Power, Personalities and Politics
The Growth of Iranian Christianity since 1979

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Abstract

While Christianity has existed in Iran/Persia since the fourth century, if not earlier, at the middle of the twentieth century almost all Iranian Christians belonged to an ethnic minority, especially the Assyrians and the Armenians. Ethnic Iranians were almost all Muslims, and then mostly Shi'a Muslims. Since the Revolution of 1979 hundreds of thousands of ethnic Iranians have left Islam for evangelical Christianity, both within and outside of Iran. This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted factors – political, economic and technological – that have helped to create an environment wherein increasing numbers of ethnic Iranians have apostatized from Islam and become evangelical Christians. A concluding section outlines Steven Lukes' theory of power and analyzes the growth of Iranian Christianity in the light of his theory.

Keywords

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   Portions of this research are related to the author's 2014 doctoral dissertation/thesis (divinity) at the University of Edinburgh, *Living among the Breakage: Contextual Theology-making and ex-Muslim Christians*.

Christianity in Iran Prior to the Revolution

The New Testament indicates that Jewish "Parthians, Medes and Elamites" were among the first members of the Church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Yet "[t]he first verifiable evidence of Christianity as far east in Persia as Adiabene comes to light only after the middle of the second century…" (Moffett 1992:72). An organized, Christian Church has been present in what is now Iran from the third century, if not earlier.[1] The long history of Christianity in Iran prior to the twentieth century is not the concern of this article, however. By the twentieth century Christians in Iran belonged primarily to two ethnic minorities – the Armenians and the Assyrians. Presbyterian and Anglican missionaries had mostly focused their missionary work on the Christians of the Assyrian Church of the East (sometimes called "Nestorians" in older literature, though the term is considered pejorative today). Regarding the Muslim world, the overarching missionary strategy of the nineteenth century has been described well by Lyle Vander Werff (1977) and Robert Blincoe (1998), and the latter of the two labeled it "the Great Experiment." The conversion of Muslims to Christianity was a key goal of the early evangelical missionaries sent out by institutions like the American Board for the Commissioning of Foreign Missionaries and the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The former was based in the USA and catered to Presbyterian and Congregationalist missionaries; the latter was based in England and worked with Anglicans and Lutherans from the Continent.

The Great Experiment, as a missionary strategy, proposed that the best way to work towards the evangelization of Muslims would be to "reform" the indigenous, ancient churches of the region. These churches had been born over a millennium before the so-called "Reformation" in the sixteenth century in West Europe. Not surprisingly, they were not on the whole eager to be recreated in the individualistic, Enlightenment mould of Euro-American evangelicalism. So the missionaries eventually decided to create new churches of their own, mostly consisting of converted Jews, Armenians, Assyrians, and, sometimes, a converted Muslim. There were some missions that respected the integrity of the older churches, namely the Archbishop's Mission from the Tractarian wing of the Church of England. The Anglo-Catholic missionaries were, in many ways, closer to the ancient churches in their theology and liturgy than they were to the evangelicals. Their mission did not result in any conversions that we know of, but that was not their aim (Richter 1910:279–336). It did result in a substantial amount of pioneering scholarship though. When the Assyrian Church

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1 For more on the earliest contacts between Christianity and Persia see Russell 1991.

of the East decided to align itself with the Chalcedonian Russian Orthodox Church, they were asked to leave, and they did, leaving all their schools and properties to the indigenous Christians whom they called Assyrians (Blincoe 1998:95). If one assumes that missionary activity is directed at non-Christians, then the Great Experiment was not really missionary work at all. It was an effort to make one sort of Christian into another kind of Christian – a more devout, knowledgeable, bible-reading, sober Christian. But that was all.

Missionary work did take place under the aegis of the Church Missionary Society in the twentieth century, and Muslim and Jewish converts were being baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Vander Werff 1977:167). The numbers were rather small, but the culmination of this mission-ary effort can be seen in the ordination of Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, an ex-Muslim Christian, to the office of Bishop of the Diocese of Iran, one of the four dio-ceses of the Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East, itself one of thirty plus provinces of the worldwide Anglican Communion.[2]

By 1979 there were a handful of evangelical churches throughout Iran. Their members consisted of converts from the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Church of the East (Assyrians), Judaism, Baha'ism and some from Islam. The numbers were small as a percentage of the whole country. Levon Haftan, an advocate for human rights in Iran, claims that there were about 250,000 Armenian Christians in Iran prior to the Revolution (2006:NP). While this is not the entire Christian population, Armenians are by far the largest Christian community in the country. These numbers are difficult to verify.

Religious Conversion from Islam to Christianity

Religious conversion involves a turning away from and a turning to. Alfred Nock's well-known definition is helpful:

> By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong, and the new is right. (Nock 1933:7)

In speaking of Iranian Christianity today we are speaking of individuals who have made such a turn from Islam to Christianity. A number of studies exist providing accounts of why people turn from Islam to Christianity, or more

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2 For more on the life of Dehqani-Tafti see his autobiography (Dehqani-Tafti 2000).

narrowly, to Christ.[3] Among the Iranian Christians interviewed for this article, conversion generally entailed turning away from Muhammad, the Qur'an, the Ummah and Islam as old and flawed, and turning towards Jesus Christ, the Bible, the Church and the Christian religion as being new and correct. While religious conversion is often a lengthy and gradual process, it is common to identify specific events as moments of passage from the old to the new. For Iranian Christians, who are largely evangelical or charismatic, the moment of confessing "Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior" and the moment of baptism in water accompanied by an invocation of the Trinity are the two moments which are most often identified as being particularly powerful or important in passing from the old to the new.

Apostasy indicates a specific type of conversion – a turning away from a religion, but without any necessary turning to some other religion as the new. Indeed, one might turn to atheism as that which is new and right. In reference to Islam though, what the apostate turns *to* is not important. That she has turned *away from* Islam is key. In relation to this article, then, apostates have turned away from Islam (and then, normally, Shi'a Islam), and have turned *to* Christianity (and then, normally, within the evangelical tradition). In the context of this article the word "convert" will be used to refer to one who has intentionally and consciously turned away from Islam *to* Christianity, and who identifies himself as a Christian of some sort, and who has made a confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and, when security permits, belongs in some form to a local gathering of fellow Christians. Some of these individuals have received baptism, others have not.

In discussing the contemporary Iranian Christian churches in Iran (or in the Diaspora), we are speaking of gatherings of people who have undergone such an experience of conversion, though these congregations often meet in homes in Iran, rather than official religious church buildings (Lane 2008:NP). Moreover, the Iranian government appears to be aware of this and recent reports indicate that action is being taken to suppress such congregations (Tosatti 2013:NP).

Research Background

In 2010, at an inter-disciplinary conference in England, a paper was presented on the topic of Muslims who had decided to follow Jesus as he is portrayed

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3 Gaudeul 1999 is one of the best such studies. Cate and Singer 1980 is a study of Iranian converts specifically.

in the New Testament. The aim of that paper was to identify some factors of change in the second half of the twentieth century that had helped to create an environment wherein an unprecedented increase of conversions from Islam to Christianity (or Islam to Christ) has taken place.[4] The paper's key question was, "what changes have made this rather surprising and startling development possible?" (Miller 2010:2)

Since very little written material existed on the topic, interviews with a number of ministers were carried out. These ministers were both foreign and indigenous and they had experience with Christian ministry in Islamic contexts, including North Africa, the Arab world, East Africa, Iran, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Based on the information received from these sources, the following list of factors facilitating conversion was composed. This is to say that the factors helped create an environment wherein conversion was possible. It is not to say that these factors give a complete causal account for the increase in conversions from Islam to Christianity. This is the list of the top ten factors that were identified, and they are explained at some length in that paper. The number in parentheses refers to how many people (out of 30) mentioned the stated factor:

1.   Media (15)
2.   Exposure to other ways of life/thought/and religion (15)
3.   Contextualized or culturally-sensitive witness (11)
4.   Living Abroad/migration (9)
5.   Prayers/a move of the Spirit/God's timing (9)
6.   Dreams/Visions/Miracles (8)
7.   Greater number of missionaries (5)
8.   Translation of the Bible and material into local languages/dialects/ forms (5)
9.   Greater diversity in missionary strategies/platforms (4)
10. Greater boldness in evangelization (4)

This article is a continuation of that research, but focuses on Iran as a country, and ethnic Iranians specifically. Therefore it complements previous research on Iranian Christian congregations in the Diaspora (Miller 1969; Miller 2012a; Oksnevad 2012) and individual Iranian converts from Shi'a Islam to Christianity

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4   The first great movement from Islam to Christianity was in Indonesia (Willis 1977), but other examples of significant movements from Islam to Christianity are Algeria (Madany 2009), Turkey (Bultema 2010) and Kosovo (Bytici 2008). After Indonesia, Iran appears to be the largest movement from Islam to Christianity in terms of numbers of converts.

(Miller 2012b; 2009a). The next section of this paper will explore the changing environment in post-Revolution Iran that led to, or at least allowed for, the growth of an indigenous, ethnic Iranian evangelical Church within Iran, and in the Iranian Diaspora (Pankau and Siemon-Nietto 2011:44).

The Complex Issue of Determining the Number of Iranian Christians

Determining the number of Christians from a Muslim background in a country like Iran is extremely difficult. Both the Christian and the Muslim sides have motives for over-estimating and under-estimating the number of converts. Also, the precise meaning of what exactly is a convert can be debated. Is a convert someone who faithfully attends a home church? Or must they have made a confession of faith? Or must they have been baptized? What if they made a confession of faith and were baptized but no longer attend a church? The complications are evident. Nonetheless, a solid case exists for the growth of Iranian Christianity since the Revolution, even if precise numbers and definitions appear elusive. As of 1979, there were about five hundred known Christians from a Muslim background in Iran (Mandryk 2010:465).

As of 2005 Patrick Johnstone, an expert in the demographics of World Christianity, estimated about 40,000 ethnic-Iranian Christians (i.e., not including ethnic minority Christians who live in Iran and/or have Iranian citizenship. Cited in Larson 2010:8fn). Almost all of the individuals are converts from Shi'a Islam. Johnstone is the author/editor of *The Future of the Global Church: History, Trends, and Possibilities*. Moreover, having edited multiple version of *Operation World*,[5] he has access to internal information from multiple churches and mission societies not available to the public. This estimate of 40,000 is based on his own research, and the term "believer" here conforms to the common evangelical usage: a person who has made a confession of faith in Jesus Christ, but who may or may not be baptized.

Another well-informed source places that number, within Iran, at around a hundred thousand as of 2010. This number refers specifically to people who have made a confession of faith to their local congregation (likely a home church [Lane 2008]) and who, if security permits, regularly attend and take part in the life of some sort of congregation within Iran. Some, but not all,

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5   Now in its seventh edition, *Operation World*, contains detailed profiles of each and every
     country in the world, including the number of Christians and evangelical Christians. Each
     country profile contains information on how one can pray for the country.

of such people have been baptized.[6] The source of this information must remain confidential due to security reasons, but he is a person with decades of experience in ministry within Iran, and in the Iranian Diaspora as well. He is respected within the Iranian Christian community and is presently involved in strategic media ministry reaching into Iran as well as pastoring an Iranian church in the Diaspora.

The Joshua Project is an initiative of the US Center for World Mission. It has as one of its main goals tracking to what extent the people groups of the world are evangelized. Its website indicates that the population of ethnic Persians[7] in Iran is about 29.2 million, and that 00.6 per cent of that population are adherents to the Christian faith (in any of its traditions).[8] This yields a figure of 175,000 Persian Christians. Most of these individuals would be converts from Shi'a Islam, though some might be converts from Zoroastrianism or the children of converts from Shi'a Islam. Armenians and Assyrians belong to different people groups, and are thus excluded.

In sum, the task of calculating a precise number of converts in Iran is difficult for at least two reasons. First, because the precise meaning of the word "convert" is interpreted differently even among evangelicals (and most Iranian Christians are indeed evangelicals, broadly speaking). Second, because we are dealing with an illegal, deviant activity: apostasy from Islam and conversion to Christianity is a legal impossibility in Iran. The churches formed by such individuals exist, by definition, illegally. In defining the precise number of converts from Islam to Christianity in Iran – or any other Islamic nation – we are dealing with figures that are not only academically imprecise, but that also *in esse* resist careful analysis because of the security of the believers we are discussing. Nonetheless, that there exists a significant increase in the growth of Persian Christians who are converts from Shi'a Islam to Christianity, and that this has taken place after the Revolution, appears to be incontrovertible.

The previous section presented some key factors that, according to previous research, fostered an environment wherein the number of reported conversions from Islam to Christ had increased. In this section a number of estimates

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6 Though note that recent reports exist of large numbers of baptisms taking place in Iran, including one service wherein 246 Iranians were baptized (Steffan 2013:NP). It is possible that some of these were ethnic Armenians or Assyrians who were becoming evangelical Christians, but since the articles says this is connected to the house church movement, it is certain that most of these people are converts from Islam.

7 Which excludes Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Arabs with Iranian citizenship and other groups, though figures for those groups are present on the website as well.

8 Accessed on 2 July 2013 <www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=14371&rog3=IR>.

of how many converts there are in Iran were presented. One decisive figure is not available, but that the number of ethnic-Iranian Christians in Iran has grown very substantially was established. The following section will explore some of the many factors that created an environment in Iran wherein this increase in conversions has taken place. The examples are the result of field interviews as well as what little literature has been written on the topic.

After the Revolution: Politics, Economics, and Personalities

Krikor Markarian (2008a; 2008b and 2008c) proposes a number of political, religious and economic factors that appear to have contributed to the creation of an environment wherein tens of thousands of Iranians from a Shi'a background, both within and outside of Iran, have converted to Christianity. The first factor Markarian suggests is the ministry of the Assemblies of God bishop Haik Hovsepian.[9] Hovsepian, an Armenian, is a rare example of the Great Experiment actually functioning correctly. Hovsepian, in the late 1960s, began to evangelize Muslims and, by 1976, had founded five house churches among whom were about twenty Muslim-background Christians, and by 1981 that number had increased to around sixty (Markarian 2008c:7). Two years after the revolution, in 1981, Hovsepian became the leader of the Council of Protestant Ministers in Iran. From this position of influence he shared his methods and experience with other leaders and some of them began to experiment in conducting worship in Farsi rather than Armenian, meaning that the Christian worship in these churches could now be understood by the majority Shi'a Muslim population without translation. This experimentation in Farsi, which had commenced during the Anglican missions, was creatively expanded in the context of home churches by Hovsepian and his disciples.[10] Hovsepian made himself odious to the Iranian regime by protesting the imprisonment of a fellow pastor, Mehdi Dibaj, an ex-Muslim who had been a Christian for over 40 years. After calling international attention to Dibaj's apostasy trial, the latter was eventually released from custody. Four months later Dibaj was assassinated, and is considered a martyr by Iranian Christians. His written

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9   The bishop's sons have produced a movie based on his life and work (Hovsepian 2007). It is a moving tribute to their father and contains valuable footage from his ministry in Iran in the 80's and 90's. The movie can be watched in Farsi or English. The film's preview can be found online at www.acryfromiran.com/Trailer1.htm (accessed 30 June 2013).

10   No less than Bishop Dehqani-Tafti explored the theme of Christ in Persian poetry, and composed a number of Christian hymns in Farsi (Dehqani-Tafti 1990).

testimony to the court that heard his case has become an influential document for Iranian Christians because of its bold tone:

> The eternal God who sees the end from the beginning and who has chosen me to belong to Him, knew from the beginning those whose heart would be drawn to Him and also those who would be willing to sell their faith and eternity for a pot of porridge. I would rather have the whole world against me, but know that the Almighty God is with me. I would rather be called an apostate, but know that I have the approval of the God of glory, because man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart. For Him who is God for all eternity nothing is impossible. All power in heaven and on earth is in His hands.[11]

This written defense is signed "Your Christian Prisoner".

Three days after Dibaj's release in 1994, Hovsepian was abducted and assassinated. According to Markarian, this emboldened large numbers of Armenian and ethnic-Iranian Christians: "At Haik's funeral, hundreds of Persian [Muslim-background believers] turned out to honor him despite the presence of government agents documenting all who were present" (Markarian 2008c:8).

During this time, after the Revolution, there was also a growing sense of disappointment with the new regime. Members of non-Shi'a religious communities including Sunni Muslims, Baha'is, Jews and Christians experienced a loss of freedom and rights, as did women (Mahdi 2004:434). This was the case even when those communities had supported the actions of the Ayatollah Khomeini against the Shah. "Once it became clear that Ayatollah Khomeini was going to successfully set up a Muslim religious dictatorship, both Assyrians and Armenians swiftly came to the conclusion that Iran was not the place for them" (Bradley 2008:167). Since then many Christians, Jews and Baha'i have emigrated.

Prior to the Revolution much had been promised in the way of economic development and freedom. However, many Iranians felt that the new Islamic government, which purportedly governed according to the divinely revealed Shari'a, which had its source directly in God and not in man, did not deliver the prosperity and freedom that had been promised. Rather than prosperity and growth, the economy stagnated for an extended period of time, and when there was economic growth it was unevenly distributed – with the proceeds often going to allies of the Ayatollah (Zangeneh 2004:490). Another source of

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11   Farsinet. www.farsinet.com/persecuted/dibaj.html. Accessed on 8 January 2012. The website contains both the original Farsi and the English translation used above.

deep disappointment was the unprovoked Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). Both sides claimed to be engaging in the sacramental, divinely-sanctioned violence of jihad, notwithstanding the fact that their opponents were Muslims. Bradley, who has written a rare book-length treatment[12] of Iranian Christianity, arrives at the conclusion that "Since 1979 Shia Islam and the rule of the government have been one, so Shia Islam's reputation was bound to be weakened…" (Bradley 2008:x). Or as another observer writes, "The Iranian revolution seemed an answer to the prayers of so many faithful throughout the Muslim world […] However, the years of forced consolidation of clerical power, the devastating war with Iraq, and the debilitating isolation imposed by a hostile outside world have taken much of the shine off the Islamic Republic" (Abdo 2000:193). This sense that Islamic rule was essential to the development of Iranian Christianity was also mentioned by several of the people interviewed during the research. One person, reflecting on the future of Iran, wondered if Christianity would continue to grow in a future Iran of greater human rights. Utilizing the analogy of the religious marketplace, the Islamic rule of the Ayatollahs causes some people to become disillusioned with their brand and seek an alternative. Furthermore, the use of Farsi in worship in some churches has made a new product, Christianity, more easily available to Farsi-speaking Iranians.

Bradley proposes that there are also some historical aspects of Iranian culture that make the Christian message attractive to some Iranian Muslims (2008:22). He points to the fact that Shi'a Islam has within it, unlike Sunni Islam, the concept of redemptive suffering, meaning that the Christian doctrine of vicarious atonement is readily comprehensible. There is also the deep conviction I found in many of my interviews with Iranian Christians, that Islam is a form of socio-religious colonialism – that it was unjustly imposed by Arabs (an unaccomplished and uncultured group of warriors, in this view) on the rich and great culture of Persia. As one interviewee said, "Islam was a step up for the Arabs, because they moved from fighting with each other to unity; but for Iran it was a step down." Another said that after he completed his asylum process in the UK, he would legally change his Arabic name to a Persian one. For him, his Arabic birth name was inextricably linked to the concept of the suppression of Persian culture and heritage by the foreign (and presumably inferior) Arabizing culture/religion of Islam. His religious conversion was then, in some

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12   Bradley's main work is his 2008 *Iran and Christianity: Historical Identity and Present Relevance*. His 2007 book *Iran: Open Hearts in a Closed Land*, is a popularized version of the longer, better documented 2008 book, but it is affordable and much easier to find and contains many of the same conclusions.

sense, a decision to recover or restore a Persian-ness that had been obscured by Arabizing Islam.

Moreover, the Bible paints a largely positive image of Persia/Persians, going so far as to portray God as referring to Cyrus as "my messiah" or "my anointed one", in reference to his role in having the exiled Jews return to and resettle Palestine (Is. 45:1). The story of Esther takes place in Persia. It has also been suggested that the Magi whom Matthew has worshipping the infant Jesus are from Persia. While the Bible paints a respectful picture of Persians (Hershberger 2011; Huntzinger 2007), concomitant with the status of the powerful Medo-Persian Empire, the Qur'an says little to nothing about Persia.

One interviewee, "Gloria", lamented that in history class in Iran, everything started with the advent of Islam, without any mention of the illustrious history of Persia in the ancient world. She explained that insofar as Islamic historiography is concerned, everything before the birth of Islam was considered *jahiliyya*, an Arabic word which means *ignorance* and refers to the entirety of pre-Islamic history. The founder of Farsinet, which hosts the worldwide list of Iranian congregations,[13] explained that the first document he ever placed on the Internet (when the Internet was little more than an assortment of message boards) was a document on Persians in the Bible. One Iranian pastor in the American Midwest explained that he was talking with a relative in Iran by phone and he used the common phrase *in sha' allah*. It is a well-known Arabic phrase meaning "if God wills it", but is used by people all over the world without translation. He was corrected by his cousin, and was told not to use the Arabic phrase, but the Persian phrase of the same meaning: *be omida khoda*. Sufyan is an Iranian convert who has a PhD in a field of natural science and pastored a refugee Iranian church in a large Turkish city for about ten years. He commented that more and more people in Iran are choosing Persian names for their children rather than Arabic names. One Iranian pastor explained that he had given all of his children names starting with "p", since most Arabs cannot make this sound.[14]

In sum, Islam has come to be regarded by a substantial number of Iranians as a sort of pollution that corrupts their otherwise great culture (Miller 2012a:3). Once an evangelistic, house-based form of Christianity moved beyond the ethno-linguistic boundaries of the Armenian and Assyrian churches to the larger ethnic-Persian, Farsi-speaking population, eventually it too became an avenue for recovering what was lost. Christianity is perceived as being

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13   Farsinet. www.farsinet.com/icc/. Accessed 7 Jan. 2012.

14   The basic Arabic alphabet does not have a sound for 'p' or 'v'. Iranians use a modified alphabet that does have signs for these two letters.

affirmative of Persian-ness, however one defines that term, because it affirms the history of the Persians in its holy book, permits (and perhaps requires) the use of the local vernacular for worship, and translates itself into Persian – in its liturgy, holy book, and even in the act of naming children. For many, the economic and political decline of Iran since the Revolution has discredited Islam. Since Islamic rule in Iran does not allow for a separation of mosque and state, once the political claims of Islam have been disproved (i.e., to bring freedom and progress), the spiritual claims of Islam about the personality of God and his Prophet are also called into question. Iranian Muslims already have the concept of an intimate connection to God through the rich Sufi traditions there, and the idea of a righteous imam suffering on the behalf of the people is also present, and Bradley (2008:22) suggests that these may well constitute a preparation for the Gospel that many other Muslim societies do not have.

In addition to translation, the communications revolution, especially the Internet and satellite TV, has made the Christian message easily accessible to Iranians who may have never even met a Christian. Christian satellite broadcasting in Farsi started in 2000, and Diaspora Iranian Christians have been active in broadcasting Christian content to Iranians still in the country (Lewis 2008a:70). All of these factors appear to have been important in creating an atmosphere wherein Iranian Muslims could hear and embrace the Christian faith, and wherein key claims of Islam were seen as compromised by the state.

Apostasy and Power

The Prophet was unequivocal about apostasy: *man baddala diinahu, faqta-luuhu* (Al Bukhari 4:52:260), or in English, "Whoever changes his religion, slay him." The oft-quoted verse from the Qur'an, *la ikraaha fi id-diin* (Qur'an 2:256) or "there is no compulsion in religion", is not relevant to the question of apostasy – it only refers to the fact that one should not force a person to become a Muslim (though offering financial and material incentives is permitted). Islamic jurisprudence is unanimous that the male apostate must be executed, though there are differences of opinion regarding the female apostate (Fatah 2008:117; Lewis 1953:59). The Islamic Republic, at times, tries to carry out this sentence in an official capacity. When that is not possible, as was the case with Dibaj, it allegedly delegates the task to paramilitary groups not visibly and officially affiliated with the government.

Given this reality, how can one account for the notable increase in apostasy? In seeking to answer this question Steven Lukes' theory of power will be outlined, and then related to the changing environment in Iran which was

presented above. Lukes (1974) argues that power is expressed and manifested in three dimensions, all of which are deployed by the Islamic Republic to coerce ethnic Iranians to maintain the religious status quo. Paradoxically, this deployment of power for the sake of obtaining an objective (which is called agency), has resulted in the diminishing of the efficacy of the said power.

Lukes espouses what he calls a "radical view" that has "three dimensions". The first and most basic sort of power is that whereby an agent can cause another agent to decide to do something not in his interest (1974). But there must be more to power than this, he argues. For instance, is it not an exercise in power to cause certain issues never even to be raised? That is, to the extent that an agent can control the issues that are even under debate, to begin with, is also a form of power. This second dimension is able to analyze "... the question of control over the agenda of politics and the ways in which potential issues are kept out of the political process" (Lukes 1974:21).

Lukes is aware as a social scientist that it is more difficult to observe such instances of the use of power, because, unlike with the first dimension, there is no easily observable action taking place. Nonetheless, he insists that it is possible to observe such currents of power in society and gives some examples. The first dimension is a decision to *do* something: it is active, and it results in observable behavior. The second may appear to be a non-decision, but as such, is a kind of decision that thwarts or suppresses an issue or interest before it can even be raised. That act of suppression is still an action though (Lukes 1974). But Lukes finds this theory of power still insufficient, and proposes a third dimension (1974). In this third dimension one can examine a still more nuanced (if difficult to observe) use of power "in which *potential issues* are kept out of politics, whether through the operation of social forces and institutional practices or through individuals' decisions" (Lukes 1974:24). That is to say, while the second dimension understood power as being able to keep *real* issues off the political agenda, this third dimension of power is understood as the ability to prevent potential issues from becoming real issues.

Much of the rest of Lukes' book is concerned with teasing out how such a subtle thing as the third dimension can be empirically observed and tested (a requisite for a social science). He also argues (*pace* Arendt 1970) that power may indeed be coercive or violent, though it need not be (Lukes 1974). He deals with the complication of interest – what if an agent (whether communal or individual) misunderstands what *really* is in their interest? He also considers whether persuasion is a use of power, that is, to convince someone to believe that his interest should be your interest as well.

Now it is possible to apply these three dimensions to the topic of conversion to Christianity from Islam by providing some examples. Then, examples

are given of how the power of Iranian society has eroded (in all three dimensions) to the point where conversion from Islam to Christianity, while certainly not without difficulties, is a viable possibility for people that they are increasingly aware of. The following three examples, one for each of the dimensions of power Lukes proposes, are all hypothetical but realistic examples related to conversion from Islam to Christianity.

The first dimension is explained as the ability of one agent to cause another agent to do something that the second agent would not normally do. History provides many examples of such acts of power. Churches would normally not remove crosses from the exterior of their buildings; under Islamic rule, in some cases, they did. Churches did not desire to stop ringing their bells; under Islamic rule, in some cases, they did. Christians did not desire to have their sons taken by the Ottomans, forcibly converted to Islam, and then have them trained as Muslim soldiers, but under the system of *devshirme*, they allowed it. Christians did not desire to convert the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople or the Cathedral Church of St John the Baptist in Damascus into mosques, but under Islamic rule, it occurred. The assassinations (and note that the etymology of the word *assassin* originates in Shi'a Islam) of Bishop. Hovsepian and Rev. Dibaj, if indeed they are the work of the Iranian government as Iranian Christians assume, is a blatant and brutal demonstration of this facet of power.

The second dimension of power is not difficult to illustrate and is especially relevant to the Iranian context: Ahmad has been going to a local church secretly for some time, he has been reading a Bible, and he expresses interest in being baptized. Somehow, this becomes known to the secret police and they pay him a visit. They inform him that his quiet attendance of church is one thing, but the act of baptism is too much, and that, while the secret police would never do anything to hurt him, they will not be able to ensure the safety of his home, his place of business, or his person. The veiled threat succeeds. Ahmad wants to be baptized, and that is his interest. After the visit from the secret police he decides that it is too dangerous to act on his interest and therefore abandons his plan. The salient feature here is action – Ahmad was doing something, actively following a path, and the secret police actively countered his action. By means of the threat of coercion they cause him to change his plan to act on his interest. Here power is shown by its ability to enforce non-decision. The topic of baptism is simply abandoned and the status quo is maintained.

The third dimension of power is the most subtle and difficult to identify. From the point of view of studying Islam and Christianity, and specifically conversion, this is a particularly important use of power, and perhaps the most drastically diminished facet of power in reference to the topic of this article. The third dimension of power involves *foreclosing the recognition of an*

interest. From the point of view of ex-Muslim Iranian Christians, this has been carried out in several ways, many of them explicitly tied to the Iranian politic. Historically, this can be seen in the treatment of the non-Muslim *dhimmis*,[15] who were often segregated from the Muslim population. Often they had their own neighborhoods in towns, and, importantly, their safety was contingent on their use of an ethnic language like Syriac or, in Iran, Armenian in their liturgy and worship. There was no problem with them knowing and using the local lingua franca for commerce and trade, but the polluting force of Christianity had to be quarantined and isolated linguistically. Thus a rather daring Shi'a Iranian could perhaps attend the local Christian church, but would have no ability to understand what was being said in Armenian or Syriac. Neither could these enquirers easily or safely procure a Bible in their mother tongue until relatively recently.

Here, the prohibition of translation meant that potential interests could not materialize into real interests. That is, Muslims were prevented from being exposed to the Christian message, even though presumably some Muslims had a potential interest in hearing and acting on that message (Bradley 2007:15). Moreover, the indigenous Christian communities were forbidden from evangelizing Muslims, and when it was tried coercive power in its first dimension was generally employed, and the decision to evangelize reverted to a decision to not evangelize, or if the evangelist was imprisoned or killed, then an inability to evangelize.

It is important to note that, from the point of view of Iran's Muslim rulers, these acts of power, including coercive and violent power, are not only ethically permissible, but mandatory. In relation to the first dimension examples, power is understood to flow from God, and is a sign of God's favor. The career of Muhammad is validated in that he went from being powerless to being powerful. So in this reading the ability to coerce and to use that coercion to force people to comply with God's will is the very reason that power is given in the first place. Since having power is an indication of God's will, it is appropriate to deprive certain people and groups of people of power. Specifically, this is the case when such groups (like Christians and Jews) are recalcitrant in accepting the full truth of God revealed in the person of Muhammad and his Qur'an. Insofar as Jews and Christians do not completely reject God, by resorting to

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15   That is, non-Muslims under Islamic rule. It is often said that the term refers to religious minorities under Muslim rule. This is an example of the mediocrity of Islamic scholarship in the West though. A region may be 90 per cent Christian or Jewish or Zoroastrian, but that population would still be *dhimmi*, as long as the ruler is Muslim. In other words, *dhimmi* status has nothing to do with minority status.

atheism or outright polytheism, they do not need to be deprived of all power. That is, they do not need to be expulsed from lands of Muslim rule or executed. So the Christians and Jews have some things right – prophets, a belief in the resurrection and final judgment, etc. – but they have other things wrong, notably a refusal to accept the prophet-hood of Muhammad. So power is, in this reading, a measure of orthodoxy. And it is the will of God to demonstrate the orthodoxy of one community *versus* another by allowing for the orthodox to exercise power over the heterodox. The *dhimmi* system is nothing less than a just allocation of power in Islamic jurisprudence.

Because of this, the use of the means of the mosque and the state to prevent Islamic society from being polluted by the Christian message is, in their view, a virtuous act. It is an act whereby they "command that which is just and forbid that which is evil" (Qur'an 3:110). In this reading, the real interest of every Muslim is to stay a Muslim. If some Muslims hear the Christian message then they may depart from this real interest and a perceived interest (to leave Islam) may arise in them. But that perceived interest, no matter how sincerely held, is impossible to reconcile with their real interest, which must inhere with the revealed interest of Allah, and indeed of the interest of the Muslim rulers, whose power would diminish if apostasy became widespread. Moreover, following in the example of the Prophet who used violence and coercion on multiple occasions, and sometimes with great success, it is permissible to wield power in such a manner to preserve the interest of God (and the rulers). The use of coercion and violence, however, do not mean that the use of power is oppressive. Rather, it is a just and responsible use of force to ensure the maintenance of the will of God (and the power of the ruling order).

The summary above of changes in Iran since the Revolution provides some hints as to how the power – in all three dimensions – of the Iranian regime has been diminished in reference to its ability to delimit and circumscribe the proliferation of the Christian message in Iran. The example of Haik Hovsepian's funeral, part of which can be seen in the movie produced by his sons, is an example of the diminishment of their power in its first dimension. The man had been brutally murdered, yet many people still turned out for his funeral, including Christians from a Muslim background. While the government was allegedly successful in stopping the speech of Hovsepian by means of his assassination, the long-term effect was to make him into a martyr and an example of boldness and courage for the Iranian churches. Jesus' words about persecution had come true: "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). The government, in its persecution of figures like Hovsepian, Dibaj and Dehqani-Tafti and his family, provided to the Iranian Christians proof that the Bible was reliable and that Jesus' statements were trustworthy. The

government's use of persecution *qua* coercive power has, ironically, led to the diminishment of that power.

The second dimension of power involves a party being aware of an interest, like believing in Christianity, for example, but then not acting on that interest. One of my Iranian contacts in the UK, a refugee and a convert from Islam to Christianity, said that he believed that if there were freedom of religion in Iran hundreds of thousands of people would publically and openly change their religion to Christianity. This is not a legal possibility in today's Iran though, so it is an example of the successful use of power in the second dimension: a convert decides it is in her interest to have her legal status changed from Muslim to Christian, which would mean that according to issues related to family law she would be treated as a Christian, and that she would receive a Christian burial in a Christian graveyard, among other things. The Islamic Shari'a in Iran, however, does not allow for such a procedure. The interest of the convert is real, she is aware of it, but she cannot act on it.

What the Iranian regime has not been able to do is stop converts from acting on their interest in discarding the religious and political tenets of Shi'a Islam, and embracing the religious and political tenets of Christianity. The Christian message is much more widely available than ever before, and some people who hear it become aware of an interest they had not been aware of previously. While the Iranian government can make it impossible for them to legally have their conversion recognized, it is impossible to compel a person's conscience.

This is the third dimension of power, and it is here that the power of the Iranian government has been most drastically diminished. Iranian Muslims were, by various means listed above, kept from even being aware of their potential interest in converting to Christianity. Some of the methods involved segregating Christians from Muslims, forcing Christians to use languages other than Farsi in their churches, physically prohibiting the printing and distribution of the Bible and other Christian material in Farsi, monitoring church attendance and demanding lists of attendants and, of course, the threat of death upon conversion. Anglican and other missionaries had broken the language barrier. Hovsepian broke another barrier by focusing on ministries in homes rather than church buildings. The rise of satellite broadcasting in Farsi, not to mention websites, has proved very difficult for the Iranian government to censor (Lewis 2008a:70). The practice of monitoring church attendance forced the Muslim-background congregations of Iranian Christians into homes which proved much more difficult to surveil than church buildings. Finally, the close relation of politics and religion in post-Revolution Iran has led some Iranians to the conclusion that, since the government has been a political and economic failure, the religion itself is a failure. While some Iranians have left Islam

for atheism or secular humanism, others have opted for the Christian message, which is now available to them in terms of their own heritage, language and Persian culture.

Conclusion

All of the factors mentioned in the 2010 paper appear to be at play in the Iranian movement from Shi'a Islam to Christianity. The leaders of the Iranian revolution made great promises about rights and economic progress. These accomplishments would come to pass because Iran would be governed according to God's laws, and not the laws of man. Victory, justice, and progress were assured. But in the eyes of many Iranians these promises have not been fulfilled (Persaud 2011:14). Due to advancements in media and translation the Christian message is available to Iranians on an unprecedented scale and the traditional uses of power by the Iranian Republic to stymie the spread of the Christian message have proven less than successful on several fronts. Migration patterns related to politics and economics have likewise helped to create a sizeable Iranian Diaspora in Europe and North America, and operating from countries with greater religious freedom, the power of the Iranian leadership to contain the spread of the Christian message has diminished (Mandryk 2010:467). During this period we have also seen a number of bold, indigenous Iranian Christians – some of which were mentioned in this article, like Hovsepian, Dibaj and Dehqani-Tafti – operating from a position of relative powerlessness but deploying what power they did possess for the sake of transforming society. The recognition that one possesses power, even if in a relatively small amount, and the subsequent decision to deploy that power is called agency – which is what we have seen in the lives of these figures.

This complex web of realities – migration, politics, indigenous leadership, translation, developments in the media – describes an environment wherein an Iranian Church composed largely of converts from Shi'a Islam has come into existence and experienced growth. Paradoxically, the coercive power of the Ayatollahs and their allies, which greatly increased after the Revolution, has proved incapable of containing the growth of this relatively powerless community. On the contrary, the deployment of coercive power has, it appears, made conversion to Christianity all the more acceptable as a gesture of defiance or resistance. The Christian message, which posits that an obscure, crucified rabbi is in fact the victorious and eternal King of Kings (a Persian title, incidentally), appears to have a capacity to, in some circumstances at least, invert coercive power in all its dimensions into a position of weakness, while

simultaneously translating the deployment of such coercive power into an affirmation of its own message, thus augmenting its own power. Or to quote an older and more recognized scholar, ". . . when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

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