



CONVERSION VI. TO PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY IN PERSIA

CONVERSION

vi. To Protestant Christianity in Persia

The conversion of Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, Muslims, and Zoroastrians in Persia to Protestantism as the result of missionary activity by foreign societies and national churches is discussed here (for conversion in a broader sense, see Horner, 1981; Lofland and Skonovd; Rambo; Tippett). It began with the arrival in Persia of European and American missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries (see [christianity viii](#)). In 1160/1747 a Moravian mission from Saxony visited Persia with the intention of converting Zoroastrians but was forced to withdraw because of political disturbances (Bliss et al., p. 502; Waterfield, pp. 88-89). In 1236-55/1821-39 Swiss missionaries from Basel were stationed in Šūšī (Šūšā) in Qarābāg; the best known of them was Reverend K. G. Pfander (1803-65), who visited Persia in 1246/1831 and wrote *Mīzān al-ḥaqq* and other polemical essays much used by later missionaries among Muslims (Bliss et al., pp. 71, 581-82, 584-85).

In 1242/1827 Dr. Joseph Wolff (1795-1862), a Jew from Bavaria, converted to Christianity in England, visited the Nestorian (Assyrian) Christians in



Azarbaijan and wrote a report that piqued the interest of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (A.B.C.F.M.), an organization at that time affiliated with the Congregational Church and several Reformed and Presbyterian denominations (Bliss et al., pp. 27, 582, 787-88). As a result Eli Smith (1801-57) and H. G. O. Dwight (1803-62) made an exploratory visit, which in turn led to the posting of Reverend Justin Perkins (1805-69) and Dr. Asahel Grant, a physician (1807-44), with their wives to Urmia in 1249/1834 and 1250/1835 respectively (Bliss et al., pp. 274, 579). In 1249/1834 Reverend Frederic Haas of the Basel mission and Reverend J. L. Merrick of A.B.C.F.M. had traveled through Persia and Central Asia to explore the possibilities of working among Muslims. Because of Islamic opposition in Isfahan, however, the idea was abandoned (Bliss et al., p. 582).

In southern Persia British missionaries had been at work since the early 19th century. In 1227/1812 Henry Martyn (1781-1812), a chaplain of the East India Company, completed, with the help of Mīrzā Sayyed ‘Alī Khan of Shiraz, a Persian translation of the New Testament; it was intended as a tool for evangelization among Muslims (Bliss et al., pp. 438-39). In 1254/1838 Reverend William Glen, a Scottish missionary who had spent some years in Astrakhan working on a Persian translation of the Hebrew Bible, visited Tabrīz and Tehran to enlist the aid of local scholars in revising his text. This translation was later combined with the Persian New Testament by Martyn and Mīrzā Sayyed ‘Alī Khan to make a complete Bible for Persian readers (see [bible vii](#)). In 1285/1869 an Anglican missionary, Robert Bruce (1833-1915), settled in Isfahan (Bliss et al., p. 168). By 1330/1912 there was an Anglican diocese in Persia with the Englishman Reverend C. H. Stileman as bishop (Barrett, p. 389; Waterfield, p. 162). In 1340 Š./1961 Ḥasan Dehqānī Taftī was consecrated the first Persian bishop of Kelīsā-ye osqofī-e Īrān ([Episcopal church of Iran](#)).

Although most missionary groups in Persia carried out charitable activities, particularly in education and health care, the primary purpose of the Protestant groups was conversion. Two Protestant denominations, the American Presbyterians and the British Anglicans, have had the longest history of involvement and the most extensive institutional presence in Persia. The Division of Foreign Missions of the Assemblies of God, though a relative latecomer in 1344 Š./1965, was also quite successful in establishing the Assemblies of the Church of Iran (Wilson, p. 172). A supporting role in evangelization was played by the American Bible Society, which distributed bibles through Presbyterian missions (Bliss et al., p. 25), and the British and



Foreign Bible Society, which in 1319/1901 maintained in Būšehr an office for distributing bibles (Bliss et al., p. 110).

After abortive efforts by American and Swedish Lutherans to aid the Nestorian missions (Richter, pp. 314-15), in 1328/1910 the American Lutheran churches were granted missionary responsibility for Kurdistan by the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference. The following year missionaries of the intersynodal Lutheran Orient Mission arrived in Sāwj-Bolāg (Māhābād). Although they were forced to leave during World War I, in 1317 Š./1938 they reestablished their mission in Arbīl in Iraḡi Kurdistan (Bodensieck, I, pp. 114-15; Goddard et al., pp. 385-86, 633).

Most of the other groups that worked in Persia were either small or stayed only a short time or both. Among earlier missionary establishments were the Brethren Church Foreign Missionary Society (Goddard et al., p. 95), the German Christoffel-Blindenmission im Orient (established in Tabrīz and Isfahan in 1304 Š./1925; Goddard et al., p. 159), B. W. Stead's medical dispensary in Kermānšāh (founded in 1323/1905) and an orphanage and industrial farm school at nearby Faramān established by Dr. Stead and her husband in about 1920 (Waterfield, pp. 139-40), and the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society (established in Zāhedān in 1304 Š./1925; Waterfield, pp. 175-76; Goddard et al., p. 48). During the later Pahlavi period a wide range of evangelical and missionary organizations were working in Persia. They included the American Messianic Fellowship, 1356 Š./1977; the Armenian Missionary Association of America (Goddard et al., p. 41); the Baptist Bible Fellowship International, 1345 Š./1966; the Campus Crusade for Christ (1346 Š./1967; Wilson, p. 203); the Child Evangelism Fellowship, Inc., 1353 Š./1974; Christian Echoes National Ministry (Wilson, p. 224); Christian Missionary Alliance, 1314 Š./1935; Deutsche Orient Mission (Dennis et al., p. 92); Go-Ye Fellowship; Operation Mobilization Send the Light (1343 Š./1964); the Southern Baptist Convention Foreign Mission Board, 1347 Š./1968; and the World-Wide Evangelization Crusade, 1342 Š./1963 (Barrett, p. 390; cf. Wilson, pp. 613-14).

From the beginning of Protestant missionary work in Persia the three main avenues to winning converts were preaching and teaching the faith, medical services, and education at all levels. The first involved distribution of the Bible or portions of the scriptures and Christian literature; radio broadcasts with accompanying correspondence courses; and summer conferences, along with regular worship services, personal evangelism, and revival meetings. Medical services, particularly hospitals and clinics, including those conducted by



itinerant evangelists, were humanitarian measures that also generated good will and encouraged conversions. Eventually, however, the high cost of maintaining such services and the development of government and private health facilities led to abandonment of medicine as an adjunct to mission work; the last Presbyterian hospitals to close were those in Mašhad and Tabriz. Modern education was also first introduced into Persia by missionaries from the West. In particular, two missionary institutions, [Alborz College](#) in Tehran, founded by Presbyterians, and Stuart Memorial College in Isfahan, founded by Anglicans, were effective channels for influencing belief and practice. With the growth of nationalism under Rezā Shah (1302-20/1925-41), however, Western educational institutions were taken over by the Persian government or by national churches or were closed (Elder, p. 71; Waterfield, pp. 169ff.). Other missionary activities, particularly those connected with relief and rehabilitation, as well as international Christian efforts of the same kind, were not explicitly aimed at conversion but did enhance the climate for evangelism.

Opposition was, however, strong and consistent in those communities among whom evangelists were active. Furthermore, Assyrian and Armenian Protestants resisted receiving converts from Islam into their congregations; as their services were conducted in Assyrian and Armenian, it would have been difficult for such converts, who spoke Persian or Turkish, to participate in any case. Among Muslims themselves there were strong theological objections to what was viewed as defection from the one true faith (see, e.g., Elder, pp. 47-49).

Conversion among Assyrians. The original purpose of the A.B.C.F.M. mission in Urmia was to revive the ancient Nestorian church, so that it might once again become an agent of evangelization in Asia and particularly among Muslims in Persia (Bliss et al., p. 222; Waterfield, pp. 102-03). Between 1251/1835 and 1287/1870, when the mission was transferred to the Presbyterian church, about fifty missionaries were active. They preached, opened schools, installed a printing press for the production of literature in modern Syriac, engaged in medical work, and trained indigenous Christian leaders (Bliss et al., pp. 31, 582, 720). The hope that these Christians might carry on evangelical work among their former brethren and among other religious groups in Persia was disappointed, however. Initial support from the patriarch and his followers turned to opposition (Waterfield, pp. 104-10), and a group of Presbyterians broke away and formed the Evangelical church in 1271/1855. In 1278/1862



Deacon Isaac (brother of the incumbent Nestorian patriarch), along with three bishops and a large number of priests, deacons, *and maleks* joined the Evangelical community (International Missionary Council, pp. 61-62).

The work of the Urmia mission continued after the Presbyterian church took over, despite Nestorian opposition, competition from Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox missionaries, and the arrival of the archbishop of Canterbury's mission to the Assyrians (Waterfield, pp. 124-32). At its zenith this group numbered more than 2,000 (cf. Richter, pp. 298-304). On the eve of World War I the Presbyterian church in Azarbaijan encompassed a synod with four presbyteries, but in the subsequent Ottoman invasion of the province the Assyrian community suffered severely (Waterfield, pp. 140-41). Some Assyrians later returned to Urmia; many, however, remained scattered among the larger cities and towns of northern Persia, in each of which a Syriac-speaking Protestant community was formed. In 1312-13 Š./1933-34 they joined with other communities of Protestant converts (including Armenians and Jews, as well as former Muslims and Zoroastrians) to form Kelisā-ye enjīlī-e Īrān ([Evangelical church of Iran](#)).

Conversion among Armenians. In the 19th century the Armenian population of Persia was concentrated in Azarbaijan, Isfahan, Hamadān, and Tehran; it was larger than the Assyrian community, but it included fewer Protestant converts (Horner, 1974, p. 66). In Azarbaijan individual Armenians did convert, but Protestant missionaries originally devoted little attention to the community as a whole, regarding the converts primarily as instruments of evangelization among Muslims. Nevertheless, when conversion of Muslims proved too difficult the Armenian community did become the object of evangelism, particularly in northern Persia (Richter, 319-20, 327). Despite strong opposition from the Armenian apostolic hierarchy (Richter, pp. 319-20), by the end of the 19th century there were six organized congregations, the fruits of a program of schools for Armenian children. In 1285-86/1869 the Church Missionary Society of London sent Reverend Bruce (1833-1912) to Isfahan, where he provided aid to the victims of famine and earned the good will of all religious communities (Richter, p. 329; Waterfield, pp. 147-49). Armenians were the first to be converted, but because the Armenian clergy objected the society shifted its focus to Jews, Muslims, and Zoroastrians and encouraged Armenians to remain within the apostolic church (Waterfield, p. 165). At its peak the Armenian Protestant community numbered fewer than a thousand people.

Conversion among Muslims. The third largest (Horner, 1974, p. 66) group of



converts consisted of former Muslims; at one point immediately after World War II they numbered in the hundreds. One very early convert to Protestantism was the Russian orientalist Mīrzā Aleksandr Kāzem Beg (1802-70), the son of a *qāzī* in Darband. As a young man he had been converted to Christianity by Scottish missionaries in Astrakhan (Waterfield, pp. 99-100).

Conversion among Jews. In 1260/1844 two missionaries of the London Society for the Propagation of Christianity among the Jews toured Persia from their base in Baghdad, distributing Christian literature among the Jews. At about the same time Presbyterian missionaries in Hamadān began work among Jews, which resulted in a small community of Jewish converts, most of whom later moved to Tehran or emigrated to the West (see iv, above; Waterfield, pp. 112-23; 576; Behravecš, pp. 109-13). The Jewish converts, though few in number, played an important role as leaders of both the Evangelical church of Iran and the Episcopal church of Iran (Waterfield, pp. 121-23).

Conversions among Zoroastrians. Zoroastrians were a small community in Persia and thus received limited attention from missionaries. Only a very few were converted to Protestant Christianity (Barrett, p. 390).

The national churches. In 1317 Š./1938 the Evangelical church of Iran reported thirty-two organized congregations and 2,560 members (Assyrians, Armenians, Jews, and former Muslims and Zoroastrians). At the same time, the Episcopal church of Iran had about 1,200 members, mostly converts from Islam, with a considerable minority of Jews and Armenians (International Missionary Council, pp. 60-66). According to a report in 1950, the Evangelical church in Tehran, then the largest convert church in the Middle East, boasted 815 members, of whom 285 were Assyrians, 260 Armenians, 160 former Muslims, 100 Jews, and 10 former Zoroastrians (Wysham). By 1970 some 14,000 of the quarter-million Christians in Persia were Protestant. The Armenian and Assyrian branches of the Assemblies of God included 450 and 1,700 adult members respectively. The Episcopal church of Iran had 700 adult members, the Evangelical church of Iran 3,000, of whom 55 percent were Assyrian and 21 percent Armenian (Barrett, pp. 388, 390).

It is difficult to identify and assess the causes of religious conversion, though in many instances converts have attested in both their writings and their lives the genuineness of their beliefs; one noteworthy example is the Kurdish doctor Sa'īd Khan, who was converted to Presbyterian Christianity (ca. 1321 Š./1942; Rasooli). In times of political instability, economic despair, or



communal misery any source of hope has an appeal. During most of the 19th and 20th centuries Persia suffered under imperialist domination, with all its painful accompaniments. For some Persians Protestant missions from the powerful and affluent West offered escape and a means of emancipation. Furthermore, in Persia, as elsewhere, ethnic and religious minorities have experienced discrimination and deprivation in the course of their history. That some of them have sought the protection and help of more powerful and wealthier communities, like those represented by Western missions, is understandable.

There is no systematic or detailed record of what happened to Persian converts to Protestant Christianity. It seems clear from an examination of missionary literature, however, that some did return to their original religious identifications, owing to family or community pressure, difficulty in securing employment or economic advancement, scarcity of suitable spouses, lack of emotional support in the new community, and so on. Others abandoned all traditional religious ties. Most, however, remained and raised their children within their new communities. Some studied for the ministry or joined church or mission staffs. Others obtained higher education and became successful professionals or entrepreneurs in Persia or abroad, where they often established congregations.

World War II and the immediately following years brought both hardship to the Persian people and opportunity to the missionaries. Political upheaval, economic distress, and social change created an atmosphere favorable to conversion. In the decade preceding the Revolution of 1357 Š./1979, however, Persia experienced unprecedented economic growth, and, despite the large number of Protestant missions at work in the country, conversion was comparatively infrequent (Barrett, p. 388, 390). With the advent of the Islamic Republic the Protestant missionary societies withdrew their personnel from Persia. Three Persian Protestant churches remained: the Evangelical Church of Iran, the Episcopal Church of Iran, and the Assemblies of God. Although internal migration and emigration to the West have strained religious ties, these churches have not only continued but even increased their outreach ministry, and the number of people seeking membership has increased dramatically, according to reports from Presbyterian and Assembly of God congregations in Tehran and from Persian-speaking Protestant groups abroad. Some Persian Muslims may also be making a political statement by seeking to affiliate with Christian groups. The descendants of earlier converts are also



still to be found among groups of Persian Protestants in Europe and North America (Richter, pp. 306-07).

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