerns about the uncertain present, containing well informed interpretations of the events. In October 1978, James Neely sent a letter to the missionary department of the Assemblies of God, informing about the postal strike and the terrible situation in Iran:

The reason for the unrest seems to stem from deep social and political problems which have not been solved. No one knows what the final outcome will be. However, all seem to agree that it will be a number of months before one will be able to clearly tell what change will take place and how extensive it will be.⁹

The consequences of social protest were hard to predict, and the exact moment when the revolution broke out was hardly noticeable.

The Anglican Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti was convinced that the *‘āšurā* day marked a turning point of social unrest, transforming into revolution. How did the

8 AG, WM, folder: Iran (1970–1989), ‘Thomas to Greenaway’, 21 September 1978.

9 AG, WM, folder: Neely, James (Eloise) (–1999), ‘Neely to Greenaway’, 17 October 1978.

Protestants answer the revolutionary call? Again, we should notice that the assessment of Pahlavi's reign by the Iranian converts, members of the Protestant Churches, and missionaries varied. At the beginning of 1979, the situation in Iran got worse, and thus incidents and clashes with the police increased. However, missionaries supposed that their presence in Iran was secure. The main problem for them was communication and shortages of goods and money, which in the long run had a disastrous effect on the upkeep of hospitals. Because of the evacuation of the foreign personnel working in the oil industry in Iran, which constituted a huge number of the Protestant church members in 1970s, supporting missionary work and the churches became very challenging. Richard Gardiner, who worked in the hospital financed by the Lutheran Orient Mission Organisation based in the United States, estimated in January 1979 that some 41,000 Americans had left Iran during the past three months. The transfer of money from abroad was complicated, as the Tehran Bank was open just three times a week.¹⁰ In the first phase of the revolution, insufficient funds undermined the position of the Church, thus limiting its activity. However, church leaders were still not threatened by the events.

In a letter dated 15 February 1979, one day before the shah's escape from Iran, James Neely argued that:

There have undeniably been a lot of people killed in demonstrations that have gone on throughout the country. To this point, I know of only

10 LOM, Box 6, Correspondence 1971–1979, 'Gardiner to Puls (Dr and Inez)', 17 January 1979.

one confirmed death of a foreigner as a direct result of the unrest. There have been and continues to be much harassment, threats, and pressure in general, with some verified incidents of physical abuse. But all this must be kept in focus with the total picture. There are still many thousands of foreigners here in Iran.¹¹

Neely worked in Tehran, where the community of expatriates was the largest, and the Pentecostal Church had the most members. The church was attended not only by Americans, but also by Filipino women, Indian workers, and others who had not yet decided to leave Iran.

The revolutionary events or, more precisely, the revolutionary year of 1979 can be divided into several periods of great importance for the Protestants in Iran. The first phase, lasting from 16 January to 11 February, was the time from the shah's departure to the proclamation of the revolution's victory. The second period lasted from February to 11 November, the day when the American embassy in Tehran was seized. The third period began after 4 November.

The most uncertain period for the missionaries remaining in Iran lasted from 16 January to 11 February, when the victory of the Islamic revolution was proclaimed after the collapse of Bakhtiar's government. The anti-western and anti-American slogans chanted by the Iranians threatened the lives of American missionaries in Iran after Khomeini's return. The real exodus of foreign workers started in the first months of that year. Despite that, the Protestant churches

11 AG, WM, folder: Neely, James (Eloise) (- 1999), 'Neely to Greenaway', 15 January 1979.

still operated and sought out all opportunities to share the Gospel with the Iranians. In some of them, church services were carried on in both English and Persian.

During his short stay in Tehran, Richard Gardiner had a conversation with the bishop's son, Bahram Dehqani-Tafti, on 6 February after attending an Anglican service. The conversation is a good example of the divergent opinions expressed by the missionaries and the representatives of the younger generation of Iranian Christians. Disappointed with Bahram's opinions, he nonetheless justified him in a letter written to Charles and Inez Puls from the Lutheran Orient Mission in the United States: 'He had certainly swallowed a lot of propaganda and was bitter about the sins of the former regime with its vast capacity for corruption and theft.'¹² The argument that Gardiner wheeled out to show the generosity of the shah was based on his own experience from the time of the so-called 'White Revolution,' the package of social reforms implemented in Iran in the 1960s, when he started his career as a missionary doctor in the small town of Qorveh in Kurdistan. It seems, however, that Bahram represented a broader 'fraction' inside the Protestant community, which was critical of the monarchy. In a letter published in *Iran Diocesan News* in May, his father, an Anglican bishop, compared the collapse of the Pahlavi regime to the conquest of the Sasanian Empire by the Arabs, when Islam spread among the Iranians. Although he admired the Ayatollah Khomeini's fight against despotism,¹³ he

¹² LOM, Box 6, Correspondence 1978–1979, 'Gardiner to Puls', 9 February 1979.

¹³ *Iran Diocesan News* (May 1979), 122, p. 1.

was not sure what the future would bring. The bishop's text is thought provoking and is not easy to interpret; however, it certainly expresses hope that under new but confusing political circumstances the church could survive. Dehqani-Tafti took Khomeini's admiration of liberty and equality for granted and expected that it might bring benefits for all the minorities living in Iran. It is interesting that the text was written in a very difficult moment in the history of the Anglican Church in Iran, during which it lost one of its leaders, Arastu Siyah, an Anglican priest from Shiraz, who was murdered. In his book, Paul Hunt also recalls the bishop who organised the meeting in Isfahan gathering all the missionaries working within the Church to explain the Khomeini's concept of the Islamic Republic.¹⁴ Again, we should consider the moment when the Protestant Christians realised – if they ever really did – that politicised Islam offered them nothing more than a limited space to exist. After appointing the new government headed by Mehdi Bazargan and empowering the political position of Shi'a leaders with Khomeini as the spiritual leader, it became obvious that Iran had ruptured with its royal past.

Analysing the missionary letters and reports, we see how the attitudes towards the Iranian uprising, the monarch, mass mobilisation, Shi'a mullahs as well as the Islamic Republic were changing and how the leader of the revolution was portrayed. It was a path from hope to disappointment. The period between 16 January and 11 February should be defined as transitional. It abounded with concerns about Iran's divided and antagonised society and

14 Paul Hunt, *Inside Iran* (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1981), p. 90.

doubts that moderate and educated Iranians could ever follow the radical vision of Islam shared by Khomeini's followers. Thus, Khomeini's actions were perceived just as 'a personal vendetta against the shah,' and the ayatollah was incorrectly seen as 'a political puppet supported by Marxists and other extremist groups.'¹⁵ Upon Khomeini's arrival, two new phenomena worried the missionaries. They were the persecution of minorities, especially the Baha'is, and the pervasive feeling of fear. In wondering why Christians and Jews were welcoming Khomeini at the airport during his return, Monica Gardiner suggested that they worried about their lives. Along with her husband Richard, she gave a remarkable account of the tensions and clashes between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims and between Kurds and Persians in a region far from the capital of Iran stretched between Hamadan and Kermanshah. Their accounts are very important for reconstructing the revolutionary events in the peripheral Iranian regions. They presented Sunni Muslims as opponents of Khomeini and described how they reacted when photographs of him were distributed by the revolutionaries.¹⁶ They saw these photographs as blasphemous. Richard Gardiner wrote about the Kurdish local sheikh Hadi Hashemi and his rebel against Khomeini, who were ultimately brutally put down.¹⁷ He witnessed the persecution of the Jewish community in Hamadan and the transformation

15 LOM, Box 6, Correspondence 1978–1979, 'Monica Gardiner to Puls', 4 February 1979.

16 LOM, Box 6, Correspondence 1978–1979, 'Monica Gardiner to Puls', 4 February 1979.

17 LOM, Box 6, Correspondence 1978–1979, 'Richard Gardiner to Puls', 16 February 1979.



Figure 10. Monica and Richard Gardiner
(Luther Seminary. The Lutheran Orient Mission archives)

of the Jewish synagogue into ‘Khomeini’s mosque.’¹⁸ In Qorveh, where the hospital was located, the changes became visible just after the victory of the revolution. Gardiner writes that:

two heavily armed leaders of the Ayatollah’s security forces visited me and asked why we did not have a picture of ‘the Agha’ up in the hospital. I told them we had them and took him to the X-Ray where Jamsheed had put one up the previous day (...). They were pleased but suggested I change the name of the hospital, as Iran was now an Islamic state and the people would not like it.¹⁹

The hanging of a portrait of Khomeini in a Christian hospital (*Bimārestān-e masīhi*), symbolised the total break with the past.

The Iranian Spring and the Church’s New History

With the victory of the revolution, tensions and protests across Iran calmed down, but the country was still a semi-controlled state with many self-organised revolutionary committees not under any control by Bazargan’s government. The identification of the country and its legal frame, Kurdish demands of autonomy, the economic crisis, and unemployment were among the problems the Iranian government had to face with. The referendum on the Islamic

¹⁸ LOM, Box 6, Correspondence 1978–1979, ‘Richard Gardiner to Puls’, 9 February 1979.

¹⁹ LOM, Box 6, Correspondence 1978–1979, ‘Richard Gardiner to Puls’, 16 February 1979.

Republic and amendments of the Constitution were, however, prioritised.

Protestant Christians still believed that the political changes would bring freedom and equality. Bishop Dehqani-Tafti sent a letter to the new government congratulating it on the victory of the revolution and the preparation for a referendum to the end of March. The organisers of the referendum gave the voters just two options: to be in favour of the Islamic Republic or to be against it. In Isfahan, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti and Iraj Mottahedeh gave their votes for the Islamic Republic, as did many other Iranians, even though they did not know what was hidden behind the name of an 'Islamic Republic.' The bishop wrote on a voting card an additional note: 'Islamic Republic, taking into account the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.'²⁰

After the harsh winter of 1978–1979, the Iranian New Year offered some hope. Reporting on the situation in Kurdistan, Gardiner remarked that the Kurds had been given a kind of autonomy and that the Kurdish language was to be taught in their schools. Gardiner was aware that education in Kurdish was forbidden by the old regime, so any improvement of the situation of the ethnic minorities in Iran was welcomed. Gardiner dared to write: 'This may be the opportunity we have been waiting 30 years for.'²¹ Since his arrival to Iran, he had been waiting to use the Kurdish language to spread the Gospel among the Kurds. Soon, it turned out that the Iranian government perceived Kurdish

²⁰ Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design*, p. 189.

²¹ LOM, Box 6, Correspondence 1978–1979, 'Gardiner to Puls', 8 April 1979.

autonomy as merely a separatist movement.²² Interestingly, the missionaries shared the common desires of average Kurds living in the region. Two years after the revolution, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, a Kurdish political leader, summarised the outcome of the revolution in bitter words: 'After a few months, however, the mullahs confiscated power and imposed their monopoly. Political liberties were suppressed. There was a lot of talk about the *mostaẓ'afān*, but nothing was done.'²³ The crucial word recalled by Ghassemlou that dominated the revolutionary discourse was *mostaẓ'afān*, the oppressed people, which was used initially in reference to those who supported the revolution, but later was used to categorise and divide the Iranians and justify the oppressive actions.

Although he stayed in Iran, Richard Gardiner faced some problems regarding the personnel of the hospital in Qorveh. After giving leave to the Indian and Pakistani doctors, he was forced to employ Iranians who were unqualified but faithful to the revolutionary values. He wondered how rapidly Iranian society was being transformed by the revolution and came to the conclusion that the 'deterioration of respect for authority in every form' was a by-product of the revolution.²⁴ In much more serious words, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti evaluated the situation in Iran, enumerating acts of violence and persecutions the church had suffered. On 19 August 1979,

22 David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London – New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000), p. 169.

23 'The Clergy Have Confiscated the Revolution. Abdul-Rahman Qassemlu and Fred Halliday', *MERIP Reports* (1981), 98, p. 17–19.

24 LOM, Box 6, Correspondence 1978–1979, 'Gardiner to Puls', 7 June 1979.

a group of armed men invaded his house in Isfahan. After searching the apartment, they took all the documents related to the church, including the lists of members as well as private notes and family albums. The things they did not find useful were burned in the yard. It was a sign of the new era and of the new chapter in Iranian Church history.²⁵

2.2. The Ayatollah and the Church

Before his return to Iran, Khomeini sent a letter to Christians all over the world on the occasion of Christmas of 1978, encouraging them to pray for Iran:

On behalf of the oppressed people of Iran, I ask you the Christian people to pray for our people who are suffering from the despotic tyrant on your holy days and ask Allah for their emancipation. I ask you, the great Christian nation, to warn the heads of some Christian countries helping the tyrannical shah with their satanic powers.²⁶

By speaking in the name of oppressed people (*mostaż'afān*), he presented himself as a defender of the rights of the Iranians to fight against tyranny and strive for dignity. The problem with the letter lies in the enormously broad

25 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, 'The Bishop's Letter. An End and Beginnings in the Diocese of Iran', *The Iran Diocesan News* (September 1979), 123, p. 1–3.

26 'Imam Khomeini's Message to the Noble Christian People of the World on the occasion of Christmas (23 Dec 1978)', in *Imam Khomeini, Pope and Christianity* (Tehran: Islamic Propagation Organization, 1984 [1404]), p. 7–8.

understanding of Christianity represented by Khomeini and his followers as well as in the equalisation of Christianity with the politics of Western countries, especially the United States. This is clearly visible in the correspondence between the Ayatollah Khomeini and Pope John Paul II and in Khomeini's speeches against the United States. However, regarding internal policy, legal steps were undertaken to place Christian communities under the new order. However, this did not apply to all Christians. The Christians were categorised regarding their origins, connections, and the relationships that they maintained before the revolution.

The Christians in Iran: Recognised and Unrecognised

The problem of the social and political activity of the recognised religious minorities (*aqaliyat-e dini*) and those not recognised by law in the Islamic Republic of Iran should involve us in a discussion on how the state shapes its relations with minorities and how it influences their cultural and social development. Thus the problem of minority-state relations is of a two-fold dimension: ideological and material. Ideology in the Islamic Republic plays a crucial role in offering minorities ways of participation: they must accept revolutionary values. Ideology is used to include or exclude certain minority groups. The material dimension is concerned with social, economic, and political resources provided by the state. The state, which by definition has power, sets the structural framework combining these two dimensions. The constitution should be treated as a manifestation of the ideological identification realised in the functional and material aspects of the state.

The relations between the Iranian government and the minorities were seen in debates over the new constitution, which was accepted in 1979 and slightly amended ten years later. The constitution reflected the new state ideology, which defined religious minorities as Jews (*Kalimi*), Zoroastrians (*Zartoštīyān*), and Christians (*Masiḥīyān*) without making any distinctions between them (in Art. 13).

The Constitution guaranteed the right to freely observe religious rituals and conduct religious education.²⁷ On its part, by referring to the linguistic policy of the state the constitution emphasised the role of Persian as the official language and gave ethnic groups the right to use their national languages in textbooks or other publications. A very important task for the newly established regulations was the constitution's Art. 64, which deals with parliamentary elections. This article states that all the religious minorities living in Iran (described in Art. 13) have the right to choose their own representatives to the Iranian parliament. In this article, the definition of minorities is based on both religious and ethnic criteria.

The following minorities were included: Jews (with the right to choose one representative), Zoroastrians (one representative), Armenians (two representatives, one from the north and one from the south of Iran), and Assyrians (one representative). But in the first parliament representatives of minorities were confused and upset with the proposed regulations. They criticised them. Hrair Khalatian,

27 See: Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities*, p. 67, which refers the discussion over art. 13 in detail.

the Armenian deputy from Tehran,²⁸ explained that the Armenians are quite different from the Western Christians or the Maronites in Lebanon, so he was convinced that the name 'Christian' is not enough. He also pointed out the historical ties between Iranians and Armenians. We can assume that the position of the Armenians, who constituted the largest group among Iran's religious minorities, differed from other minorities. Rabani Shiriazhi, the Jewish deputy, pointed out that Jews and Christians had lived in Iran for over two thousand years and that throughout history thousands of Jews had left the country or converted to Islam (it was clear in his speech that some Muslims might have Jewish ancestors). In social and economic life, Muslims and Jews intermixed. In his first speech, the Zoroastrian priest Shahzadi explained that many Zoroastrians did not wish to be called a minority because they had a unique connection with the land and its people. Bait Urshana, the Assyrian deputy, protested against electing just one deputy jointly for the Assyrians and Chaldeans, arguing that the Assyrian community was divided into two religious groups, the Assyrian Church of the East and the Catholic Chaldean Church, and thus should obtain two posts. However, in spite of the active role of Sergen Bait Ushana in arguing that the Assyrian and Chaldean communities are as large as the Armenians and

28 'Hrāyr Kālātyān (1308–1367) – namāyande-ye masīhiyān-e Armani-ye Tehrān va šomāl-e kešvar dar doure-ye avval-e majles-e šourā-ye eslāmī', *Fašlnāme-ye farhangī Peymān* (1389), 54 [online: <http://www.paymanonline.com/article.aspx?id=BC450349-2C74-4A78-B303-67E3B7BCE313>]

reached 70,000–80,000, their petition aroused no interest among the Constitutional Assembly of Experts.²⁹

The Iranian lawmakers used ethnic criteria in defining the Christian minorities in Iran, excluding from such a category ethnic Iranians who for various reasons had embraced Christianity. As has been documented in Chapter 1, the Iranian converts attending various Protestant churches constituted an important yet marginal group in Iran with the unquestionable conviction that they belonged to Iranian culture and they were a part of the Iranian nation. How were the Protestant Churches perceived by the Iranian authorities and by Khomeini himself? And what was the response of the Iranian Protestants to the exclusive understanding of Christianity in Iran?

The draft of the constitution attracted the attention of Anglican Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, who in his letter to Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan of dated 28 Esfand 1357 (19 March 1979), expressed his doubts regarding the categorisation of Christians in Iran solely on an ethnic basis, which gave a guarantee of legal protections only to the Armenians and Assyrians. He suggested another category, ‘Persian-speaking Christians,’ to be implemented. The bishop, who in the period before the revolution put a lot of effort in outlining the identity of the Iranian Christians, was convinced that a category based on language would avoid a narrow and simplistic view of the Christians in Iran. It did not fit the official identity discourse of the Islamic Republic, which by recognising Armenians and Assyrians as minorities excluded

²⁹ Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities*, p. 69.

the Iranian converts, accusing them of being traitors.³⁰ The way that the Christians were categorised in the constitution reflects how they were perceived: firstly, as a permanent component of Iranian history and culture and, secondly, as a permanent strangers, a foreign element, which indicated that throughout the history Christian communities in Iran had been composed of Assyrians and Armenians using their own vernacular languages for religious purposes. The constitution legalised the process of the ‘otherisation’ of some Christian groups, including the Iranian converts in Iran, depriving them of rights and property. One could have likely predicted that in a situation of growing anger towards the West and America churches dependent on foreign missionaries would be stigmatised. It seems that the missionaries realised what was really going on and what Khomeini’s intentions were.

In an interview with Debbie Alves, James Neely predicted that Khomeini would accept minorities like Assyrians and Armenians unless they were ‘westernised.’ Neely said: ‘I think Khomeini will eventually put pressure on the evangelical groups if he perceives them to be oriented to the West or if the Christian population will appear to be growing.’³¹ This was a very accurate statement showing complete understanding of the mentality of the new Iranian regime. In the subsequent months of the revolutionary year of 1979,

30 Ziya Meral, ‘Minority Religions and Islam: Religious minorities and conversion as national security threats in Turkey and Iran’, in David M. Kirkham (ed.), *State Responses to Minority Religions* (Brigham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 31–44.

31 Debbie Alves, ‘Missionary in revolution. Iran may allow churches devoid of “westernization”’, *Temple Daily Telegram* (May 1979).

the churches focused on evangelisation and proselytising among the Iranians were under pressure from the revolutionary guards and revolutionary committees operating across the country. However, the lack of coordinated actions towards foreigners and missionaries and contradictory approaches towards them that might be considered proof of the total disintegration of the country after the victory of the revolution. We should also take into account the local aspects of Christian-Muslim relations. A good example is the Christian hospital run by Gardiner in Qorveh (mentioned in Chapter 1). Nevertheless, the wave of animosity against the foreign missionaries caused them to leave the country. James Neely, who since 1975 had been a minister of the English-speaking Assemblies of God Church,³² left Iran on 18 June 1979. His wife and children decided to follow on 22 February. In spite of the decreasing number of foreign workers, some pastors of the English-speaking Protestant communities in Iran were allowed to stay. One of them was Robert Pryor, a pastor of the Community Church in Tehran, who had been working as a Presbyterian minister in Iran for twenty years and served as a chaplain of the US Armed Forces.³³ Others, like the Anglican pastor Paul Hunt, were accused of spying for the United States.

³² James and Eloise Neely were appointed to Iran on 24 August 1970.

³³ LOM, Box 6, Correspondence 1978–1979, ‘Gardiner to Wallance’, 23 May 1979.

Espionage Allegations and the Confiscation of Church Property

It is worth noticing that revolutionaries perceived both missionaries and some of the local Christians as spies for the American, British, and Israeli governments. The reason was that diplomats, embassy staff, and foreign workers visited the Protestant churches. In the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal churches, the presence of the foreigners doubled the total number of church members. The revolutionary press, whose role as a persuasive tool in the hand of government is hard to overestimate, informed widely about the ‘nests of spies,’ revealing forged and false documents accusing missionaries of attempting to undermine the revolutionary state. Paul Hunt admitted in his book that the newspapers resembled James Bond novels.³⁴ The problem was that the stories he read were about himself. It seems that from the beginning of the revolution missionaries were treated with suspicion and after a while became the target of revolutionary propaganda, as were the Iranian converts. Espionage allegations equally affected missionaries and the governments with whom they maintained contacts. Pressure on the Protestant churches in Iran coincided with the foreign and internal policy of the state and was changing during the year 1980, when just a few missionaries remained in Iran.

In August 1980, the Foreign Office received information from Tehran that in an interview with the Pars information agency the deputy minister of national guidance

³⁴ Hunt, *Inside Iran*, p. 122.



Figure 11. Bishop Dehqani-Tafti and the shah
(Archives of the Church Missionary Society)

had declared that Paul Hunt was a spy and had for years been in contact with the CIA.³⁵ In fact, this allegation was part of a broader campaign against the Anglican Church in Iran, which affected many church members and especially Bishop Dehqani-Tafti's family. In England, the Anglican Consultative Council issued a statement disproving false allegations concerning the Anglicans made by the Iranian authorities.³⁶ Iraj Mottahedeh, a convert of Jewish origin, was charged for receiving courses in espionage in Israel, Britain, and Pakistan.³⁷ The revolutionaries presented the Anglican Church as a nest of spies (*lāne-ye jāsusān*), a term that was used mostly in reference to the American embassy in Iran. One measure that the Iranian authorities had undertaken against the Protestant churches in Iran was the confiscation of church property and the closure of churches. Of course, such actions were stretched over time and were applied to various churches with different levels of intensity. Church closures intensified in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Pentecostal churches in Mashhad (1988), Sari (1988), and Gorgan (1993) and the Anglican church of St. Andrew in Kerman (1992) were shut down.³⁸

Despite its declaration of support for the new government, after the victory of the revolution the Anglican Church in Iran faced unprecedented persecutions, including the

35 TNA, FCO 8/3639, 'From Tehran to FCO', 27 August 1980.

36 TNA, FCO 8/3639, 'Statement from the office of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East', 26 August 1980.

37 TNA, FCO 8/3639, 'Telegram Wyatt from Tehran to FCO', 26 August 1980.

38 The process started during the revolution continues: in 2013 the Pentecostal church in Tehran was shut down.

expropriation of private and diocesan property registered in the name of the Episcopal Church Trust Association (*Anjoman-e Kelisā-ye Osqofī-ye Irān*) belonging to the Church Missionary Society. The most significant were: the Christian hospital in Isfahan, taken by force by revolutionaries on 11 June 1979; the closure of two houses in the hospital in Isfahan; the Christoffel Home for Blind Boys and Young Men in Isfahan, seized on 12 August 1979; the Farm for Blind Young Men in Isfahan, seized on 3 October 1979; the bishop's house in Isfahan (a property bought by Bishop Linton), taken over by revolutionaries and used as a Literary Centre; and the Christian hospital in Shiraz with its ancillary buildings, seized on 12 July 1979.³⁹ That year, the Mehr Ayin bookshop, opened in 1974, was closed (figure 12). Additionally, the Iranian authorities seized sums of money belonging to the above-mentioned institutions. When the hospital in Isfahan was taken over, Sir John Graham, serving as a British ambassador in Tehran, sent a protest to the Foreign Ministry, but with no results. In fact, he was also accused of spying.

Systematic pressure on the Anglican Church in Iran was experienced by the church members on two different levels: the official level, represented by the authorities, and the local one, which depended mostly on revolutionary mobs and seemed to be exceptional in the whole history of the Protestant churches during the revolution. What is more, the Anglicans paid the highest price at that time, as they were interrogated, imprisoned, and murdered.

39 CMSA, ACC 892 O5, Hassan B. Dehqani-Tafti, 'List of properties belonging to the Episcopal Church in Iran', 8 July 1982.



Figure 12. The Christian bookshop in Isfahan
(Danmission Photo Archive)

Generally speaking, the Protestants and their initiatives were recognised by the ordinary Iranians as well as their influence on society through the hospitals, schools, bookstores, and Biblical correspondence courses, which raised the concerns of the revolutionary government. Moreover, the Iranian converts were categorised in the revolutionary discourse as a threat to the new Iranian identity, while the attitudes toward the missionaries were shaped by ‘culture in conspiracy.’⁴⁰

The Anglican Martyrs

The first event that really terrified the small Anglican community and caused concern among the other Protestants was the assassination of Pastor Siyah in Shiraz (figure 13).

Arastu Siyah was born into a Muslim family in Kerman in 1927. When he was a child, his widowed father decided to move to Isfahan with his children. There, Arastu’s sister was sent to live in the girls’ hostel run by the Anglican Church. One time, when he wanted to fetch his sister from there, he was attracted to the church service and Christian songs sung by the Anglicans. Gradually, as he became familiar with Christianity, he decided to embrace this religion. After working for a few years in a local bookshop, in 1953 he was sent to the United Theological College in

40 I use this term after the authors: Sayed H. Mousavian, *Iran and the United States. An Insider view on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace* (New York–London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 63; Şādeq Zibā-Kalām, ‘Enqelāb-e eslāmī, soqūṭ-e režim-e šāh va bimāri be nām-e “tavahhom-e touṭe’e”’, in Şādeq Zibā-Kalām, *Yād-dāštā-ye enqelāb* (Tehrān: Ruzone, 1388), p. 11–21.

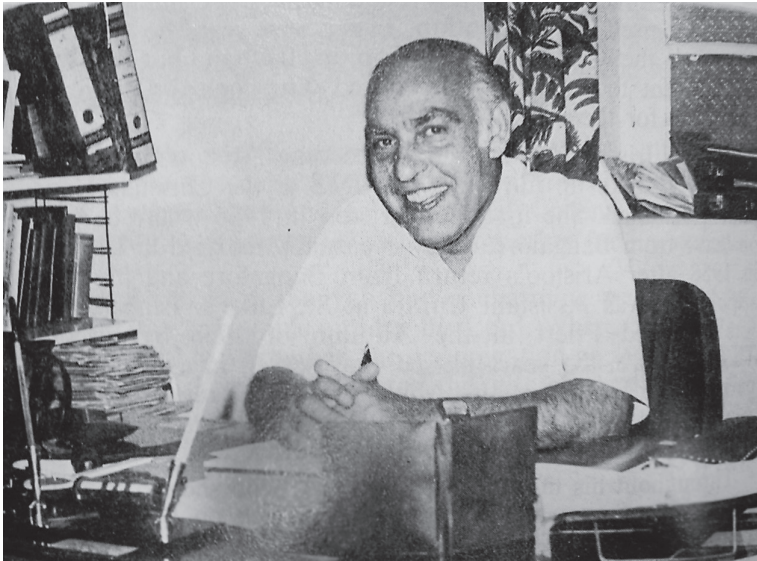


Figure 13. Arastu Siyah (Archives of the Church Missionary Society)

Bangalore, India, for training. He was ordained a priest in 1958 by Bishop Thompson. He married Iris Palmer, a nurse working with the Church Missionary Society. By 1979, he had moved with his family to Shiraz. In February 1979, he was found murdered in his church office. Earlier that day, two men he knew and who from time to time visited him asked to see him. According to Paul Hunt, the city's chief mullah announced that the murderers were counter-revolutionaries and insisted on unity on behalf of revolutionary values.⁴¹ Bishop Dehqani-Tafti regarded him as the Church's contribution to the Iranian Revolution: 'The Revolution has had many martyrs and so, in a way our small Church has taken part in the Revolution by sharing in martyrdom.'⁴² The Memorial Service was held in Tehran and gathered the leaders of Christian churches in the city, including the papal nuncio Mgr. Bugnini, who in the following months became engaged in negotiations between the Iranian government and the Anglican Church.

It is difficult to believe that Pastor Siyah was murdered by 'counter-revolutionaries,' especially when we take into account the relations between the revolutionary committees, the revolutionary guards, and, finally, the revolutionary government with the tiny Anglican community in Iran as a whole. Attempts to murder Bishop Dehqani-Tafti, the brutal assault on his wife and other church members, and the confiscation of church properties provoked animosity and hatred toward the church fuelled by the most radical

41 P. Hunt, *Inside Iran*, p. 91.

42 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, 'The Bishop's Letter', *The Iran Diocesan News* (Spring 1979), 122, p. 2.

and extreme ideologies and, at the same time, superstitions and stereotypes shared by the revolutionaries.

The most tragic moment for the Anglican Church and especially for the bishop himself and his family came on 6 May 1980, when Bahram Dehqani-Tafti was found murdered. Bishop Richard Ashton from London telephoned Bishop Dehqani-Tafti while he was in Cyprus attending the conference of the Middle East Council of Churches, informing him of the death of his only son.⁴³ Bahram returned to Iran on the outset of the revolution and started working as an interpreter for foreign journalists in Iran and as a lecturer. When he returning home from the university campus in Tehran on 6 May, his car was stopped by armed men who shot him. In subsequent days, the British ambassador Sir John Graham pressed on Iranian President Bani Sadr to take necessary measures to identify the murderers of the bishop's son.⁴⁴ Likewise, the Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie called on the Iranian president to protect religious minorities in his country.⁴⁵ However, as we will see, the Anglicans were not categorised as minorities in the Iranian constitution. What is more, Mousavi Garmaroudi, a cultural adviser to the president,⁴⁶ discredited the archbishop's regret for minorities, saying that the West expressed no regret when Muslims were killed during the revolution.⁴⁷

43 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, *The Hard Awakening* (London: SPCK, 1981), p. 76–77.

44 TNA, FCO 8/3639, 'Graham to FCO', 8 May 1980.

45 TNA, FCO 8/3639, 'Archbishop of Canterbury asks Iran for assurance'.

46 Ali Mousavi Garmaroudi was also a revolutionary poet and translator of the Koran and classical Shi'a texts into Persian.

47 TNA, FCO 8/3639, 'Graham to Miers', 11 May 1980.

At the beginning of June, Sir Graham sent a report to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office informing that the Pars news agency made a statement that an anonymous telephone caller introducing himself as a representative of the World Assyrian Liberation Organisation admitted the responsibility of this organisation for the execution of the bishop's son.⁴⁸ The statement caused a reaction of the Assyrian Organisation in Tehran, which protested against publishing unverified and untrue information. The British ambassador concluded that this 'presumably is an attempt by somebody to shift the blame.'⁴⁹ In fact, the death of Bahram sheds some light on both the state's information policy and its real attitude towards Iranian Anglicans. This tragic event had a great influence on the bishop's entire family. While abroad, he was advised to not come to Iran, and in fact he never did.

The Bishop and the Ayatollah

Before his return to Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini sent a message to the Christians in Iran ensuring them that their rights would be respected after the revolution. He encouraged them to take part in revolutionary events. While he was in Iran, some Christians were excluded from the category of 'religious minorities' recognised by the state, finding themselves marginalised and persecuted. In a situation of great loss and pain, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti wrote a letter to the ayatollah. The letter, dated 19 September 1980, was

⁴⁸ TNA, FCO 8/3639, 'Graham to Williams', 2 June 1980.

⁴⁹ TNA, FCO 8/3639, 'Graham to Williams', 2 June 1980.

a symbolic answer to Khomeini's offer to take part in the revolution. The text starts as follow:

Before the fruition of the Revolution, during Christmas 1978, while still in Paris, you sent a message in the form of a bulletin to all Christians, inviting them to co-operate in the cause of the Revolution. The Diocese of Iran, which is part of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East also received copies of the same. The Church in Iran, which for its part had experienced the pressures and limitations of the previous regime and interferences by the SAVAK in Church matters, held this message as a good omen.⁵⁰

The letter manifested disappointment with what the revolution had really bought to the Christians. Instead of equality and peace, it caused killings, imprisonment, and false accusations against church members. The letter was delivered to the Iranian embassy to Mr. Ehdai, who was believed to have passed it on to Ali Garmaroudi, the spokesman of the president of Iran, who was in London at that time. It is hard to believe that Khomeini received the letter, but still today it is a document written by an Iranian who had chosen to be a Christian and found himself in a difficult situation during the revolution. Undoubtedly, the revolutionaries perceived his identity as an Iranian and Christian as a hybrid combination, and even as a violation of the revolutionary identity model. What should be emphasised is the bishop's fight to have the right to choose any religion. In

50 Dehqani-Tafti, *The Hard Awakening*, p. 92. The letter was published in: Hassan B. Dehqani-Tafti, 'The Episcopal Church in Iran: a suffering Church', *Anglican and Episcopal History* (1990), 59, 1, p. 14–18.

that sense, he became a ‘revolutionary’ hero and a symbol of the post-revolutionary Iranian church.

Returning to his letter, he ended it by listing in chronological order the murders and persecutions of the members of the Anglican Church: the murder of Arastu Siyah on 19 February 1979; the murder of Bahram Dehqani-Tafti on 6 May 1980; and the imprisonment of Jean Waddell and John and Audrey Coleman in August 1980.

2.3. Hostages, Prisoners, and the Iranian Church

The situation of the Anglican Church in Iran gradually attracted the attention of the international community. The materials regarding the persecution and killing of the church members as well as evidence of the violation of the rights of the other unrecognised minorities like the Baha’is influenced public opinion in Europe and the United States. However, unless the American embassy in Tehran was taken over, the reports concerning the internal situation in Iran did not cause any serious political reaction. The seizure of the American embassy, which the revolutionaries saw as historically justified, changed everything. This occupies a central position in the modern history of Iran and in the general history of international relations. How did the takeover of the American embassy influence the global Christian perception of Iran, and what was its impact on the internal situation of Iranian Christians?

The takeover of the American embassy in Tehran by Iranian students who presented themselves as the followers of the imam’s line on 4 November 1979, started a crisis

in Iran's relations with the international community and definitively precluded the possibility of the United States' acceptance of Iran's new post-revolutionary political course. The hostage crisis, however, gave room for the greater involvement of religious authorities in negotiations with Iran and indicated the importance of interreligious diplomacy. The most spectacular example was an attempt by American President Jimmy Carter to involve Pope John Paul II in contacting Khomeini regarding the American hostages.⁵¹ The pope sent a letter to Khomeini. The leader of the revolution responded to the pope a few days later in the presence of the papal nuncio, Mgr. Annibale Bugnini, and Bani Sadr, the minister of foreign affairs at that time.⁵²

Khomeini's answer to John Paul II is important for understanding the former's view on American policy and his own understanding of Christianity. He condemned any support for the exiled shah as contrary to Jesus' teaching. He regarded himself as a representative of the oppressed people (*mazlum*) and wrote to the pope that 'if Jesus Christ lived today, he would reproach Carter; if he lived today, he would deliver us from the clutches of this enemy of mankind (*došman-e kalq*), this enemy of humankind (*došman-e bašar*). You as a Vicar of Christ (*namāyande-ye Masiḥ*) must do what he would do.'⁵³ The Iranian policymaker and scholar Seyed

51 Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith. Memoir of a President* (Toronto–New York–London: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 459.

52 The speech was delivered in Qom on 10 November 1979. For an English translation, see: *Islam and Revolution. Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, translated and annotated by Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), p. 280–287.

53 I quote in my translation: *Şakife-je Emām*, vol. 11, p. 37.

Hossein Mousavian notes that with the seizure of the embassy the 'enemy narrative' emerged in the Iranian political narration⁵⁴ but, on the other hand, we observe that the Iranian revolutionary discourse concerning the social aspects resembled the narrative of Christian liberal theologians.

The anti-American and anti-Western sentiments expressed by Khomeini provoked a British reaction. Uncertain of the future of its own staff embassy, the British government decided to recall its ambassador Sir John Graham in April 1980. After his return to London, it decided to close the embassy on 9 September 1980. From that moment on, the diplomatic mission of the Kingdom of Sweden represented British interests in Iran.⁵⁵

The events beginning on 4 November 1979, and the long months of the hostage crisis had a great impact on Christians in the United States, which is evident in the cyclical prayers recited in American churches: 'O God of mercy and power, look with compassion upon the hostages held in Teheran. Stand by them by day and by night; grant them strength in body, mind, and spirit; and give them patience to the time of their release. Sustain their relatives and all who love them in their plight; guide our President in his decisions and preserve peace in the world. Finally, o Lord, we pray for the people of Iran and America, that looking to the welfare

54 Mousavian, *Iran and the United States*, p. 65.

55 Christopher Rundle, 'Iran–United Kingdom Relations since the Revolution: Opening Doors', in Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Mahjoob Zweiri (eds.), *Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad* (Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 2008), p. 92.

of each other we may come through anger and strife to reconciliation and friendship. Amen.’⁵⁶

Taking into account the reactions of an average American at that time, by insisting on the necessity to find reconciliation and maintain peace with the Iranians the prayer was exceptional. But the strong Iranian revolutionary discourse and reluctance to free the American diplomats and embassy workers had an impact on the categorisation and demonisation of Iran and Islam by evangelical Christians, leading to a clash of religious discourses. It is, of course, not the only religious context in which the hostage crisis appeared.

Undoubtedly, for some of the hostages held in the captivity for 444 days the solitude and trauma they experienced gave rise to spiritual experiences. On the second night of the takeover, Kathryn Koob, an embassy cultural officer experienced something she believed was the visit of an angel who convinced her of the constant presence of God.⁵⁷ She found strength in religion to survive during that period. In the meantime, partly for propaganda purposes and partly because of the pressure of the world’s religious leaders, the Iranian authorities organised a Christian celebration for the hostages. Thus the Christmas and Easter holidays became part of the hostages’ lives.

On Christmas 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini prepared a special message in which he accused America of intermingling Koranic verses with the Sermon on the Mount.⁵⁸

56 LPL, Runcie/Main/1980/104, ‘Prayer for Hostages’.

57 Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah. The First Battle in America’s War with Militant Islam* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), p. 206.

58 Bruce Laingen, *Yellow Ribbon. The Secret Journal of Bruce Laingen* (Washington–New York–London: Brassey’s, 1992), p. 46.

This Christmas holiday, the first that the hostages spent in captivity, became a media show arranged by the revolutionary students. The Iranian authorities chose three American clergymen because of ‘their militant history against imperialism’ to visit the hostages.⁵⁹ They were: Reverend William Sloane Coffin from New York City’s Riverside Church; Reverend William Howard of the National Council of Churches; and a Catholic bishop, Thomas Gumbleton from Detroit. Together with the Catholic cardinal of Algiers, they celebrated several holiday services with the hostages, which were broadcasted on Iranian television. Officially, the Iranians tried to persuade the world that they responded to the religious needs of the detainees. Paradoxically, the political climate and the anti-Israeli policy of the new Iranian government persuaded the Iranian revolutionaries. After giving Khomeini a letter from the pope in November 1979, Archbishop Bugnini recommended Hilarion Capucci, a Melkite archbishop, as a mediator in the case of the American hostages (figure 14). Archbishop Capucci was perfectly suited for this role. In 1974, Israeli authorities accused him of smuggling arms to the Palestine Liberation Organisation and thus arrested him. He remained in Israeli prison until November 1977, when he was released after the Vatican’s intervention. His pro-Palestinian activity gave him points in contacts with the Iranians and with Khomeini himself. In fact, in April 1979, Capucci met with the Ayatollah Khomeini and with a group of representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organisation who had arrived

59 Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah*, p. 274.



Figure 14. Archbishop Hilarion Capucci among the hostages (courtesy to khamenei.ir)

to Tehran at the time.⁶⁰ Finally, he managed to negotiate the release of several American hostages. In 1980, he travelled to Iran several times to deliver messages from Pope John Paul II to the Ayatollah Khomeini discussing the fate of the imprisoned Americans. Kathryn Koob remembered the bishop's visit in winter. She asked him to arrange regular meetings with the priest, complaining that the last visit had been scheduled at Christmas. Together with three American clergy – Jack Bremer and Nelson Thompson, both Methodists, and the Catholic Darrell Rupiper – Capucci met her again. They also met other hostages divided into smaller groups, some of which had been isolated from each other for months.⁶¹ The American clergymen were not allowed to see William Daugherty, who nonetheless mentioned in his book that on 6 April at midnight he was awoken and taken to the room where Archbishop Capucci was waiting.⁶²

The hostage crisis inevitably leads to a question about the American missionaries working in Iran in 1979 and 1980: Did they continue their work after the embassy had been taken over? Surprisingly, they faced no serious problems at that time.⁶³ Mark Bliss, a prominent Pentecostal missionary, was able to come to Tehran in November to see the church and the evangelisation centre. He said that

60 TNA, FCO 8/3640, 'Grier to Hurd', 3 October 1980.

61 *The Iran Hostage Crisis. A Chronology of Daily Developments. Report Prepared for the Committee on Foreign Affairs U.S. House of Representatives by the Foreign Affairs and National Defence Division Congressional Research Service Library of Congress, U.S. Government March 1981* (Washington: Printing Office, 1981), p. 148.

62 William J. Daugherty, *In the Shadow of Ayatollah. A CIA Hostage in Iran* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2001), p. 169.

63 Hunt, *Inside Iran*, p. 120.

just a few items belonging to the church, such as an accordion, telephone, Persian rug, and camping tent, were stolen by the Iranian mob.⁶⁴ In 1980, he reported that the sale of Christian literature was growing.⁶⁵ There is some evidence that the Pentecostal centre in Tehran was generally recognised by the Iranians. During the Easter holiday of 1980, in addition to the above-mentioned American clergy and Archbishop Capucci, two local clergymen were invited to conduct an Easter service for the American hostages.⁶⁶ From the correspondence between James Neely and J. Philip Hogan, the director of the Assemblies of God World Missions, we know who they were: Saro Khachiki, co-director of ICI in Iran, who headed the Living Bible translation project; and Lazarus Yaghnazar, the executive committee of the Assemblies of God in Iran.⁶⁷ Both were of Armenian origin. Saro Khachiki informed that: 'The Moslem students contacted our church to ask for two ministers to come and have an Easter ceremony for the hostages. We also met the ministers who had come from the States.'⁶⁸ At that time, the Pentecostal Church in Iran remained almost untouched by the revolutionary guards, which indicated that during the first phase of the establishment of the Islamic Republic the persecutions of minorities were politically motivated.

64 AG, MW, folder: Iran (1970–1989), 'Bliss to Greenaway', 27 November 1979.

65 AG, MW, folder: Iran (1970–1989), 'Report form Iran 1980'.

66 *The Iran Hostage Crisis. A Chronology of Daily Developments*, p. 147.

67 AG, WM, folder: Neely, James (Eloise) (–1999), 'Neely to Hogan', 18 April 1980.

68 AG, WM, folder: Neely, James (Eloise) (–1999), 'Neely to Hogan', 28 April 1980.

The main reason for interrogating and detaining church leaders and members was the accusation of espionage. In fact, the latter half of 1980 brought some changes, which resulted in internal ideological struggles. The universities, schools, and clashes between the so-called revolutionary students and the more liberal ones caused concern among the revolutionary leaders, who involved them in a project of purification – which in reality meant ‘Islamisation’ – of the Iranian educational system. The new regulations affected both recognised minorities⁶⁹ and the missionary schools.⁷⁰ This started a general removal of elements connected to the old regime from the public space and the introduction of a new set of Islamic symbols, including the most powerful one: the Islamic *hejāb*. 7 July 1980, was announced as the final day to clear out all ‘vestiges of Satan.’⁷¹

The American embassy became a symbol of both the old regime’s crimes and of the victorious spirit of the revolution. The Iranian government approached the problem of the Americans in Iran more ideologically and systemically by organising an international conference devoted to the ‘crimes of America’ at the beginning of June. It gathered around 300 delegates who were taken to Isfahan on 5 June to commemorate the anti-shah demonstrations of 1963. The revolution needed its own holidays, symbols, ceremonies, and enemies. The American embassy perfectly responded to the revolutionary needs and became a symbol of the old corrupted and evil regime.

69 Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities*, p. 76–84.

70 Good examples are the schools run by the Catholic priests and nuns. In August 1980, they were asked to leave Iran within a month.

71 *The Iran Hostage Crisis. A Chronology of Daily Developments*, p. 229.

The case of the imprisoned American diplomats is in a sense related to the Anglicans in Iran, at least in two aspects. First, this was because some of the embassy staff members belonged to the Episcopal Church and attended church services in Iran. Second, the embassy's seizure set a precedent that the Iranian authorities used to accuse members of the Anglican Church of espionage, emphasising their contacts with the Americans. The revolutionary government also made allegations against the British diplomats working in Iran, including ambassador Sir John Graham. This influenced the decision to evacuate diplomatic staff and close the embassy on 9 September 1980. One British diplomat was transferred to the Swedish embassy and Sweden started to represent British interests.⁷² It is important to emphasise that at that time the British government was involved in negotiations for the release of four British citizens accused of spying, who were imprisoned by the Iranians. These negotiations were conducted in the shadow of the 'hostage crisis.' Three of the detained British citizens were active members of the Anglican Diocese of Iran.

On 6 August 1980, Jean Waddell, who had been working in the bishop's office since 1977, was arrested on suspicion of spying and conducting subversive activities against the Islamic Republic. On 10 August, two other members of the diocese – John and Audrey Coleman, missionary doctors working for the Church Missionary Society in Yazd – were detained on espionage charges. John Coleman, who came

72 Tehran radio announced that the real reason for evacuating the British embassy was espionage activity conducted through the Anglican Church in Iran. See: *The Iran Hostage Crisis. A Chronology of Daily Developments*, p. 288.

to Iran with his wife Audrey in 1948, was ordained a priest just a year before, on 5 October 1979.

A few days later, the fourth British citizen, Andrew Pyke, who had hitherto not been involved in any missionary work, was imprisoned. He worked for a helicopter company. In the meantime, three Iranian Anglicans – Iraj Mottahedeh, an Anglican priest of Jewish origin working in Isfahan; Dimitri Bellos, a diocesan administrator in Tehran; and Nusratullah Sharifian, a pastor in charge in the Church of Kerman – were also put in prison.

The situation of the Anglican Church in Iran was under the special investigation of both British Foreign Office and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Office. Robert Runcie, the archbishop appointed to the post on 25 March 1980, tried to communicate with Iranian President Iran Bani Sadr after the murder of Bishop Dehqani-Tafti's son. In August 1980, when information about the imprisonment of the Anglicans in Iran reached his office, he wrote a personal letter to the Ayatollah Khomeini stressing that the church in Iran was independent and not governed from London.⁷³ His message remained unanswered. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office took some measures to find the proper person who could negotiate with the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian authorities on behalf of the British government. In Tehran, the Apostolic Nunciature, headed by archbishop Annibale Bugnini, was engaged in searching for a solution.⁷⁴ Just like in the case of the American hostages, Bugnini proposed

73 LPL, Runcie/Main/1980/104, 'Text of a Statement made by the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace at 15.00 hours on 13th August 1980'.

74 Dehqani-Tafti, *The Hard Awakening*, p. 107.

Hilarion Capucci as a mediator.⁷⁵ The Foreign Office also considered Ahmad Khomeini, the ayatollah's son,⁷⁶ hoping that he would be able to influence the Iranian revolutionaries. Archbishop Capucci accepted his role with reluctance. He met Robert Runcie in London in October 1980.⁷⁷ During the meeting, he described how difficult his task was, pointing out that as a convert from Islam Bishop Dehqani-Tafti made himself prone to persecution by staying in Iran. He also mentioned the Iranian government's antipathy to the Anglican Church in Iran.⁷⁸ Although he did not elaborate on what the problems were, it is easy to guess that one reason for the negative categorisation of the Anglican Church was rooted in both the political situation and the ideology of the Islamic Republic. On the political level, the Anglican Church was treated just as the American embassy was: as a nest of spies. On the ideological level, it was seen as a threat for the new model of identity, which assumed that an Iranian should be a Shi'a Muslim. Consequently, the Anglicans in Iran were perceived as disloyal citizens who sought to destroy the Islamic order. This did not mean that the particular view of the Iranian Anglicans had an impact on the general perception of the Anglican Church. Some representatives of Palestinian Anglicans supporting the Palestinian Liberation Organisation had to play a role building bridges between the small Anglican Church in Iran and the Iranian government. At the beginning of the tragic year, during the general assembly of the Middle East

75 TNA, FCO 8/3639 'Miers to Beckett', 27 August 1980.

76 TNA, FCO 8/3640, 'Miers to Beckett', 16 September 1980.

77 TNA, FCO 8/3640, 'Grier to Hurd', 17 October 1980.

78 TNA, FCO 8/3640, 'Heath to Hannay', 8 October 1980.

Council of Churches held in Nicosia Bishop Dehqani-Tafti explained the problems that the Anglicans faced in the Islamic Republic of Iran. At that time, the Standing Committee of the Central Synod of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East made a decision to nominate Eliya Khoury, a PLO activist, to be an auxiliary bishop in Amman and resolved that during the ordination ceremony in Jordan a message expressing solidarity with the Anglicans in Iran would be delivered to the Iranian ambassador in that country. Dehqani-Tafti hoped that the planned visit of Khoury, a Palestinian Anglican, in Iran might help to create a more positive image of the Iranian Anglican Diocese among the Iranians.⁷⁹ On the contrary, Iranian authorities jailed three British members of the Anglican Diocese in Iran in August and kept three other Anglicans imprisoned on charges of spying for the United States and Israel.⁸⁰ The negotiations undertaken by Capucci brought no results. What is more, the outbreak of the war between Iraq and Iran made his mission difficult.⁸¹ Although he was able to meet Rafsanjani, who was the speaker of the Iranian parliament, in the face of war the Iranian authorities showed little interest in the fate of the imprisoned Anglicans. It turned out that despite sophisticated diplomatic attempts, engaging Christians in good relations with the PLO did not contribute to any change of Iranian attitudes towards the Anglicans in Iran or to the release of imprisoned diocesan personnel.

79 Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design*, p. 201–203.

80 TNA, FCO 8/3640, 'Cable no 783 from 2 September 1980, from Tehran to FCO'; to the cable some materials from official Iranian newspapers *Keyhān* were included

81 TNA, FCO 8/3640, 'Heath to Beckett', 11 November 1980.

From the time of the imprisonment of the British citizens, the situation of the Anglican Church in Iran became an international issue. In August 1980, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti planned to tour Germany and Geneva. He hoped to get support for the Iranian Anglicans from the Lutheran Church and wanted to speak with the World Council of Churches officials in Geneva.⁸² The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Foreign Office cooperated closely to solve the problem of the Anglicans. The situation of the Christians in Iran was discussed during a session of the European Parliament on 15–19 September 1980.⁸³ Consequently, the international community took an obligation to support certain initiatives aimed at a deeper engagement of the world's religious leaders to contact and communicate with the Iranian authorities. At the same time, Margery Corbett-Ashby, a nearly ninety-year-old political activist and feminist, sent a letter to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher suggesting the involvement of Queen Elizabeth II as the formal head of the Church of England in mediation with the Iranians in order to release the Anglicans. Douglas Hurd from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office responded to the letter of Corbett-Ashby, subtly suggesting that the idea to ask the queen for personal contact with Khomeini was misconceived in the light of Her Majesty's previous encounters with the deposed Iranian shah, her visit to the Anglican church in Isfahan in 1960s,⁸⁴ and the generally negative attitude towards monarchy among the Iranians. He

82 TNA, FCO 8/3639, 'Miers to Beckett', 27 August 1980.

83 TNA, FCO 8/3640, 'Hurd to Provan', 1 October 1980.

84 The visit took place in 1962 and was described in: *The Iran Diocesan News* (September 1962), 88, p. 12.

emphasised that the Foreign Office stayed in close contact with the Archbishop of Canterbury as well as with the European Community in order to solve the problem quickly.⁸⁵

On 27 November, Robert Runcie decided to write a letter to Khomeini before the upcoming Christmas, asking for permission to organise a Christmas service for them.⁸⁶ Terry Waite, who was responsible for international relations within the Anglican Community and later was the archbishop's envoy and negotiator,⁸⁷ consulted the contents of the letter with the Foreign Office.⁸⁸ In the meantime, Göran Fredrik Bundy, the Swedish ambassador in Tehran, started preparations for Waite's visit to Iran by getting in touch with influential Iranian politicians, including Ayatollah Beheshti, who was in charge of the Iranian judiciary.⁸⁹

Christmas of 1980 was approaching. For the American hostages, it happened to be the second Christmas holiday spent in captivity. Kathryn Koob noted that she was worried about her future and expected something 'spectacular,' even a decision of the Iranian parliament to put someone on trial as an example.⁹⁰ Nothing like this happened, however. Some

85 TNA, FCO 8/3640, 'Hurd to Corbett-Ashby', 1 October 1980.

86 TNA, FCO 8/3641, 'Runcie to Khomeini', 27 November 1980; LPL, Runcie/Main/1980/104, 'Dr. Runcie's Christmas plea to Ayatollah Khomeini', 21 December 1980.

87 Terry Waite, *Taken on Trust* (London: Coronet Books, 1994), p. 331–336.

88 TNA, FCO 8/3641, 'Graham to Grier', 27 November 1980.

89 TNA, FCO 8/3641, 'Göran to Beheshti', 3 November 1980.

90 Kathryn Koob, *Guest of the Revolution. The Triumphant Story of an American Held Hostage in Iran* (Nashville–Camden–New York: Thomas Nelson, 1982), p. 185.

of the hostages⁹¹ were visited by papal nuncio Mgr. Annibale Bugnini and Chaldean Archbishop Issayi, who conducted the Christmas service.⁹²

Several days before Christmas, the archbishop of Canterbury was informed that the Iranian authorities had given permission to Terry Waite to see the detained Anglicans in Iran. After arranging and completing visa formalities, he went to Iran on 25 December with letters for Khomeini. After his return to London on 31 December, he announced that his visit was fruitful: he had delivered Runcie's message to Khomeini related to the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and had met the Colemans, Waddell, Sharifian, and Bellos in prison. Unfortunately, he could not see Andrew Pyke. During a speech at Heathrow Airport, he expressed his hopes that the recently completed journey would open a new chapter in mutual relations between the Iranian government and the Anglican Church.⁹³

January 1981 brought significant changes. The drama of the American hostages came to an end: they were released on January 20, which gave hope that the Anglicans would share the same fate. On January 21, Ambassador Göran Bundy met with Rafsanjani and later with the Ayatollah Beheshti, obtaining assurance that the British citizens would be freed soon.⁹⁴ Terry Waite paid another

91 Forty-nine hostages took part in the Christmas service. See: *The Iran Hostage Crisis. A Chronology of Daily Developments*, p. 415.

92 Koob, *Guest of the Revolution*, p. 193–194.

93 TNA, FCO 8/3641, 'Press statement given by Mr. T. Waite, Archbishop's envoy on arrival at Heathrow airport', 31 December 1980.

94 TNA, FCO 8/4067, 'Cable to FCO no. 30 from 21 January 1981'.

visit to Iran in February to talk about the prisoners with the revolutionary guards. Having been convinced of the good will of the Iranians, he informed the archbishop that the moment of release was close.⁹⁵ In fact, within a few days the Anglicans, both British and Iranian nationals, were set free. Jean Waddell and John and Audrey Coleman returned to London on 28 February 1981, and gave their first public statements at Heathrow Airport.⁹⁶ They emphasised the total lack of interest in their case shown by the authorities, which according to them proved the fictitiousness of their charges. They also discussed Iranian Christians who were collaborating with the new Iranian regime to forge the documents accusing the Anglican Church in Iran.⁹⁷ Shortly after their return, the archbishop's office received a telegram from the queen in which she congratulated all those who made a contribution to release the Anglicans: 'I warmly congratulate all those who were involved in their release. Please pass my good wishes to Dr and Mrs Coleman and Miss Waddell, together with my admiration for their courage throughout their long ordeal.'⁹⁸

95 Waite, *Taken on Trust*, p. 349.

96 LPL, Runcie/Main/1981/109, 'Press statement given by miss Jean Waddell at Heathrow on 28.02.81; Press statement by Dr. John and Mrs Audrey Coleman at Heathrow on 28.02.81'; *Yes the CMS magazine* (April–June 1981), p. 4–5. Jean Waddell was kept in a prison cell with five other women: a Muslim, Zoroastrian, Baha'i, and Roman Catholic, and the American journalist Cynthia Dwyer.

97 It seems that the Anglicans had been largely supported by the Roman Catholic Church. In the documents and materials there appears name of an Iranian Christian (Shapur Purpasang), who collaborated with the revolutionary authorities against the Anglican Church.

98 LPL, Runcie/ACP/1981/11, 'Text of Royal Telegram'.

The hostage crisis and the imprisoned Anglicans occupied a special place in the discourse and informative strategy of the Iranian government, creating a dichotomous vision of the world divided between these who were imperialists and aggressors and these who rejected any form of oppressive regimes. Religious affiliation played a role, but in fact the boundaries between oppressed and oppressors crossed religious identities. Thus, Christianity might be identified as both an oppressive religion used by colonisers and imperialists and as the religion of the poor in need of protection. This ambiguity is visible in the letters and pronouncements of Iranian politicians, in the slogans and cries of the revolutionary Iranian masses, and in the actions undertaken in the name of the Islamic Republic.

The hostage crisis and the experience of captivity had a twofold impact on Protestantism and on Christianity in Iran more generally. First, this was because of the prayer for hostages and the prayer with the imprisoned, which in its symbolic dimension was not limited to a specific Christian denomination or Church tradition but instead proposed unity in face of persecution. Second, the experience of prison inspired the Christian protest against tyranny and resonated with the Iranian revolutionary discourse. Thus, among the Christians in Iran both protest and prayer were transformed into communication patterns and new Church practices. But probably the most important was the reactivation of the concept of unity of the Iranian churches, which took place under the term 'Persian-speaking Christians.' Paul Hunt pointed out that in spite of the revolution, the confiscation of church property, and

the hostage crisis, ‘each month the Persian-speaking fellowship had a meeting. This started after the revolution. Farsi-speaking Christians from seven different churches came together. It was the first time meetings like this had ever been held.’⁹⁹

2.4. Remembering the Revolution

The above-mentioned letters and statements by Hassan Dehqani-Tafti are a sort of memoir from the time of the revolution, which reached its complete form in a book titled: *The Hard Awakening*, published in 1981 by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Together with another book written by Paul Hunt, *Inside Iran*, it gave an Anglican’s look into church realities under the chaotic, vague, and unpredictable events known as the Islamic revolution. The difference between these two books is that the former was written by an Iranian and gave an insider’s view, while the latter was written by a British missionary working in Iran.

After the murder of his son, the bishop stayed in Cambridge, accepting the invitation sent from Ridley Hall. There he started to write a book that became a kind of testimony of a Christian living in a time of revolution and, to some extent, a private history of the revolution.

Dehqani-Tafti worked on the book for three months, meeting every week with an editor from the Society for Promoting the Christian Knowledge. Martle Powley came to Cambridge from London, took the prepared text, edited

⁹⁹ Hunt, *Inside Iran*, p. 130.

it, and discussed it during the next session.¹⁰⁰ The title of the book was suggested by the bishop's oldest daughter Shirin, who used a phrase from a famous *ghazal* of the Iranian poet Hafez. It was an English translation of the fragment '*ešq āsān namud avval vali oftād moškelhā* by Arthur J. Arberry: 'Love at first is an easy thing but ah, the hard awakening.' The title also corresponded to the idea of awakening (*bidāri*) re-interpreted and reused by the Iranian revolutionaries. In a broader sense, the Iranian poem to which the book refers in many aspects indicates the importance of poetry among the Iranians on at least two levels: social, as a mobilising or, rather, revolutionary tool; and personal, integrated with the question of one's identity and belonging. A good example is the modern Iranian poet Christian Bozorgmehr Vaziri, who in an article titled 'Ḥāfeẓ va Masiḥ. Āyā Ḥāfeẓ masiḥi bud?' ('Hafez and Christ: Was Hafez a Christian?') wondered why Hafez referred to Jesus instead of to Muhammad, which implicitly attested to the enormous role of poetry in the maintenance of cultural identity by Iranian Christian converts.¹⁰¹

The Hard Awakening is a dialogue and polemic in nature that explores the rhythms and rhymes of the revolution. As it is based on quotations, it becomes a book about a book, a word about a word in which in the revolutionary contexts tends to be politicised, tampered with, and transformed. The book can be understood as the voice of the voiceless who resist against the appropriation of the Iranian mass movement by one religious and political party, which used

¹⁰⁰ Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design*, p. 225.

¹⁰¹ The complete text is available online: http://www.farsinet.com/vaziri/hafiz_va_masih1.html.

the mechanism of Islamic revolutionary discourse to exclude and denounce a certain social and religious group: the Anglicans. The book offers a kind of summary of the revolutionary events witnessed and experienced by the representatives of a rather marginal group. The beginning of the revolution was marked by protests tied to the Shi'a holiday commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. By referring to the Iranian revolutionary rhetoric and shouting the phrase *allahu akbar*, Dehqani-Tafti pointed out that the slogan was transformed into – *allahu akbar – Komeyni rahbar* ('God is great; Khomeini is the leader').¹⁰² The slogans that filled the public space set the framework for politically public expression and influenced anti-American and anti-Western sentiments determining the popular response to the Anglican Church in Iran.

The book, which was written when the American hostages and the members of the Iranian Anglican diocese were detained by the Iranians, attracted attention even before it was published. From August 1980, the Foreign Office in collaboration with the archbishop of Canterbury sought a way to influence the Iranian authorities with regards to the detained British citizens. They received information about the manuscript of the bishop's book. Responding to a request of the Foreign Office, Patrick Gilbert, the general secretary of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, dispatched the manuscript to Douglas Hurd on 1 December 1980, informing him that the publication would not be ready by

¹⁰² More about the revolutionary slogans: Mohammad H. Panahi, *An introduction to the Islamic Revolution of Iran and its Slogans* (London: Islamic Centre and revolutionary Organization, 2001).

February 1981.¹⁰³ On December 5, Hurd's secretary prepared an answer that in the context of subsequent events seems to be very significant. The letter to Gilbert contains the following statement: 'Bishop Dehqani-Tafti's book is obviously a very personal record of events in which he and his family have been deeply and tragically involved. I think it sets out admirably the record of a sad period in the recent history of Iran. Future historians will find it a useful document in trying to analyse the larger picture of these times.'¹⁰⁴ Indeed, historians can find it useful in creating a picture of a person immersed in revolutionary plots or in studying the development of the revolutionary discourse from the vantage point of a representative of a certain minority group. However, when the letter was written, pointing out its historical value was used as an excuse for delaying its publication. The author of the letter suggested that the book could cause a lot of harm in the case of British citizens held in Iranian prisons and give rise to a new wave of persecution of Anglicans in Iran. When he became aware of the Foreign Office's wish, the bishop maintained that the publication of the book would neither make relations between Anglicans and Iranian authorities worse nor would it impact the attempt to release the British prisoners. He also added that he was not in a position to delay the book's publication.¹⁰⁵

On December 15, Douglas Hurd met Patrick Gilbert, while the staff of the Department of the Middle East at FO remained in contact with the bishop. Gilbert assured the

103 TNA, FCO 8/3641, 'Gilbert to Hurd', 1 December 1980.

104 TNA, FCO 8/3641, 'Hurd to Gilbert', 5 December 1980.

105 TNA, FCO 8/3641, 'Lampport's note on the Anglican Church in Iran', 17 December 1980.

Foreign Office that he would try to again with the bishop. The case was also presented to Archbishop Runcie, who argued that he knew of the planned publication, but Lambeth Palace had not received the manuscript yet. In the meantime, Lamport contacted the Lion Publishing Company to discuss the terms of the publication of another book about the Iranian Revolution written by an Anglican working in Iran, Paul Hunt. The company expressed willingness to delay the publication of that book. Terry Waite, the archbishop's envoy to Khomeini, was also against publication. He went to Iran during Christmas in 1980. The pressure on the bishop to resign or delay the publication continued after his return to London at the beginning of 1981.¹⁰⁶ Undoubtedly, this was a very difficult time for Bishop Dehqani-Tafti, who was denied the right to tell his own story about the revolution. This seems to be symbolic. Recalling these events, the bishop admitted that he was pushed by different institutions to refuse the publication of the book.¹⁰⁷ He was convinced that the archbishop's envoy had been instructed by the Iranians to stop the publication, which according to him might be a condition for release of the British citizens detained in Iranian custody.¹⁰⁸ The pressure he felt gave rise to concerns about freedom of speech. He was, however, supported by Professor Ann Lambton from the School of African and Oriental Studies in London¹⁰⁹ who chaired the Council of Friendship of the Diocese of Iran and knew Iranian issues well. The bishop also had the support of the

¹⁰⁶ TNA, FCO 8/4067, 'SPCK and the bishop of Isfahan', 23 January 1981.

¹⁰⁷ Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design*, p. 229.

¹⁰⁸ Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design*, p. 229.

¹⁰⁹ In 1939–1945, she was worked at the British embassy in Tehran.

publishing house, which nonetheless decided to make a compromise and stop publication until the detainees in Iran were released.¹¹⁰

In February 1980, the drama of the detained Anglicans came to an end. Thus, there was no reason to stop the publication of the bishop's book anymore. In fact, at the beginning of the year the publisher announced that the book would be published in the new *Triangle* series and was engaged in selling the publisher's rights to the United States, the Netherlands, Germany, and Australia.¹¹¹ Soon, the book appeared in German, Arabic, Danish, Icelandic, and Finnish translations. Two years after the English publication, a Persian translation was completed. In 1995, the book was republished in Persian by Sobrab Books. It was printed in New Port Beach, California, which seems to be significant considering the size of the Iranian diaspora in that American state. In 1981, it was published in Danish, raising considerable Christian interest in Scandinavia, and for some time remained on the bestseller list in Denmark. In 1981, the bishop, invited by Leif Munksgaard of Danmission, who was responsible for the distribution of Christian literature in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries before the revolution, came to Denmark to promote the book and talk about the situation of Christians in Iran¹¹² (figure 15).

The discussion over the publication of the book *Hard Awakening* opened a new lens through which we should perceive the Iranian revolution. It raises the questions

110 Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design*, p. 229.

111 LPL, Runcie/ACP/1981/10, 'Martin to Waite', 6 January 1981.

112 Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design*, p. 234.

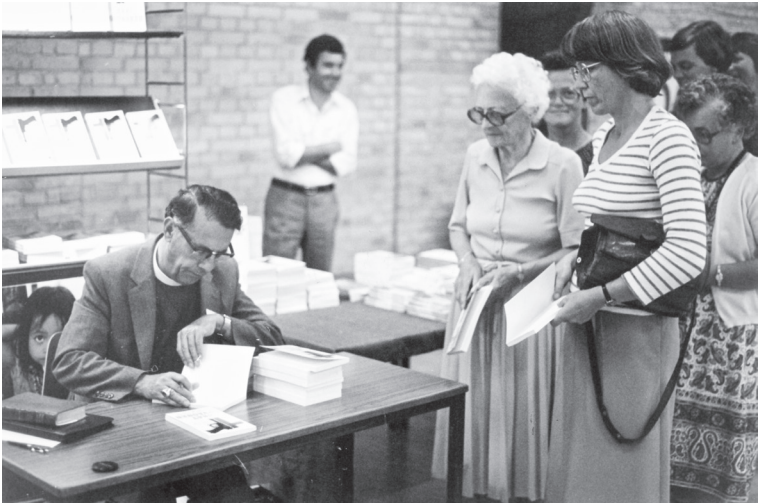


Figure 15. Bishop Dehqani-Tafti signing his book *The Hard Awakening* (Danmission Photo Archive)

about the relationship between politics and memory or, more broadly, about the variety of revolutionary narratives and revolutionary discourses battling and contradicting each other. The revolution was an explosion of different narratives like the official Iranian one and political ones, but also marginal ones that belonged to uncategorised and unrecognised Christians.

The Hard Awakening refers, in a sense, to the mediating role of the text in advocating for the Iranian Revolution. The book as a message to the Iranians manifests the values that they share: martyrdom and sacrifice.

The publication of the book coincided with a wave of Iranian migrants coming to Great Britain. Thus the Anglican Church faced the new challenge of preparing work among the Iranians living outside of Iran. One of the manifestations of this activity was the publication of Persian literature concerning Christian doctrine and the development of Christianity in Iran. The bishop founded a publishing house called 'Sohrab' (the name of one of the heroes of Šahnāme), which his martyred son, Bahram, had used as a literary penname.¹¹³

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The period of 1978–1981 completely changed the situation of the Protestant communities in Iran as well as the conditions of the other minority groups: religious, ethnic, and political (especially leftists who felt that the revolution

113 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, *Masiḥ va masiḥiyat nazd-e Irāniyān*, vol. 3 (Basingstoke: Sohrab Books, 1994), p. 400.

was handicapped by the Islamists). The Protestant churches were allowed to exist under the new Iranian regulations. One of them was the preservation of the strict ethnic composition: Armenians and Assyrians regardless of their church affiliation were allowed to confess their faith.

After the release of the Anglicans from Iranian prisons, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti went into exile and never came back to his native land. Officially, he remained the head of the Anglican Diocese in Iran until 1986, when Iraj Mottahedeh was appointed bishop. He focused on both pastoral work and on writing books.

The revolution affected the private lives of Christians, involving them in seeking new forms of expressing their identity. The dispersion of Iranian Christians around the world required a reconceptualisation of both the history of the Iranian Church and of its core idea.

After the brutal persecutions of the Anglicans during the first years of the Islamic Republic, other groups, such as Pentecostals, experienced a new wave of repression and harassment in the 1990s. The daily life of Protestants in Iran has become a constant revolution, in the meaning in which this term was originally understood: as a protest against oppression and a prayer for the oppressed.

3

Everyday Revolutions: Iranian Protestants in the Revolutionary State

The feelings expressed by Christians living in Iran at the time of the revolution hardly differed from common Iranian attitudes towards the idea of the new Iran after the departure of the last shah. Charles Kurzman pointed out in his book *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* that in its on-going process the Islamic revolution was an anomalous, chaotic, and even contradictory movement devoid of a coherent, single narrative. Concerning Christians, we should try to gauge their expectations, what they gained, and, finally, what they lost during the revolution. Furthermore, we should take into account the reactions of Western missionaries and Iranian Christians to the revolutionary ideas. They diverged from each other as their understanding of history and attitudes towards the monarchy were incompatible. This has already been presented in the book's previous chapters.

We can assume that the revolution caused the necessity of re-defining Christianity in the Iranian context, making it more 'Iranian' in style and depriving it of Western influences and, at the same time, requiring one to confess his or her chosen religion in daily life under the new political circumstances. Explaining the revolution in post-revolutionary outcomes, we see that the evolutionary

nature of the attitudes and approaches ranged from hope to disappointment.

It is worth noticing that the revolution as a cultural phenomenon also created a new interpretative paradigm offering a revision of history and introducing new cultural practices. Thus, the revolution itself can be seen as a practice and a way of communication. Through the dissemination of revolutionary texts, the Iranian people became familiar with the revolutionary ideas that in practice consisted of their expressing grievances in public and protesting. The protest among the Christian communities consisting of the Iranian converts took the form of prayer in the Persian language, which was and is still being removed by the Iranian authorities from church discourse and Christian worship.

We can presume that the practices reviled by the Iranian Protestants after the revolution resemble general Iranian activity before the revolution with their desire for the removal of tyrannical government. It also means that religious conversion and the expression of Christian identity after the revolutionary events emerged within a cultural framework re-fashioned by Iranians dissatisfied with the Islamic republic and disappointed with the fruits of the revolution.

Some Iranians perceived religious conversion not as a process of alienation from their culture but, on the contrary, as a return to their own values. What was the context of religious conversion and what was it that inspired Iranians to become Christians? Was conversion a process of discovering history and the pre-Islamic past and interweaving one's personal narrative with the Biblical stories?

The everyday revolutions – the category introduced in this chapter – are connected to Iranian Christians' daily

reading of Bible and discovery of Persian figures and places in its pages. They were a reading of the Bible translated into Persian. Perceptions of language as the source of one's identity were common among the church members who supported an inclusive category of Persian-speaking Christians.

This chapter covers the 1980s and 1990s, following the 1981 release of the American hostages and of the Anglicans kept in Iranian prisons. It provides some analysis of the changes and developments in the persecuted Anglican Church in the 1980s and of the progress and growth of the Pentecostal community in the 1990s. In fact, the situation of Christians in Iran in 1981–1988 should be placed within the broader context of the Iran-Iraq War, which had a great impact on demographics, society, and internal policies. During the war, the Iranian authorities categorised and evaluated all internal communities using the concept of martyrdom. The category was also accepted by the recognised minority groups in Iran that by emphasising their loyalty to the state, which in practice meant participation in the war, found symbolic representation in the Iranian political and cultural discourse.¹ However, among the Protestants the idea of martyrdom after the revolution was predominantly reserved for those who were murdered during and after the revolution. Part of this chapter is devoted to this problem.

1 The most 'visual' aspect of such a symbolic recognition of the minorities is manifested by the place they occupied in the museums devoted to the Iran-Iraq War, called by the Iranians the 'Sacred Defence' (*defā'-e moqaddas*). See: Christine Gruber, 'The Martyrs' Museum in Tehran: Visualizing Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran', *Visual Anthropology* (2012), 25, 1–2, p. 68–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2012.629171>.

In the end, however, more general information concerning the activity of Iranian Christians in cyberspace is included.

The changes that the Protestant Churches in Iran experienced after the revolution are as follows: high levels of migration, the appearance of new Iranian Protestant communities across the globe, new forms of evangelisation (through television and the internet), and the process of the 'Pentecostalisation' of the Protestant tradition in Iran itself.

3.1. The Exiled Church, Migrations, and the Re-shaping of the Protestant Tradition in Iran

When conducting research among the Christian communities in Iran, it is easy to fall into the trap of statistics. All minority groups collect their own statistical data. However, there are no sources that we can fully rely on. Moreover, with regards to the study of converts, the situation is even worse. What we know is that the revolution of 1979 had a profound impact on every aspect of the communal and personal life of the religious communities and their members. Political and economic conditions changed dramatically after the fall of the monarchy, causing waves of migration among the minorities, including Protestants. Although the measures that the Iranian authorities took against the Anglican Church in 1979 and 1980 were exceptional, very high rates of migration were typical for all religious minorities, both those recognised by the law and those that remained unrecognised.

The study of migrations is very important in the context of the spread of Christianity among the Iranians in

particular, and Muslims in general. Even now, we can observe that Muslims who have migrated to the United States and Europe tend to change their religion. It was also the minorities that experienced the highest levels of migration. Of course, this is related to the position of Islam in post-revolutionary Iran. Islam became the dominant religion and the criterion for the classification of individuals and groups that also experienced economic changes and political tensions. The changes that were relatively easy to observe are of a quantitative character; it is difficult to study qualitative data.

In their valuable study on the topic, Mohammad Hemmasi and Carolyn Prorok try to explain the nature of the changes, addressing questions such as: How has the size of the religious minorities changed since the Islamic revolution? How does the demographic structure of religious minorities differ from that of the Muslim majority with regards to age, gender, fertility, etc.? What is the geographical distribution of the minorities (including the proportions of those living in rural and urban areas)? To what degree did political circumstances influence the demographic patterns of religious minority communities?² These questions are relevant to research on Protestantism in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

No proper and valuable research has been done concerning the population of the religious minorities in Iran, not to mention the Protestant communities specifically. The

2 Carolyn V. Prorok, Mohammad Hemmasi, 'Demographic Changes in Iran's Officially Recognized Religious Minority Populations Since the Islamic Revolution', *African and Asian Studies* (2002), 1, 2, p. 63–86, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156921002x00077>.

estimates are based on personal interviews and observations rather than on systematic studies, which are practically impossible to conduct. Mohammad Hemmasi, who analysed the demographic changes among the religious minorities after the Islamic revolution, confirmed such a problem. In the case of the Christian and Jewish populations, he noted significant declines compared to the situation from the 1976 census. He limited his research to the recognised minorities, which means that the only Christian groups taken into account were the Assyrians and the Armenians. Naturally, there were great declines among them.³ However, the problem with studying the Protestants is much more complex. First, this is because the number of Protestants, mostly Pentecostals, is growing in Iran, but they are hidden believers operating through nets of house churches. Second, the Iranian Protestant churches are increasing outside of Iran. Such a process was rooted in the revolution, when members of the Protestant communities, both foreign-born and Iranian, were expelled from the country or had their lives threatened and thus decided to leave Iran. How did they maintain contacts with the believers who remained in the Islamic republic? How did the waves of migration shape and re-shape the Protestant churches in Iran, and how did they influence church structure, affiliation, and activity?

In the previous chapter, we saw that an unintended result of the revolution was the loosening of denominational borders and identifications among the Protestant Christians in Iran manifested by the affirmation of the

3 James Barry, ‘“This is not Our Country”: Declining Diversity in the Islamic Republic of Iran’, *The Muslim World* (2015), 105, 3, p. 281–298.

concept of ‘Persian-speaking Christians.’ Nevertheless, at a particular level church education was provided within the existing church structures in the framework of a certain ecclesiastical tradition: Presbyterian or Episcopal. In the US and UK, some of the Iranian Christian organisations came into being immediately after the revolution. They initially attracted Christian migrants from Iran, but afterwards they initiated missionary work to reach Iranian Muslims. In the UK, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti became a symbol of the persecuted church and attracted the Iranians through his faith and courage. Thus, I believe that we should focus on him again when discussing the exiled Iranian church.

On 19 January 1981, a meeting of the so-called Iran Group, whose task was to analyse the situation in Iran in reference to the work of Bishop Dehqani-Tafti, was held at Lambeth Palace. He and his wife Margaret took part in the meeting.⁴ During the discussion, the fate of the Baha’is and other religious groups in Iran was mentioned but, of course, the most important matter was the bishop’s personal situation. It was clear that he would never be allowed to return to Iran again;⁵ thus he became a ‘bishop in exile,’ which was officially confirmed in a resolution approved by the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC-4, Resolution 30) entitled: ‘Anglican Clergy in Exile.’ He was appointed an auxiliary bishop in

4 LPL, Runcie/ACP/1981/10, ‘Meeting of the Iran Group’, 19 January 1981. Among the participants were: Miss R. Anstey (BCC), The Revd. R. Huddleson (BMU), The Revd. Canon M. K. Moore (CFR), The Revd. D. Chaplin (PWM), The Revd. J. Clark (CMS), The Revd. G. B. Braund (ACC), The Ven. R. Lindley (JandMECA), Mr. J. McDouall, The Rt. Revd. J. Howe (ACC), Mr. T. Waite (Lambeth), Mr. Martin (ACC).

5 TNA, FCO 8/4069, ‘Lampton to Miers’, 5 March 1981.

Winchester and was granted the ability to visit Middle Eastern countries. In 1983, he obtained British citizenship.⁶

John Howe, a representative of the Anglican Consultative Council, suggested that the bishop should stay somewhere near London to be able to conduct his work because, as Howe acknowledged, 'most Iranians who have had to flee are in the London area and as yet they (not only the Anglicans) look to Hassan as a leader.'⁷ The statement confirmed the position and the authority of the bishop both among the Iranians living in the UK and among the growing community of Iranian Christians gathered around the bishop. In fact, in May 1981 Dehqani-Tafti informed Lambeth Palace that within a few months a group of nearly forty people regularly met to attend the Christian service conducted in the Persian language. The Fellowship of Persian Speaking Christians was formed after the revolution to support Iranian Christians living outside Iran. In a letter to Lambeth Palace, the bishop mentioned an idea that had been growing in prominence in the United States: 'Recently, this idea has taken host in North America. They are busy printing Persian Christian books and working among Persians in diaspora.'⁸ He was convinced that the revolution opened new fields of missionary enterprises and that work among the Iranian diaspora was one of them. In May 1981, the bishop responded to an invitation from the George Washington University, where his son had been studying, and thus paid a memorable visit

6 LPL, Runcie/Main/1981/61, 'Archbishop of Canterbury to Dehqani-Tafti', 7 September 1981.

7 LPL, Runcie/ACP/1981/10, John Howe, 'Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti and the Church of England', 20 February 1981.

8 LPL, Runcie/Main/1981/61, 'Dehqani-Tafti to Hook', 11 May 1981.

to the US.⁹ It was one of the many journeys that he undertook in the years after the revolution to share his faith and pain, encouraging and inspiring Christians all over the world. That trip to the US, however, was a special one, as it was the first one made after the release of the Anglicans from Iranian prisons, and thus it drew the attention of the Foreign Office, which felt responsible for protecting the bishop's life.¹⁰

Inside Iran, the situation of the Anglicans became stable. In a letter to the Bishop dated 5 October 1981, Nicolas Barrington reported on his meeting with Iraj Mottahedeh, giving some accounts of the financial and organisational problems. He reminded that as a British diplomat and an Anglican Christian he was deprived of the possibility of attending church.¹¹ Barrington was appointed head of the British diplomatic mission at a difficult moment when diplomatic relations between the UK and Iran were suspended. He resided in the British embassy compounds on Ferdousi Street but under the flag of the Kingdom of Sweden. He mentioned in a letter that he would destroy any letter he received from the bishop in order to avoid any false accusations from the Iranian authorities. He was also convinced that the Anglican Church suffered more than the others because it had more converts.¹²

In a text published in 1983 under the title 'IRAN: Four Years after the Islamic Revolution,' Dehqani-Tafti predicted that nothing in Iran would change as long as Khomeini was

9 Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design*, p. 233.

10 TNA, FCO 8/4069, 'Lennox to Berthoud', 24 March 1981.

11 CMSA, ACC 892 O4, 'Barrington to Dehqani-Tafti', 5 October 1981.

12 Nicholas Barrington, *Envoy. A Diplomatic Journey* (London–New York: The Radcliffe Press, 2014), p. 230.

alive. He indicated a desire for revenge and Iranian individualism as the main obstacles in dealing with Iranians after the revolution. His suggestion that Islam was not the only force among the Iranians is also worth noting: 'At the moment the country is under the sway of those religious leaders, and there does not seem to be anything effective enough to challenge this. But, as mentioned above, Islam has not been and is not the only force in the country. The 'Persian-ness' of the Iranian character ought also to be taken into account [in the context of Christianity].'¹³ It seems that the category of 'Persian-ness' or 'Iran-ness' is crucial to understanding the concept of Iranian Christianity and, in a broader sense, the process of creating a Christian identity associated with Iranian culture and traditions among the Iranians. This was exactly what the exiled bishop was working on. His main aim was to produce books describing the relationship between Christianity and Iranian culture written by an Iranian and addressed to Iranians. He implemented this idea by organising a low-cost publishing house in his own home called Sohrab House. It published the Persian translation of *The Hard Awakening* (the book described in Chapter 2). He also continually issued diocesan bulletins informing about the achievements and needs of the Anglicans and generally about the Christians in Iran. In 1986, he started to publish the four-page bulletin *The Flame*, which in 1990 changed its name to *The Mustard Seed*. Despite these efforts, he was not able to perform his duties as a bishop in the Anglican Diocese in Iran. In 1985, he raised the

13 LPL, Runcie/ACP/1983/14, Hassan B. Dehqani-Tafti, 'Iran – four years after the Islamic Revolution', May 1983, p. 4.

question of the consecration of a new bishop for the threatened and dispersed Anglican flock in Iran. After some informal consultation, he informed Archbishop Runcie about his plans to appoint archdeacon Iraj Mottahedeh as bishop. Archbishop Runcie expressed his approval, mentioning that the ceremony should be carried out by at least three bishops, as prescribed in the Anglican regulations.¹⁴

The episcopal consecration of Iraj Mottahedeh was held on 11 June 1986, and was indisputably the most important event in the church's life after 1979 (figure 16). What should be emphasised is that the consecration ceremony was held, for the first time in history, in Tehran. Moreover, the ceremony became a real ecumenical event that brought together around 300 Christians from the various churches in Iran. Four Anglican bishops came to Iran to consecrate the new bishop: Archbishop David Penman, Archbishop Robert William Dann, and Bishop Kenneth Bruce Mason from Australia as well as Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali from Pakistan.¹⁵ Although the event brought attention to Iranian Christians in Iran and abroad, the Iranian Anglican diocese remained very small. In addition to the new bishop, only two more priests were serving the church at that time.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, kept track of the events in Iran and in the whole Middle East. His envoy Terry Waite, who had been negotiating the release of the Anglicans, paid a short visit to Iran in order to unsuccessfully try and help the church to retrieve its

¹⁴ Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design*, p. 239.

¹⁵ *The Flame. An occasional newsletter from the Anglican Bishop of Iran* (October 1986), 2, p. 2.



Figure 16. Consecration ceremony of Iraj Mottahedeh
(Archives of the Church Missionary Society)

confiscated properties.¹⁶ Waite stayed in touch with Iranian politicians and again was sent as a negotiator during the Lebanese hostage crisis.¹⁷ It was believed that Iran backed the Hezbollah group responsible for taking the hostages. When Terry Waite was imprisoned in January 1987, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti prepared some reports concerning the image of the Anglicans in the Iranian press. He pointed out that six years after the release of the Anglican prisoners in Iran the Iranian official press levelled accusations against church members. In one of the articles in an official newspaper he found the picture of himself with his wife and two daughters reprinted from Paul Hunt's book *Inside Iran*.¹⁸ He thought it might be connected somehow to Terry Waite and to some requests of the Iranian authorities towards the British. Fortunately, it had no impact on the Anglican Church in Iran.

The early 1980s were a transitional period for Iranian Protestants. It is true that decline in membership in the Anglican Church in Iran was significant but, on the other hand, there was a systematic growth of the number of Pentecostals. This attests to the tendency towards the 'Pentecostalisation' of the small Iranian Protestant communities and the attractiveness of this form of Christianity to former Muslims. At the beginning of the 1980s, Mehdi Dibaj joined the Pentecostal Church and started to work in the northern part of Iran in Sari, inhabited mostly by devout Muslims, where he was imprisoned in 1983. Some of the Iranian Presbyterians also joined the Pentecostal

16 Waite, *Taken on Trust*, p. 356.

17 There he was taken hostage and was released in November 1991.

18 CMSA, ACC 892 05, 'Dehqani-Tafti to Robert Runcie', 28 April 1987.

communities. The best known among them was a pastor from Mashhad named Hossein Soodmand.

In 1981, Haik Hovsepien Mehr became superintendent of the *Jamā'at-e Rabbāni* (Assemblies of God) in Iran. He was convinced that the only way for the Church to survive is through spreading the Christian message. Against all odds, he got involved in missionary work in the impenetrable region that is Kurdistan. He promoted the idea of personal evangelisation as the best possible way to communicate with Iranians, developed the house church networks, and, above all, emphasised the importance of using the Persian language in missionary work. Although he was an Armenian, his attitudes towards Iranian culture were manifested in the title *mehr* 'kindness, mercy'. Some years later, in 1993, he prepared a report for the Assembly of God Missionary Division estimating the total number of members of the Pentecostal Church at 2,500¹⁹ (table 3), which was an increase compared to the data from the pre-revolutionary records.

Table 3. Pentecostal Church in Iran. Statistics for 1993

Membership	approx. 2,500
Number of attendants	3,500
Sunday school	600
Baptised in the Spirit	2,300
Number of churches	14
Number of church workers (full time)	35
Number of Assyrian AoG churches	5
Number of Assyrian church workers (full time)	8
Membership (Assyrian church)	1,200

Source: AG, WM, folder: Iran (1990–1994).

¹⁹ AG, WM, folder: Iran (1990–1994), Haik Hovsepien, 'Iran Statistics', 17 December 1993.

Hovsepien Mehr made a division between the Iranian AoG, the community that used the Persian language during worship, and the Assyrian AoG. Such a division was historically justified (see: Chapter 1). The number of church workers is impressive especially when we compare it to the number of members and workers the Anglican Church (mentioned above). The difference between members and attendants is also important. These statistics provide evidence of church growth. The reason why the Iranians abandoned Islam in the years after the revolution was, in his view, disillusionment with politicised Islam and a hunger for true spirituality. To some extent, Pentecostalism resembled the mystical spirituality that permeated Iranian culture. We can also expect that a kind of ‘Pentecostalisation’ among the Christians in Iran could be seen also among the Iranians who left the country after the revolution. In his report prepared twelve years after the revolution, Hovsepien Mehr estimated the number of Iranians living abroad at about three million. As we know, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti wished to organise a kind of community of Iranian Christians living abroad. Such an idea was realised on a greater scale by the Pentecostal Church workers who came to the UK. In 1990, an organisation called Elam Ministries was founded in the UK. Elam Ministries commenced its training programme in February 1990 with the arrival of six students from Iran. After several months, the number of students reached eleven²⁰ and still was growing.

20 AG, WM, folder: Iran (1990–1994), ‘Iranian Bible Training and Resource Centre’, Elam Ministries, August 1991.

At the end of this part of the chapter, we should recall once more Bishop Dehqani-Tafti. In the middle of the 1980s, he was confounded as he witnessed rivalry between the churches, which wanted to turn Iranians into their parishioners. He suggested that ‘rather than quick superficial conversion, [the Iranians] need a great deal of sympathy and understanding, and ways of deepening their trust in God while adjusting their old faith to the new one.’²¹ He raised an important question concerning conversion to Christianity among Iranians living outside of Iran and the motivations that led them to such a decision. He insisted on the gradual process of becoming a Christian believer, having been convinced that Christian literature in Persian would be helpful in making proper decisions by balancing the emotional desires and intellectual needs of converts. However, several questions remained. How did the Iranian Revolution impact Christianity? Did post-revolutionary Iranian Christianity absorb the revolutionary values? If so, how are they manifested in conversion to Christianity?

3.2. The Church of Converts and the Martyred Church

When discussing Iranian Christians both in Iran and out of the country, we cannot avoid the problem of conversion and its complexity. Conversion, in fact, emerged in daily life, the daily struggles and everyday decisions of the people who decided to embrace a new religion. This was both an individual

21 *The Flame. An occasional newsletter from the Anglican Bishop of Iran* (October 1986), 2, p. 4.

decision and the communal process of the re-configuration of the past. The Islamic revolution began by reforming the idea of being Iranian. Ali Shariati, one of the revolutionary thinkers, implemented the concept of return – *bāzgašt* – arguing that what the Iranians really needed was a re-discovery of their identity rooted not in their mythological Aryan past but in Shi‘a Islam.²² In a way, the revolution was a historical project of rebuilding the nation by rediscovering the past; as such, it became a model of conversion implemented on both the social and individual levels. A personal choice was justified by more general tendencies that were occurring in society. Similarly, conversion to Christianity among the Iranians should not be treated only as a personal choice but rather as the result of a new interpretation and understanding of the past, re-discovered again in light of religion and the text – Christianity and the Bible. It is a concept of return, however, not to Shi‘a Islam categorised as an alien religion nor to the myth of the Aryan origin of Iranians, but to the Bible and Iranian history written on its pages. A conversion to Christianity after the revolution is significantly different from one undertaken before it; the former is much more radical in terms of reactions towards Islam. Contrary to the dialogical approach towards the Islamic Iranian tradition represented by Bishop Dehqani-Tafti, the new converts radically rejected Islam, expecting the ‘fall of Islam in Iran.’²³ I propose to treat conversion to Christianity

22 Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian. A Political Biography of Ali Shai‘ati* (London–New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000), p. 346–347.

23 I refer to the influential Iranian convert Reza Safa, his ministry (Christian television TV Nejat) and his books, especially: Reza Safa, *The Coming Fall of Islam in Iran* (Lake Mary, FL: Front Line, 2006).

among the Iranians as an idea of a return to history, or rather as a return to self, which has much in common with the concept of sharia. Conversion to Christianity in a country that called itself the Islamic Republic must be seen as a declaration not only of a religious but also of a political nature. Conversion is a means of protest.

Conversion and a Re-Discovered History

History plays an important, but yet not a fully recognised role in the Iranian Christian imagination. It seems to be obvious that after their conversion neophytes treat the Bible as a source of their own personal history and when they attend the Iranian Protestant churches they are convinced by preachers delivering sermons based on the chapter from the Book of Isaiah in which the Persian King Cyrus and his special role in Biblical history is emphasised; they see that without Cyrus they as Iranians would not be who they are: Christians. *Kuroš-e Bozorg* (Cyrus the Great) linked them with Iranian culture and the Bible, inspiring a personal choice to accept the Christian tradition. Of course, praise for King Cyrus by the Iranian shah during the celebration of 2,500 years of monarchy helped the Protestant churches to attract some Iranians to the Bible. After the revolution and collapse of the monarchy, the Biblical story of the ‘anointed Persian king’ became an Iranian Christian narrative or rather counter-narrative alternative to the official and Islamic one.

The Bible is regarded as a source of inspiration while the Iranian names recalled in its pages are used as names of the leading Christian organisation. Elam Ministries, mentioned

in the previous chapter, is the best example. The name Elam refers to the ancient province of Persia. Like other parts of ancient Iran mentioned in the Bible²⁴ or events like that described in Acts in which people gathered from Media and Parthia on Pentecost allow the Iranian converts to place themselves among the Biblical events and constitute the idea of their Christian identity and history. In today's Iran, such a historical account is, in fact, a counter-history quite opposed to the interpretation of the Iranian past made by the government after the Islamic revolution. What seems to be important is the discovery of pre-Islamic history by the Iranian converts and their neglecting of Islam. As we have seen, Christianity was recognised as a foreign element in the revolutionary discourse. In the converts' image, the process is reversed: Islam is categorised as a non-Iranian element. As such, conversion means a true return to the past and return to the self. It also inspires Iranian Christians to study the early relationship between Christianity and Iran. Conversion seems to reveal an academic zeal. A good example is the writings and memories of Dehqani-Tafti in which such a tendency is clearly visible. Before and after the revolution, he stayed in contact with the leading Iranologists like Ehsan Yarshater and Yahya Armajani in order to document the spread of Christianity among the Iranians before Islam became their national religion.

Undoubtedly, the Protestants in Iran treated history instrumentally. When in contact with the so-called Nestorians, Pentecostals or Presbyterians tried to retain them their

24 Edwin M. Ymauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996).

missionary zeal from previous times. History was always re-read through a missionary lens. Today, however, history is treated by the converts emotionally; it is re-read after one's conversion and re-discovered as proof of their decision and guarantee of their continuation with the Iranian tradition.

Conversion as a Protest

Conversions to Christianity in Iran are of a mystical character; they are less intellectual and are not preceded by intensive studies of Christian texts and doctrines. When discussing their motivations for conversion, the converts emphasise their disappointment with Islam. Thus, they try to escape from politicised Islam, or from radical interpretations of it made by Khomeini and his followers. In this sense, Islam becomes something inauthentic and at the same time oppressive in the converts' eyes, which strongly contrasts with Christianity, which insists on the imperative of love, even for one's enemies. Obviously, it would be wrong to say that only Christianity attracts the Iranians' attention; some of them have tried to return to Zoroastrianism or to the Baha'i faith.

Concentrating on the disappointment with Islam as the main motivation for Iranians' change of religion, we come to the problem of conversion as a form of protest. Protest, however, is one of the basic terms in the Iranian Shi'a tradition. Hamid Dabashi, an Iranian scholar, states that the paradox of Shi'a Islam is that it has authority while having no power, yet once it obtains power it loses its authority and legitimacy in the people's eyes.²⁵ This statement – presented

25 Dabashi, *Shi'ism*, p. XIV.

here in a simplified form – refers to the Iranian cultural values that cumulated in Iranian Shi'a and publicly manifested in the most important event in the 20th century history of Iran – the Islamic revolution, which became a kind of protest against the domestic policies of Mohammad Reza Shah and at the same time against the international world system. As a manifestation of Iranian cultural values and the revolutionary discourse, the Iranian Revolution emphasised the Iranian concept of protest against every single form of tyranny, which could be one explanation why Iranians become Christians.

Considering the changes that occurred among the Christians in Iran in the years after the revolution, we can notice, in fact, two different phenomena related to various experiences: the idea of the transitional or exiled church rooted in the intensity of migrations and the ethos of martyrdom as a result of political pressure and persecution.

3.3. Martyrdom as a Practice

Christianity as well as Shi'a Islam were reinterpreted by the Iranians. Before the revolution, Shi'a Islam was re-interpreted in light of Third World revolutionary terms. The person responsible for that was Ali Shariati, who by re-reading the Christian and Marxist texts created a new category of martyr (*šahid*) in light of the upcoming revolution. In his view, martyrdom comprises sacrifice of one's life and witness to such an act. He pointed out that the Shi'a tradition started with protest, as 'no' was said to the path chosen by

history²⁶ and history was rejected with the revolutionary call of *'āšurā*. What is more, Shi'a Islam was categorised by Shariati as an egalitarian movement and had no need of being guided by the Shi'a clergy, contrary to what actually happened after the revolution. His interpretations of Shi'a Islam and Iranian traditions influenced by liberation theology led him to the conclusion that Iranian identity was rooted in Islam, in 'red Shi'a' (*tašī'-e sorḵ*) and, we should add, the religion of martyrdom (*maḏhab-e šahādat*). This concept was exclusive in the sense that it made national aspirations and one's religious affiliation equal. It would be unacceptable for Iranian Christians who despite being Iranian rejected Shi'a Islam. Prior to the revolution, the new social concepts, which we can call 'revolutionary martyrdom,' influenced the Iranian poets.

Sorour S. Soroudi analysed how Jesus was portrayed in Persian poetry, insisting that in modern poetry Jesus became a social activist rather than a healer or miracle worker. He pointed out that the poetry of Ahmad Shamlou and particularly his poem *Marg-e Nāšeri* ('Death of the Nazarene') is the best example of such a shift in the image of Jesus.²⁷ In his polemic with the ideas of Ali Shariati, Hassan Dehqani-Tafti also recalled Shamlou's poem.²⁸ Dehqani-Tafti rejected

26 A[li] Š[aria'ti], *Tašī'-e sorḵ* (Našr-e farhang-o jām'e: Tehrān, s.a.), p. 9.

27 Sorour S. Soroudi, 'On Jesus' Image in Modern Persian Poetry', *The Muslim World* (1979), 69, 4, p. 221–228, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1979.tb03387.x>.

28 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, 'The Plague of Westernization or Scope for Integration?', in *Hassan Barnaba Dehqani-Tafti 1920–2008*, compiled by Margaret Dehqani-Tafti (Basingstoke: Sohrab Books, 2008), p. 128–137.

the identity model proposed by the Shi'a thinker, instead admiring the universality, plurality, and cultural diversity within the Christian tradition. It is true that after the Islamic revolution the Christian tradition in Iran needed to be re-defined in a new political and cultural reality. Although the concept of martyrdom is inseparable from Christian beliefs for the Iranian Christians in Iran, it had a new meaning. After the death of pastor Arastu Siyah, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti counted him among the 'martyrs of revolution.' After the death of his only son, martyrdom became a reality of the church and evidence of its presence. 'The Iranian Church does really exist because it is ready to die for its faith,' he wrote.²⁹ In these words, Dehqani-Tafti defined what really attracted Iranians to Christianity in the time of revolution: its authenticity was manifested in willingness to become a martyr.

The Islamic revolution made martyrdom a social and political concern. The state took responsibility for educating and creating new citizens by promoting cultural values and identity models. Martyrdom was at the centre of a new cultural policy. Roxanne Varzi noticed that martyrdom would lose its meaning without memorialisation, but memorialisation would lose its effectiveness without a photograph.³⁰ A good example of an Iranian cultural project aimed at memorisation and representation of the war's victims and martyrs from the time of revolution is

29 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, 'The Bishop's Letter', *The Iran Diocesan News* (May 1979), 122, p. 2.

30 Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls. Youth, Media and Martyrdom in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 62.

a networks of museums devoted to what is called in the Iranian nomenclature ‘Sacred Defence’ (*defā‘-e moqaddas*), or the Iraqi-Iranian war. The main and the most splendorous one was established in Tehran according to the plan revealed in 2004, which is called *Bāg-e muze-ye defā‘-e moqaddas* (‘The Garden Museum of the Sacred Defence’).³¹ The museum, which operates with a tremendous panache, is an educational institution (figure 17) offering a tour through the history of Iran, which was previously re-interpreted and re-constructed by the architects of the Islamic revolution.

What is fascinating is the way in which the religious minorities recognised by Iranian law (Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, but only Armenians and Assyrians among the latter category) are represented and portrayed in the ‘museum of martyrs.’ They are memorialised and represented by photographs, pamphlets, and personal belongings, such as: notes, letters, Bibles, and IDs arranged and exhibited in the museum halls (figure 18).

The Iranian culture of martyrdom is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. It includes the recognised minorities because of their participation in the war, while the unrecognised groups that in fact could not take part in revolutionary events are excluded and their recognition and public remembrance are denied. With its various forms of cultural practices, as a new Iranian phenomenon the culture of martyrdom can be seen as an influential tool in creating an identity and strengthening the sense of belonging to the revolutionary state. The unrecognised communities, including ethnically Iranian Protestants, are immersed

31 More on the museum’s website: <http://iranhdm.ir/>.



Figure 17. Inside the Museum of Sacred Defence
(Marcin Rzepka)



Figure 18. Personal belongings of an Armenian 'martyr'
(Marcin Rzepka)

in the post-revolutionary culture despite their rejection of revolutionary state policy. Although the concept of martyrdom is interpreted differently by Iranian Protestants, they maintain its main functions, such as the integration of the community and a coherent model of identity. Moreover, the idea of martyrdom is transmitted through education, which is based on the memorialisation of the martyrs and their visual representation. The gallery of the Iranian Christian martyrs went virtually into the cyberspace, while church attendance became an educational practice on the way to martyrdom.

In 1990, Haik Hovsepian Mehr, a superintendent of the Pentecostal Church in Iran at that time, perfectly described 'education in martyrdom' as the church's answer to Iranian reality.

Actually, we don't baptise unless a person has studied the Word of God for one year. We are strict these days and will not baptise anyone who has come under emotional stress or has accepted Christ emotionally. This is because anyone who accepts Christ has to pay the price and we have to teach them to be really strong believers... so, this is their first level Bible school.³²

In fact, the 1990s were a significant time for Iran's Protestants. Although the country undertook a more conciliatory policy towards the outside world under the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the situation of Christians became worse in Iran. In 1990, Hossein Soodmand, a pastor

32 AG, WM, folder: Iran (1990-1994), 'Haik Hovespian Mehr interviewed by Lynn Hofstad', 30 October 1990.

of the Pentecostal Church in Mashhad, was charged with apostasy and subsequently executed. Mehdi Dibaj, also a convert from Islam, was accused of apostasy but was freed from prison at the beginning of 1994 under strong international pressure; he was found dead a month after his release. In 1994, Haik Hovsepian Mehr, an Iranian of Armenian origin who was engaged in a worldwide campaign for the Dibaj's release, was found murdered. His funeral ceremony, which gathered 2,000 attendees, integrated Iran's Protestants.

The death of Haik Hovsepian Mehr was disputed globally, not only among the Pentecostals in the US, but also among those in Japan and Korea. In spite of the martyrdom of their church's leaders, the Pentecostals experienced growth, which is hard to explain only by disappointment with Islam as a motivation for conversion. The attractiveness of the Pentecostal Church among the Iranians was related to its ability to absorb cultural codes and values, even those that were manifested during the revolution. Undoubtedly, the Pentecostals constituted the only Christian church whose membership grew continuously. 'The Iranian people,' according to a report from 1996, 'are probably more open to the Gospel than any other group in the entire Muslim world. More than half of all Assemblies of God believers in Iran – and more than half of our pastors and associate pastors – are of Muslim background. The Central Assembly of God Church in Tehran last year alone baptised more than eighty Muslims in water!'³³

33 AG, WM, folder: Iran (1995–1999), 'Majidiye (Glorious) Church, Tehran'.



Figure 19. Mehdi Dibaj and Haik Hovsepian Mehr
(Flower Pentecostal Heritage Centre)

Martyrdom, valorised positively within the cultural revolutionary frames, became significant evidence of the Protestant Church's cultural turn in the 1990s. In fact, martyrdom made the Iranian Christians more globalised.

3.4. The Global Church and Cyberspace Iranian Communities

The popularity of such terms as 'global Christianity' could be interpreted not just as the global spread of Christian beliefs but also as the qualitative change within the nature of this religion. It consists of the fact that the missionary centres have shifted from the European world towards the Global South, while Western Christianity has become marginalised or provincialised – to use the terminology of Dipesh Chakrabarty – in reference to Europe. In his book *Whose Religion is Christianity?* Lamin Sanneh, a Gambian ex-Muslim, questions the importance of local emancipated cultures in today's Christian Church.³⁴ The importance of such a change is rooted in re-reading the main Christian text, the Bible, through a postcolonial lens.

Obviously, it is not the only change. Another is the appearance of cyber religion. In her book *When Religion Meets New Media*, Heidi Campbell tries to analyse the impact of the new media on traditional religion in terms of religious authority, the transmission of religious knowledge, and

³⁴ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003).

for understanding the religious community.³⁵ As for the Christians remaining under the influence of new media, we can observe both the changes in the attitudes toward the constitutive texts like the Bible evincing in commentary (postcolonial hermeneutics) or forms in which it is distributed (Biblical quotes distributed through text message) and the change of practices like new forms of gathering, a good example being the 'I Am Second' movement or church attendance. These practices also include new missionary strategies, especially evangelisation through the Internet, highly popular in Muslim societies, including Iran.

The Islamic revolution re-shaped the Christianity in Iran on several levels. One was ideological, as it became more 'postcolonial' and 'revolutionary' in style. It was also re-shaped at a spatial and technological level, with its unpredictable effects making it much more global and dependant on cyber platforms. It also influenced the idea of the church among Iranian Christians who were ex-Muslims. Undoubtedly, Iranian Christianity became global and charismatic in the years after the Islamic revolution.

In his book *Charismatic City*, Nimi Wariboko researches the relationship between the church and globalisation, which led him to the idea that the church is 'the mother of an independent civil society.'³⁶ It seems to be true regarding the concept of the church among Iranians. What is more, the idea of church among the Iranians was evolved from its

35 Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (London: Routledge, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203695371>.

36 Nimi Wariboko, *The Charismatic City and the Public Resurgence of Religion: A Pentecostal Social Ethics of Cosmopolitan Urban Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), p. 51.

understanding as a place belonging to religious yet recognised minorities in the country (Armenians and Assyrians) to concepts of a space of, to quote Wariboko, ‘new beginnings, new thinking, new energies, and renewed religious intensity in every continent or country. It is a place of gifts (*charis*) and charisma; linked sites embedded in trans-territorial networks of people and activities.’³⁷ What Wariboko refers to as his idea of a charismatic city can be used to describe the Iranian church after the revolution, which constitutes new beginnings, new thinking, and trans-territoriality.

The connection between the local diffusion of the Protestant traditions among the Iranians and the global spread of Iranian migrants after the revolution is visible and undisputable. The growing number of Iranian converts is clearly visible inside the Iranian communities in Germany, the UK, the US, and even Turkey. However, those who live in Iran in the absence of the opportunity to go to church create alternative forms of Christian communication and church attendance by developing house churches or online communities operating in cyberspace. The geography of the Iranian Church is evolving from territorially oriented to transterritorial and cyberspace communities; from local churches to global, borderless, online and place of worship transmitted through satellite channels. One Iranian convert who for the first time took part in a Christian service launched on the Christian satellite channel ‘Church Seven’ in Persian shared his impression: ‘My family and I put on our best clothes, set out our chairs, and got our Bibles. Then

37 Wariboko, *The Charismatic City*, p. XVI.

we sat down, watched the program together, and attended church for the first time.’

The statement was published on the website of the non-profit group called Small Media based in London.³⁸ The group has published a report entitled: *Heretics: Iran’s Religious Minorities* regarding the Internet and its role among the Iranian religious minorities in practicing their faith and enhancing relations among the community members.

The research conducted by the Small Media Group indicates the role of the new media in today’s Iran as a powerful mobilising tool, especially among young Iranians, also creating a new concept of the Church. The electronic media help young Iranians to contest official state policy. Regarding Christians, the new media play a crucial role in the process of documenting history – the history of the church leaders, martyrs, church members, and of Church-state relations. They also shape the interpretative framework for revising the pre-revolutionary past and as such they create the collective Iranian Christians memory, which is useful in expressing their Christian identity. It is worth emphasising the average age of the converts, which is under thirty. As young people born mostly after the revolution, they have no personal experiences of the street protests against the last Iranian shah, but they have experienced the power of the Internet, Facebook, and Twitter in organising new forms of resistance, protest, and, finally, prayer. So the church – especially in its cyber form – was transformed into a reservoir of memories, testimonies, documents, and photographs.

38 <https://smallmedia.org.uk/heretics/> [21 August 2017].

In today's world, almost all Iranian Christian organisations explore and use the new media in their missionary activity. Some of them, however, conduct their research to discover the expectations and thoughts of website visitors or Facebook commentators. In a way, it resembles questionnaires distributed among the Iranian converts in the 20th century. Such organisations keep statistics showing visitors' interest in the content they publish on their websites. One of the first Iranian Christian sites was *farsinet.com*, which was launched symbolically on 21 March 1996 (in the Iranian calendar 21 March, is a *nou ruz* – the first day of the year). Statistics show an increase in the number of page viewers from 200,000 in 1996 to almost 20 million at the time of writing.³⁹ A similar increase has also been observed with regards to the Iranian Christian satellite channels, which offer online programs in Persian. The most popular are: *Mohabbat* and *Sat 7 Pars*. The statistical data collected by these channels, which also includes studies on the reception of the materials they broadcast and publish, show a strong connection between the interest of non-Christian viewers, users, commentators, and their subsequent conversion to Christianity. A statistical report by *Sat 7 Pars* TV conducted in Iran in 2011 showed that 1.7 million Iranians watched programmes on this channel, while 5 million had some information about them.⁴⁰ The organisation *Elam Ministries* tries to reach Iranians through various websites, like *kalameh.com* and *elam.com*, which are visited by thousands

39 <http://www.farsinet.com/statistics/> [21 August 2017].

40 Mark Bradley, *Too Many to Jail. The Story of Iran's New Christians* (Oxford–Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2014), p. 30.

of Iranians. It has a team working on the Internet daily: 'Elam's Internet pastors also engage daily with evangelism and discipleship online, through various platforms. Internet churches meet regularly for Bible reading, teaching, worship, and prayer. Internet churches are powerful vehicles for discipleship, especially for those who are unable to meet for face-to-face fellowship with other believers.'⁴¹

Recalling a question asked in Chapter 1 concerning Iranian Protestants' identity, we should keep in mind the historical, cultural, and geographical circumstances in order to research how the idea of the church was changing after the revolution. We noticed the geographical distribution and dispersion of the church members, which was connected to persecution in the country that caused a wave of migrations. Thus we observe the transformation of the Iranian Protestant churches into a global community and charismatic culture and the move of the Iranian Protestants to cyberspace, which is categorised as a free space not bound by the control by the Iranian officials and authorities, guaranteeing the Iranian converts to complete their small but significant daily revolutions using the Persian language freely.

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The Islamic revolution in Iran started with technology used for religious purposes. Today, technology plays an important role in Iranian Christians' 'everyday revolutions,'

41 <https://www.elam.com/article/tv-and-internet> [21 August 2017].

spreading prayers for the marginalised and disseminating protest against discriminatory policies.

The history of the Protestant churches in Iran after 1981 was affected by the Iran-Iraq War. At that time, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti was convinced that any change on the political scene could occur only after the Ayatollah Khomeini's death. However, the Church members experienced no improved conditions after 1989, the year when the father of the Islamic revolution died. On the contrary, the 1990s brought new waves of persecution. This did not mean the end of Protestant activity in Iran. With regards to the Anglican diocese in Iran, despite the complete marginalisation of the Church and, in a sense, its 'de-Iranisation,' which was visible, for instance, in the appointments of non-Iranians to ecclesiastical posts, the Anglican tradition was still attractive for Iranians living in the UK. By limiting the Anglican Church's public activity, post-revolutionary Iran contributed to the creation of a new paradigm of Iranian Christianity based on martyrdom and indirectly fuelled a missionary zeal among the Pentecostals, whose numbers of converts and attendees continue to grow.

The increasing number of Iranian converts is exceptional in the whole history of Christianity in Iran. Some of the converts are influenced by the new forms of propagating the Christian faith via the Internet, satellite television programmes, Biblical apps, etc. That is why research on Iranian Christian cyberspace seems to be unavoidable today even when we take into account the revolutionary era. The new websites, social networks, blogs, and other forms of the new media offer the opportunity to create archives with very rich and diverse sources: audio-visual, visual,

oral, and written, containing the personal testimonies of converts, pictures, films, and recorded sermons. They are collected by Iranian Christian organisations and by local Iranian churches and appear on the official sites and on the private blogs, which helps to memorialise the Iranian Christian martyrs, believers, and thinkers from the time of the revolution.

Conclusions

The Islamic revolution had a great impact on all Christian churches operating in Iran; however, the Protestant churches, which focused on spreading the Christian message in order to bring the Muslim believers to faith in Jesus, faced unforeseen persecutions. As a result, the number of church members decreased in the years following the revolution. This is certainly true with regards to the Anglican and Presbyterian churches. The latter, however, had a long tradition of working among the Assyrian people, and the revolution officially limited its activity to that ethnic group. It seems that the only Church that experienced a growth in membership was the Pentecostal Church. The most radical change was, however, the global diffusion of Iranian Christians.

The revolution can be seen as a shift or rather a reconfiguration of an identity issue. Thus, the concepts of history and the past occupied a special position in the revolutionary discourse. Regarding the Christian churches, we can treat the revolution as a process of re-thinking and re-defining Christianity among the Iranians and at the same time adopting the features that led Iranians to participate in the uprising against tyranny and protest against the past defined by the monarch. Iranian Protestants created their own Christian culture by absorbing common features of both the general exiled Iranian cultural production characterised

by a strong emphasis on usage of the new communication tools and the American evangelical tradition. It gave a synthesis of a book culture focused on the Bible and Persian poetry with modern technologies used to spread the Iranian Christian message. In fact, the Christianity offered a new kind of cosmopolitan culture. Of course, on the basic level we witness different approaches to what can be classified as parts of Iranian identity: history, culture, and religion. The revolution revitalised the concept of ‘Persian-speaking Christians,’ which allowed for the removal of the strict ethnic categorisations that were preserved in the Iranian constitution. Christians of Iranian origin remained ‘unclassified believers’ in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The category of Persian-speaking Christians (*masiḥiyān fārsi-zabān*) leads the discussion on Iranian Christians onto new tracks. I am convinced that introducing language in research on Christianity in Iran can broaden the perspective and allow us to go further from the studies predominantly oriented on the particular churches, their structures, and behaviours to answer how they communicated with each other, how they used the official language of the state, and how they used language to define their goals and hopes as a minority. Such a category predominantly encompasses Christians not recognised by the Islamic state. In such an approach, the Persian language becomes a symbolic tool used both by the Christians in Iran and by the state. The Iranian government uses language as a tool of ‘symbolic power’ to categorise citizens for exclusion from or inclusion in the community.

With regards to Christianity in Iran, language helps us make a synthesis of Protestant missionary activity and

helps us understand the process of the development of the indigenous Iranian churches in the 20th century. It also refers to the state's ethnic and cultural policy.

From the beginning of the reign of Reza Pahlavi, the official project of modernity was welcomed with appreciation by the missionaries. The project was, however, focused on the Persian language, which became part of the state policy, the object of cultural and social dispute. At the same time it was under the strong influence of the state-run academy called *Farhangestān*, whose main goal was to create a normative frame for preserving the language's purity by removing old Arabic or Turkish loanwords. What characterised the period was linguistic purism and linguistic nationalism. The language was transformed into an object of identity discourse followed by natural changes of geographical names or personal names. Subsequently, it became a useful tool for the inclusion or exclusion of any individual living on Iranian soil. Language, which was positively valorised, was considered in religious terms and was even sanctified. Ahmad Kasravi, a modern secular Iranian thinker, developed his view on Persian as a 'pure language': *zabān-e pāk*.¹ The purification of language can be interpreted as a kind of purification of the Iranian soul. Of course, so pure a language is connected to the pure land – *ḡak-e pāk*. It seems that these two vectors of Iranian identity, language and land, are what defines Iran-ness (*iraniyāt*), even more than religion (in fact, the Iranians eventually rejected their old religion, Zoroastrianism, and adopted Islam). We see

1 Ahmad Kasravi, *Zabān-e Pāk* (1322), online edition: <http://www.kasravi.info/>.

that the Iranian converts felt Iranian, as attested by their keeping their language and maintaining relations with their land.

Therefore, there is no doubt that language is included in various – even different – Iranian twentieth century concepts of nationalism, including the official Pahlavi nationalism (of a chauvinistic nature), the secular nationalism of Kasravi or Mosaddegh, and the religiously focused nationalism of Khomeini and his followers. The latter was manifested through the Constitution adopted after the revolution, which I suggest should be viewed as an aspect of the debate on Iranian identity. In this new victorious Islamic discourse, it is hard to avoid the question of the relationship between religion and language. However, the new concept of the ‘national language’ is manifested in the Iranian Constitution.

During the revolution, Hassan Dehqani-Tafti wrote a text titled: ‘Identity of the Persian-speaking Christians in Iran’ (*Hovviyat-e masiḥiyān-e fārsi-zabān-e Irān*).² Demands and efforts for the recognition of Persian-speaking Christians on the official level break the dominant diktat of Islamic authorities. The persecutions experienced by Christians in subsequent years are, in my opinion, rooted in controversies over the Persian-speaking Iranian Christians suspected of being ex-Muslims and accused of apostasy. A noteworthy fact is that the new wave of persecution, which started in 1990s, mostly affected the Pentecostal churches, which were very active in popularising Christian literature in the Persian language and offered services in Persian. In spite of

2 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, *Masiḥ va masiḥiyat nazd-e Irāniyān*, vol. 3, p. 410.

the closing of churches and murders of pastors, Pentecostals are now the fastest growing Christian community among Iranians, both in Iran and abroad.

The problem with the growth, development, and future of Pentecostal Christianity in the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be merely reduced to a linguistic matter. However, language as a symbolic, social, and cultural value plays a crucial role in defining sameness and otherness as a key feature of constructing both religious and national identity. For any Pentecostal Christian, the gift of tongues is a distinct sign of being a Pentecostal. In other words, speaking one's language simply means to belong to the proper and not only linguistic community. In the case of Iran, use of the Persian language by Christians caused a lot of problems on the official political level. Iranian authorities refrained from recognising other Christians in Iran except Assyrians and Armenians, whereas the existence of Persian-speaking Christian communities suggests that they do not belong to Armenian or Assyrian groups, as they have refused to become Muslims in the Islamic republic.

Considering the history of Pentecostal Christianity and more generally the history of Protestantism in Iran, we can observe a qualitative change from churches focused on ethnicity to churches open to Iranians adopting the strategy of using the Persian language. Undoubtedly, at the beginning of such changes the role of first Iranian converts can hardly be overestimated. Regarding the Pentecostal church, however, the role of Armenians, among them Seth Yaghnazar, should be emphasised. In 1978 in Isfahan, a year before the revolution, an Armenian named Vartan Avanesian, later a Pentecostal pastor in a Tehran church, first attended

Pentecostal worship and was astonished that the Church service was conducted in the Persian language instead of in Armenian.³ The role of the Persian language among Pentecostals (and in other denominations as well) helps us understand the efforts of Islamic authorities to stop the services in Persian and, in fact, remove the language from the Christian discourse.

In 1994, pastor Haik Hovsepian Mehr, an Armenian and the superintendent of Assemblies of God churches in Iran and chairman of the Council of Protestant Churches in Iran, received a request from the Iranian authorities to stop conducting Christian worship in churches in Iran.⁴ The same efforts to remove the Persian language from Iranian churches can be observed today. In the beginning of 2014, one of the biggest Pentecostal churches in Tehran was closed. The reason was that the Persian language was used in church worship. Thus, in the government's approach to the Persian language, the attempt to exclude it from the Christian discourse, worship, and prayer is clear. In this sense, it was symbolically moved to the Islamic space and, similar to the policy of the Pahlavi dynasty, is treated as an element of Iranian identity, albeit with some differences, as the language also has religious connotations.

Although Iranian authorities attempt to symbolically preserve the Persian language for Islam and to remove it by force from Christian worship, it still remains a powerful

3 'Isā Dibāj, 'Sar gozašt-e zendegi-ye kešiš-e Vārtān Āvānesyan az za-bān-e kod-e-šān', *Kaleme* (2007), 50, p. 47–49.

4 Kathryn Spellman, *Religion and nation. Iranian local and transnational networks in Britain* (New York–Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), p. 167.

tool in constructing the identity of Iranian Christians. We can ask whether the growing number of Iranians who have accepted Christianity and use the Persian language in their religious practices has an impact on the other, traditional churches in Iran in their attitudes towards the Persian language. What is characteristic is the fact that a growing number of Christians seem to respond to the demands of the Anglican Bishop Dehqani-Tafti to create a common Christian identity of Iranians speaking Persian. It also has a direct impact on publishing works devoted to Christian theology (mostly Protestant) written by Iranians. Paradoxically, the Persian language in Christian contexts – as a language of inter-ethnic communication – is a symbol of Christian unity. Persian converts interpret their conversion through a linguistic perspective, seeking the Christian element in their own literary and cultural tradition. This means that Iranian cultural values transmitted by the language are fully manifested in the converts' culture.

The Islamic Revolution undoubtedly re-configured the Christian tradition in Iran and its unpredictable effects are seen in growing interests toward Christianity among Iranians. An author using the name Krikor Markarian argues in his article 'Today's Iranian Revolution' that: 'Today, it seems Iran is on the verge of yet another revolution, ironically caused by the first and with Jesus at the centre.'⁵

5 Krikor Markarian, 'Today's Iranian Revolution: How the Mullahs Are Leading the Nation to Jesus', *Mission Frontiers* (September–October 2008), p. 6–13, online edition: www.missionfrontiers.org.

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The book *Prayer and Protest* is in many ways an innovative work in the international literature on the Islamic revolution in Iran. By going beyond the classic conceptions that focused mostly on the political and social aspects of the revolution, Rzepka presents the cultural contributions and evolution of the views of Christians belonging to various Christian denominations during the revolution and in the early post-revolutionary period in Iran. Through the use of hitherto unpublished archival sources, he has identified diverse factors that caused the denominational demarcation lines to blur between individual Protestant groups. Furthermore, Dr. Marcin Rzepka presents the process of the strengthening of the Pentecostal element among Persian Christians as well as those elements of that movement that were vibrant and attractive. This book introduces the reader to the fascinating world of little studied cultural, religious, and inter-denominational interactions in one of the world's most isolated countries in the 1970s and 1980s.

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