Published: December 15, 1991
Last Updated: June 29, 2015

CHRISTIANITY VIII. CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN PERSIA

CHRISTIANITY

viii. Christian Missions in Persia

Christianity was introduced in Persia in the Parthian period, and several bishoprics were established there (Latourette, II, pp. 263ff.). That the Persian church was itself active in proselytizing abroad at the end of the Sasanian period (224-651) and immediately after is clear from remains in India and China, including a trilingual (Pahlavi, Arabic, and Tamil) copper tablet of 824 outlining the rights granted to a Christian church in Quilon (cf. Latourette, II, pp. 283, 334); the cross of Travancore, a copy of the famed cross from the church on Mount St. Thomas near Madras, inscribed in Book Pahlavi (Sanjana; T. K. Joseph); another cross with a Pahlavi inscription in the Syrian church in Kottayam, in the state of Kerala, India; and the Xi-an Fu monument in China, erected in a Christian monastery there in 781 c.e. under the leadership of the Persian Christian Yazd-bōzēd (Saeki, pp. 68-70).

After the Islamic conquest of Persia (completed ca. 31/651) Christians had the status of a protected minority (*ḏemmī*, q.v.); the main group, concentrated in western Azarbaijan, has been variously known as Nestorian, Assyrian (*āšūrī*),

and Chaldean. In the years between 1012/1604 and 1026/1617 the Safavid Shah ʿAbbās I (996-1038/1588-1629) forcibly transported thousands of Christian Armenians from their homeland and resettled them in different parts of Persia, mainly around Isfahan. The Nestorians and Armenians are still the main groups of indigenous Christians in the country (see armenians of modern iran; assyrians in iran).

For political and economic reasons the Christian states of Europe were eager to form alliances with the Shiʿite rulers of Persia against the Ottoman empire, which was predominantly Sunnite. In the reign of Shah ʿAbbās I, who actively sought political alliance with European powers, several diplomatic missions were sent from Europe to Persia. Their members included Roman Catholic monks from several orders, some of whom were allowed to establish religious centers for European Christians, who were coming to Persia in increasing numbers (Armajani, pp. 145ff.). Shah ʿAbbās allowed the Carmelites to open two schools in Isfahan for teaching European languages and issued an edict ordering all governors (*ḥokkām*), *dārūgā*s, and people of his realm to receive and treat the Carmelite missionary Père Jean Thadée with the utmost respect (Falsafī, III, pp. 68-74). Not until the first half of the 13th/19th century, however, did French Roman Catholics and Protestants from the United States and England send actual missions to Persia. A devout French Roman Catholic layman, Eugène Boré, arrived in Tabrīz in 1254/1838 to study Persian language. In Ḏu'l-qaʿda 1254/January 1839 he established a school in Tabrīz, the Université Humanitaire (Dār al-ʿelm-e šenāsāʾī-e melal), which he funded himself, hoping that by teaching them French he could familiarize Persians with European science. Despite harassment from local Armenians and American missions he attracted a good number of students and received royal commendation for his efforts. In 1255/1840 in Tabrīz he joined the French diplomatic delegation on its way to the Persian court (Flandin, I, pp. 166-67; "Dāstān-ī," pp. 63-66; Maḥbūbī Ardakānī, I, pp. 241-42). In Ṣafar 1256/April 1840, by a *farmān* (edict) from Moḥammad Shah Qājār (r. 1250-64/1834-48), Roman Catholics were granted permission to open schools in Persia without fear of harassment from Armenians ("Dāstān-ī," pp. 63-66), and Boré persuaded the French Lazarist brothers to come to Persia (Boré). Within a few years they had opened schools in a number of cities and towns (Figure 1); the most important, the Collège Saint-Louis (Madrasa-ye San Lūʾī) in Tehran, was opened in 1277/1860-61. The Lazarists were followed by the Sisters of Charity, who founded several girls' schools, including École Jeanne d'Arc (Madrasa-ye Žāndārk) in Tehran (Piolet; Waterfield, pp. 79-83). The Roman Catholic clergy

in Persia served the spiritual needs of Roman Catholic foreigners and of Armenian and Nestorian uniates (Christians who accept the authority of the pope but follow their own rites in their native languages), but they generally limited their work among Persian Muslims to education. By 1343 Š./1964 Catholic missionaries were running seven schools, two kindergartens, and an orphanage in Tehran and seven elementary schools in Tabrīz, Reżāʾīya (Urmia), Ḵorramšahr, and Qazvīn, beside a summer camp at Nowšahr (Komīsīūn-e Mellī, II, pp. 1211-12).

By far the most extensive missionary work in Persia was carried on by Protestants, however: Presbyterians from the United States and Anglicans from Great Britain. Their programs were facilitated by translation of the Bible into Persian (see bible vii. persian translations of the bible). The translation of the New Testament that became the basis for all future efforts was prepared by the Englishman Henry Martyn in collaboration with Mīrzā Sayyed ʿAlī Khan of Shiraz; the work was completed in 1227/1812 (Waterfield, p. 179). Subsequently other translations were made, and in 1895 the British and Foreign Bible Society published a revision of all previous texts by the Scottish missionary Robert Bruce; this version is still considered standard (Waterfield, pp. 177-81).

Because hostility from the authorities made it almost impossible to work among Persian Muslims, both Americans and British focused their earliest missionary efforts on native Christians. The first American missionaries, the Reverend and Mrs. Justin Perkins, arrived in Persia in 1250/1834 and the next year established headquarters at Urmia in Azarbaijan, where they founded a church, a school, and a printing house. Their main purpose was to educate Nestorians to carry the Christian message to their Muslim compatriots (Elder, p. 7; Waterfield, p. 103). The school at Urmia was founded in about 1255/1839 and taught smithcraft and carpet weaving in addition to academic courses. In 1255/1839 Perkins procured a royal edict commending him for his efforts in educating young people. By 1304/1887 the mission had established eighty-one schools, with 1,823 pupils (Elder, p. 18; “Dāstān-ī,” pp. 60-61). Soon the American mission had grown to include doctors, educators, and preachers. The Assyrian Evangelical Church of Urmia was organized in 1287-88/1871, and other churches were established in more than fifty neighboring villages (Elder, p. 23). Medical work was an integral part of the Presbyterian mission program. Because of frequent epidemics and an almost total lack of modern medical care in Persia, missionary doctors were in demand especially among the local

Kurds. The first American hospital (Westminster Hospital) was opened at Urmia in 1304-05/1882, and the missionaries trained native nurses and assistants, who later were themselves able to provide health care (Elder, p. 21). Internal social and political changes in Persia greatly facilitated expansion of the Presbyterians' medical mission; in 1285-86/1869 the Mission to Nestorians was renamed the Mission to Persia (Elder, p. 23), and by 1330/1912 Presbyterian hospitals had been established at Tehran (1881), Hamadān (1903), Kermānšāh (1912), Tabrīz (1913), Mašhad (1916), and Rašt (1923), with schools in all but Mašhad, where the small number of students forced the mission to close the school after a few years (Elder, pp. 24ff.; see also bīmārestān).

The evangelical movement that had swept Europe in the mid-18th century had stimulated the founding in England of the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) in 1799 and the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1809. As early as 1843 the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge sent an exploratory mission to the Nestorians. This and subsequent visits of the British churchmen helped Mar Shimun, the head of the Nestorian church, realize that the coming of a British religious mission might counterbalance the work of the American Protestants and the French Catholics. In response to further appeals the Church Missionary Society of the Anglican Church sent a small mission under the leadership of Canon A. J. Maclean in 1886. These Anglicans ate, slept, and dressed exactly as did the Nestorian priests, which contrasted sharply with the Western garb and life style of the American missionaries. In 1890 four Anglican nuns arrived to establish schools for women and children. Their work continued until the beginning of World War I, when the British subjects left Urmia (Waterfield, pp. 124ff.).

By the turn of the century there were at least nine Christian missions from the United States and Europe among the Nestorians. According to J. Joseph (p. 123), "There was perhaps no missionary field in the world where there were so many rival "Christian" forces at work, as were found in Urmia at the beginning of this century, all struggling to get prominence among these few people."

In 1235/1820 Peter Gordon, a former sea captain and free-lance missionary, toured Persia with the purpose of preaching the Gospel. In Russia he had made contact with the Edinburgh Missionary Society, which had a station at Astrakhan and had provided him with tracts and copies of the Bible to distribute in Persia. Somehow he gained the impression that many Persians

were inclined to Christianity, and in his “Memorandum Concerning the Propagation of Christianity in Persia” he made recommendations for future missionaries and chose Shiraz as the most suitable center for their work. He was followed four years later by the indefatigable Joseph Wolff, who, in 1824-25, toured Persia on behalf of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews. During this tour he managed to establish schools for Armenian children in Būšehr and Shiraz. He was back in the Middle East in the years 1827-31 and traveled as far as Central Asia, Afghanistan, and India. He recommended missionary work among the Persian Jews and advocated sending doctors. In 1844 the London Society chose Baghdad as headquarters for missionary activity among the “the Jews in Chaldea and Persia.” Aaron Stern, a member of this mission, made three long, arduous trips to Persia. The mission was closed in 1865, but missionary activity was carried on by local converts. Later in the century the Society established a permanent mission in Isfahan (Wright, pp. 114-18).

In 1285-86/1869 the Church Missionary Society of London sent Reverend Bruce for a two-year sojourn in Isfahan in order to revise Martyn’s Bible translation. His arrival in Persia coincided with the famine and cholera epidemic of 1287-88/1870-71. With funds provided by the Mansion House Persian Relief Fund Bruce and his wife organized relief work, which also included a small orphanage and a trade school. Eventually he was able to persuade the Fund to provide for a permanent mission in Isfahan. Soon others joined the Bruces, and by 1896 there were seventeen missionaries living in Isfahan. Between 1896 and 1900 some of them moved to Shiraz, Yazd, and Kermān, where they built schools and hospitals, as their American colleagues had done in the north. An agreement made with the American Presbyterian Mission in 1895 prevented the British from carrying on missionary activities in northern Persia, which was recognized as an American preserve (Wright, pp. 118-19). Because Persian Muslims were willing to accept medical and educational assistance, these two aspects overshadowed the evangelical aspect of the missionaries’ work. Two of the most important educational institutions were Stuart Memorial College in Isfahan (Anglican) and the more famous Alborz College of Tehran (Presbyterian). Many Persian leaders in different spheres were educated at these two institutions.

The evangelists, educators, and physicians attached to both missions gave selfless assistance to victims of the frequent famines and epidemics that afflicted Persia in the second half of the 13th/19th and the first decades of the

14th/20th centuries. During World War I, when Azarbaijan became a battlefield between Ottoman Turks and Russians, thousands of Nestorians were driven out by the Turks and their Kurdish followers and found refuge in the American mission compound in Urmia. A number of missionaries, both Presbyterian and Anglican, gave their lives.

The conversion of Muslims to Christianity proved very difficult, however, though the missionaries never gave up that goal; nor did they fail entirely in their attempts. The Presbyterians soon recognized that their plan to have Nestorian Christians evangelize their Muslim countrymen was not working. They then turned their own efforts in this direction, and small numbers of Muslims in Azarbaijan, Arāk, Khorasan, Tehran, and Gīlān did join the Presbyterian church. Indeed, the first Persian Christian martyr of modern times was Mīrzā Ebrāhīm of Ḵᵛoy in western Azarbaijan, a convert from Islam. The mullas tried to make him recant, offering him a comfortable place in one of their shrines, but he refused. After his wife left him, taking with her his children and his property, he was arrested and imprisoned in Tabrīz. When he began preaching to other prisoners he was segregated, and he finally died in prison in 1297/1880 (Elder, pp. 47-49). From the beginning the Americans had attempted to unite the Nestorians and Armenians who had become Presbyterian with converts from Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism in a single church, with Persian as the main language.

The Assyrians and Armenians felt more comfortable worshiping in their own languages, however; some of them were even afraid to intermarry. By the late 1340s Š./1960s it was decided to organize three separate congregations according to language, though still within one denomination.

The Anglicans also had to change their approach not long after their arrival. They moved across the river from Jolfā to Isfahan proper and undertook evangelical work among Persian speakers (Waterfield, p. 149). As a result churches in the south were more “Persian” than those in the north: Their hymnal contained more original Persian poetry, their church buildings emulated classical Persian architecture, and their church calendar included celebration of national Persian holidays like Nowrūz.

Although Protestant missionaries were of great service to Persia in the fields of medicine and education and opened many doors to future progress, the Christian message was not widely accepted among Muslims. There was, of course, intermittent opposition from the Shiʿite clergy, though not all were

hostile to Christian missionaries. In 1317-18/1900, for example, Ḥājī Mollā ʿAlī, chief theologian of Semnān in Khorasan, allowed the Americans Rev. L. F. Esselstyn and Dr. Samuel Martin Jordan to enter the congregational mosque in that city and even invited the former to ascend the pulpit and preach, which he did (*A Century of Mission Work in Iran*, pp. 156-60). Two other factors were also significant in limiting the success of Christian efforts to convert the general Persian population. In the first place, Muslims viewed Christians as second-class citizens. To convert therefore meant to accept lower social status. Furthermore, the Christian church bore the stigma of a foreign religion introduced by the most powerful and "imperialist" Western nations of the 13th/19th and 14th/20th centuries respectively (Dehqani-Tafti, pp. 17-19).

Changes in Persia brought about by the Pahlavi shahs affected the church in many ways. On one hand, nationalist policies limited the work of Christian missionaries still further, but, on the other, the Pahlavis were liberal in matters of religion, and Christians were not prevented from preaching or distributing literature. In 1311 Š./1932 all elementary education was taken out of the hands of foreign nationals, and in 1313 Š./1934 American missionaries were ordered out of Azarbaijan (Elder, p. 71). By that time, however, the Persian Presbyterian and Anglican churches had both become independent of the denominational headquarters in the United States and Great Britain, and both obtained permission to establish parochial elementary and secondary schools under Persian supervision (Waterfield, pp. 169ff.). For a time the two churches even entertained the idea of union; although union was never realized, a joint literature committee was formed to prepare a revised hymnal. Other joint activities included publication of books and pamphlets and a Christian magazine, Bible-study classes, and conferences for young people (Elder, pp. 89-97). In 1319 Š./1940 all educational institutions were nationalized, and the government purchased the property of the Presbyterian and Anglican missions (Elder, p. 77).

When the oil industry was nationalized in the early 1330s Š./1950s all British missionaries who happened to be out of the country were refused permission to return to Persia; the Anglican bishop was expelled, and Christian hospitals were given six months to close (Waterfield, p. 173). After the coup d'état engineered by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1332 Š./1953, however, all these restrictions were lifted. Perhaps the most significant event for the future of the Christian church in Persia was the consecration, in 1340 Š./1961, of the Anglican Ḥasan Dehqānī-Taftī as the first Persian bishop in modern times.

After the Revolution of 1357-58 Š./1978-79 Persian Christians became a target of mob hostility and violence. Many left the country, but those who stayed suffered, especially in the south. On 30 Bahman 1357 Š./19 February 1979 the Rev. Arastoo Sayah (Araṣtū Sayyāḥ), pastor of the Anglican church in Shiraz, was murdered in his office. In Mehr-Ābān/October of the same year an unsuccessful attempt was made on the life of Bishop Dehqānī-Taftī, and his wife was wounded. On 16 Ordībehešt 1359 Š./6 May 1980 the bishop's twenty-four-year-old son Bahrām was murdered in the streets of Tehran. During this period the Anglican hospitals in Shiraz and Isfahan, together with a school for the blind and a farm connected with the latter, were confiscated; the bishop's office was looted, and both Persian and British church leaders were arrested. Months later they were released; the British left for England, but most of the Persians have not been allowed to leave (Dehqani-Tafti, pp. 92-97).

The bishop is currently in exile in England, and Persian-speaking churches in both northern and southern Persia carry on as best they can. They continue to hold interchurch conferences and to worship under the leadership of Persian-speaking pastors. Persian Christian émigrés in Europe and the United States hold worship services and conferences that are also attended by non-Christian émigrés. In a personal letter the bishop reported that he had persuaded four Episcopal bishops from Australia and Pakistan to visit Persia on 21 Ḵordāḏ 1365 Š./11 June 1986 to consecrate the Rev. Iraj Mottahedeh (Īraj Mottaḥeda) as assistant bishop. Since then Bishop Dehqānī-Taftī has retired and Reverend Mottahedeh has assumed the duties of bishop (consecrated 21 Ḵordāḏ 1365 Š/11 June 1986). According to *Iran Times* (Washington, 31 August 1990, p. 15), the Persian office of religious minorities had suggested that the Persian Bible Society replace the epithets "Son of God" and "Lord," in reference to Jesus Christ in its Persian version of the Gospels, with "Prophet"; when the suggestion was refused the office prohibited the printing of the Gospels. According to the same source, the Islamic Republic has now closed down the operations of the Society, confiscated its files, and denied the staff access to its offices.

See also capuchins; carmelites; england, church of, in persia.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Y. Armajani, *Middle East. Past and Present*, 2nd ed., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.,1986.

E. Boré, *Correspondance et mémoires d'un voyageur en Orient*, 2 vols., Paris, 1840.

L. W. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, Cambridge, 1956.

A Century of Mission Work in Iran (Persia) 1834-1934, Beirut, 1935.

"Dāstān-ī az moballeḡīn-e ʿīsawī dar Īrān," *Yādgār* 3/67, 1325 Š./1947, pp. 60-66.

H. B. Dehqani-Tafti, *The Hard Awakening*, New York, 1981.

J. Elder, *History of the American Presbyterian Mission to Iran*, Tehran, n.d. [1962?].

N. Falsafī, *Zendagānī-e Šāh ʿAbbās-e Awwal* III, Tehran, 1339 Š./1960, pp. 67-97.

W. J. Fischel, "The Bible in Persian Translation. A Contribution to the History of Bible Translations in Persia and India," *The Harvard Theological Review* 45, 1952, pp. 3-45.

E. Flandin, *Voyage en Perse*, 2 vols., Paris, 1851-52.

J. Foster, *The Church of the Tang Dynasty*, New York, 1939.

J. Joseph, *The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors. A Study of Western Influence on Their Relations*, Princeton, 1961.

T. K. Joseph, *Malabar Christians and Their Ancient Documents*, Trivandrum, 1929.

Komīsīūn-e Mellī-e Yūnesko (UNESCO) dar Īrān, *Īrānšahr*, II Tehran, 1343 Š./1964, pp. 1207-12, 1449-52.

K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vols., New York, 1937-45.

L. Lockhart, "European Contacts with Persia," in *Camb. Hist. Iran* VI, pp.

373-409.

Ḥ. Maḥbūbī Ardakānī, *Tārīḵ-e moʾassasāt-e tamaddonī-e jadīd dar Īrān* I, 1354 Š./1975, pp. 240-42, 367-68.

Mission Problems in New Persia, Beirut, 1926.

H. Nāṭeq, *Kār-nāma-ye farhangī-e farangī dar Īrān,* Paris, 1375 Š./1996.

P. Pelliot, "Chrétiens d'Asie centrale et d'Extrême-Orient," *T'oung Pao* 15, 1914, pp. 623-44.

Idem, *Recherches sur les chrétiens d'Asie centrale et d'Extrême-Orient* [I], II/1, Paris, 1973, 1984.

J. B. Piolet, ed., *Les missions catholiques françaises au XIX^e^ siècle*, Paris, n.d. [1900?].

P. Y. Saeki, The *Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, Tokyo, 1916.

D. P. Sanjana, "The Pahlavi Inscription of the Mount Cross in Southern India," in J. J. Modi, ed., *The Jubilee of Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Zarthoshti Madressa*, Bombay, 1914, pp. 193-96.

R. E. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia. Assyrians, Armenians, Roman Catholics and Protestants*, London, 1973.

D. Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, London, 1977, pp. 113-28.