

## CHAPTER 5

### WHY IRANIANS ARE ATTRACTED TO JESUS CHRIST

The Ahmadinejad years weakened Islam's legitimacy in Iran. But why the attraction to Christianity in particular, especially given its associations?<sup>217</sup>

There are the mysteries of God's sovereignty and intercession – in recent years there has been much prayer for Iran.<sup>218</sup> However, there also seems to be something in the make-up of the Iranian character so that, when there is a decision to walk away from the religion of their birth, Christianity has a peculiar pull.

Ask an Iranian why they are attracted to Christianity and the answer is often very simple: Jesus Christ. Speaking with Iranian Muslims who have been Christians for over twenty-five years it is impossible for this author not to conclude that Iranians have an instinctive love for Jesus Christ.

According to Islam, Jesus' role is only that of a prophet, though nevertheless a special prophet. It is the number of references in the Koran makes Him special: out of 114 chapters, fifteen of them make references to Jesus. So from the Koran the faithful Shia Muslim learns about Jesus' birth, miracles,

217 See Chapter 1.

218 Both Iran's politicians and its church have been in the headlines, thus prompting Christians to get on their knees and pray. In 2006 Elam Ministries launched a forty-day campaign for intercession for Iran. This went around the world. Then in 2009 the agency produced the prayer guide, *Iran 30*. To date there are over 200,000 in print in five languages. Other prayer agencies have also been active.

mission, and even his death.<sup>219</sup> Perhaps more significant are the associations that Jesus brings to mind, not just in the Koran, but also in the Hadiths (the traditions ascribed to Mohammad) and the Islamic religious literature. Respected academic Professor Tarif Khalidi,<sup>220</sup> translator of the Koran and author of several titles on Islam, sums up the special image Jesus has within this Islamic context in this way:

He (Jesus) is a miracle of God, an *Aya*. He is the prophet of peace. He is... a word and a spirit of God... Now if one adds to this the other images that he projects in the Islamic literary tradition<sup>[221]</sup> – the ascetic, the prophet of the heart, the gentle teacher of manners, the mystic, the lord of nature, the healer of spiritual ills – one arrives at a description of him, which in a sense complements that of the Four Gospels.<sup>222</sup>

Numbed by the violence of the Islamic Republic it is perhaps not surprising that Iranians from within their own Islamic context tend to first turn towards Jesus. For according to Professor Khalidi, it was Jesus who left a legacy of "gentleness, compassion, and humility",<sup>223</sup> so that "in his Muslim habitat, Jesus became an object of intense devotion, reverence, and love".

This image of the loving spiritual mystic and healer has been reinforced by some of Iran's great poets, such as Ferdowsi (940–1020), author of Iran's national epic the *Shahnameh* ("The Book of Kings"); or the mystic Rumi (1207–73) who is known

219 Sara Afshari, "An Examination of the Growth of Christianity", p. 17, footnote 30.

220 In 1996 Professor Tarif Khalidi was appointed a Fellow at King's College, Cambridge; he currently holds the Sheikh Zayed Chair in Islamic and Arabic Studies at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon.

221 In *The Muslim Jesus* Tarif Khalidi gives a detailed account of statements about Jesus in Islamic literature from the eighth to eighteenth century.

222 [http://www.jerusalemquarterly.org/images/ArticlesPdf/15\\_gospel.pdf](http://www.jerusalemquarterly.org/images/ArticlesPdf/15_gospel.pdf) Accessed 13 May 2014.

223 Khalidi, p. 15.

to many simply as "The Master"; or Ali Khaghani (1121–90) whose mother was Christian; or Hafiz (1207–73) from Shiraz, probably the country's most famous and popular lyricist.

These poets all refer to Jesus in words that portray Him as more than an average prophet.

So Ferdowsi refers to Christ as the one who brings back the dead:

*Like Jesus whose voice called the dead back to life,  
I've wakened dead heroes of struggle and strife.*

Rumi presents Jesus as the friend of the afflicted:

*The house of 'Isa [Jesus] was the banquet of men of heart  
O afflicted one, quit not this door.*

And Hafiz tells his readers that to be like light, they must follow Christ:

*If thou like Christ, be pure and single-hearted  
Who once ascended far beyond the sky,  
Thy life will shine with beams of light, whereby  
The sun will brighten by thy light imparted.*

It is interesting that one cannot find in the writings of these poets similar references to other religious leaders.

It should be stressed that the reputation of these artists is truly massive in Iran. Their poetry is often quoted and their shrines are visited frequently. Indeed, they, and other famous Iranian poets,<sup>224</sup> exercise a huge influence over Iranian culture. Their poetry amounts to what is an alternative canon of Scripture.

224 Other famous poets include: Ghazali (1059–1111), Attar (1130–1221), Khayyam (1048–1131), and Saadi (1210–91). Modern writers would include: Ahmad Shamlou (1925–2000), Sohrab Sepehri (1928–80), Mehdi Saless (1928–91), and Forough Farrokhzad (1935–67).

Like Scripture, Persian poetry is memorized,<sup>225</sup> quoted in conversation to make a point, consulted (randomly) to predict the future,<sup>226</sup> and during the Persian New Year (No Ruz) many families will place not a copy of the Koran or a Bible on the special table they prepare to welcome in the spring, but instead use a copy of their favourite poet, usually Hafiz. This reverence for poetry was clearly seen in 2000 when Ahmad Shamlou died. Thousands crammed into Tehran's streets to watch his hearse pass, many wishing him a final farewell by quoting his poetry.<sup>227</sup>

Hence for Jesus to be treated with such esteem by Iran's greatest poets means that nearly every Iranian will also share this admiration. Disillusioned with their own religious leaders, it provides a motivation, arising from within their own culture, for an Iranian to want to learn more about the founder of Christianity.

And once the Iranian begins to explore Christianity, the landscape is not so alien. This is because, ironically, Iran's Shia Islam religion is full of connections to Christianity.<sup>228</sup> The emotional hero for Shias is Hussein, the Prophet's grandson, whom Iranians believe deliberately chose to be martyred for a righteous cause at the battle of Karbala. Every year in a ceremony

225 The author once spent an evening in Iran with four young people who were playing a word game. Divided into two teams, one team quoted a line of a poem, and then the other had to start another line of another poem using the last word of the line their opponents had just quoted. The team who was unable to say the next line lost. You can tell just how central poetry is to Iranian culture by the fact that this game went on for about two hours!

226 Hafiz is the poet of choice. In Iran it is possible to buy a card with a line of his poetry on it from a street vendor for as little as \$1. For more excitement there is usually a little bird who will pick out the prophecy. For pilgrims to Hafiz's shrine in Shiraz, having an expert pick out a verse and interpret the meaning is an important part of the visit.

227 <http://iranian.com/Features/2000/August/Funeral/index.html> Accessed 12 September 2014

228 For a fuller discussion of the connections between the Shia faith and Christianity see Anthony O'Mahoney's 2006 "Catholic-Shia Dialogue: A Christian-Muslim Engagement" here: [http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/anvil/23-2\\_omahony.pdf](http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/anvil/23-2_omahony.pdf) Accessed 13 May 2014.

known as "Ashura" his violent death is commemorated in street theatre performed in thousands of towns across Iran. It is watched by millions; Hussein's death annually stamped on people's mind. But the Shia story does not end in death. A descendant of Hussein, Mahdi, disappeared in the ninth century. He is now the hidden Imam, alive but unseen, ready – as Ahmadinejad constantly reminded everyone (see Chapter 3) – to give guidance to the faithful. Mahdi is not just alive, he is coming back to restore justice. And the first case of injustice he will deal with is the murder of his ancestor Hussein on the dusty plains of Karbala.

It is not difficult to see how close the Shia story is to the Christian story.<sup>229</sup> Just some adaption is needed. Jesus is the one who truly suffered for righteousness, not Hussein; Jesus, not Mahdi, is the one who is alive but unseen; and Jesus, not Mahdi, will come back to restore justice to the world.

These connections between Shia Islam and Christianity then become more significant in Iran – in contrast to other regions like Lebanon where there are many Shias – because of the influence of Sufism,<sup>230</sup> the mystical side of Islam, and poetry.

Sufism has had a powerful role in shaping the religious identity of Iranians. In Sufism emphasis is placed on experiencing God. Theologically Christianity and Sufism have different foundations. Sufism, rooted in Islam, rejects the divinity of Christ and the cross. And in contrast to the biblical view, there is an emphasis on the existence of a "universal

229 For a lucid and comprehensive discussion on this see James A. Bill and John Alden Williams, *Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims*. As well as looking at the common theme of redemptive suffering, links are also seen between the treatment of Mary and Fatimeh, the mystics of the two faiths, the attitude to law, and more. Also see the author's *Iran and Christianity*, Chapter 1.

230 Early ascetic Sufis would wear simple woollen garments. The Arabic word for wool is *suf*.

spirit" whereby the "many is one, and the one is many".<sup>231</sup> Then there is the question of whether, when practised, Sufism and its teaching on entering a trance-like state can open doors to the occult.<sup>232</sup> Hence it would be naive to think of Sufism as a friend of Christianity. It is not. It is mystical Islam.

However, most Iranians do not experience Sufism in its religious setting, but in its literary setting. Some of Iran's most famous poets were Sufis: Ghazzali (1059–1111); Attar (1130–1221); Rumi (1207–73); and above all Hafiz (1310–89). And, as seen above, these poets have an extraordinary influence in Iran. The overall impact of Iran's Sufi-coloured poetry is to soften the sharp barbed wire boundaries between Islamic orthodoxy and heresy. This happens in two ways. First of all Iran's poetry deals with universal themes: love, life, death, God. Indeed there is not a single poet in Iran's hall of literary fame that engages specifically with Islam. Second, the poets – especially the Sufi ones – are hostile to religious dogma. It is well known that at Rumi's funeral the coffin was carried by Muslims, Christians, and Jews in recognition that this poet – "The Master" – insisted that all religions led to God. Furthermore he and other Sufis were adamant that dogma must be jettisoned if it prevented an experience of God. So Rumi famously wrote,

If the image of our Beloved is in the heathen temple  
Then it is a flagrant error to walk around the Ka'ba.<sup>233</sup>

This radical approach is taken up later by Hafiz:

231 See Nader Ahmadi and Fereshteh Ahmadi, *Iranian Islam*, pp. 73–87. They use this phrase in their conclusion.

232 For a full discussion on the practice of Sufism and its impact on mullahs see Roy Mottahadeh's *The Mantle of The Prophet*.

233 The Ka'ba is a large black stone in Mecca which Muslims believe fell from heaven. On the pilgrimage, (hajj) Muslims must go round the Ka'ba several times.

There is still more. Unlike the Taliban and Al Qaeda, whose passions are partially fuelled by a blanket hatred of all that is modern, Iranians are devotees of all things new, especially technology. And they recognize that the pioneers are largely from the West, usually America.

There is one other reason why Iranians admire the West: freedom within the rule of law. In recent years Iran has suffered a haemorrhage of its cleverest people. According to the International Monetary Fund some 25 per cent of Iranians with post-secondary education have emigrated abroad.<sup>234</sup> Some are motivated by financial security, but many more dream of a new life not because their standard of living will dramatically improve – often it won't – but because they want freedom and legal protection. It is worth noting to which countries these emigrants go. It is usually America, Canada, or Australia; clear evidence that the admiration Iranians have for the West is not just sentiment. They are willing to vote with their feet.<sup>235</sup>

This respect for the West has an impact on an Iranian's view of Christianity because Iranians tend to see Western countries as being Christian. While the reality is obviously more complex, there is a subconscious connection between the strengths of the West – opportunity to create wealth, technological innovation, social freedom, the rule of law – and Christian values. There is no evidence that this has had any direct impact on Iranians becoming Christians, but it is not difficult to see how, when an Iranian starts to consider other faiths, this connection presents the Christian faith in a favourable light.<sup>236</sup>

234 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/iran-economy-diaspora-reconciliation-sustainable-progress.html> Accessed 1 April 2014.

235 Certainly the devout are concerned about the West's immorality; however, the desire for the rule of law and freedom supersedes these concerns for many. Some Iranian refugees have no choice in where they are sent by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), but most are more than ready to go to one of these countries.

236 There are hardly any examples of Iranians becoming Hindus. Apart from the alien nature of this faith to Islam compared to Christianity, India's caste system and ongoing poverty issues might not appear that attractive.

The brutality of the Ahmadinejad years was the breaking point for many Iranians regarding their relationship with Shia Islam. This chapter has outlined why Iranians are then especially attracted to Christianity: love for the merciful Jesus presented in Islam and their honoured poets; connections between the Christian faith and Shia Islam along with the influence of Sufism; the powerful non-Iranian identity; and finally, despite all the flag burning, respect for the West.

In this equation of disillusionment with Islam and attraction to Christianity women feature prominently. Even a casual observer of Iran's new Christians will notice that there are probably more women than men in the house-church meetings. Footage of one meeting filmed secretly showed there were about fifteen women and just two men. One senior church leader bluntly states that 70 per cent of those coming to faith are women.

This is not surprising. Women have many reasons to spurn the religion of their birth. At every turn the law of the Islamic Republic devalues them. In the law courts their word is worth half that of a man's; in marriage the man can marry up to four wives and have as many temporary ones as he can afford; in divorce the husband is given the custody of the children. In some families manliness is proven by exercising strict control over the female members. The author knows of one husband who, before he became a Christian, would not let his wife have a glass of water without his permission. Control was sometimes enforced by violence.

In other families reputation takes precedence. So, for example, from the age of seven to twelve Mahnaz was repeatedly raped by her cousin. When she eventually mustered up the courage to tell her parents, she was told to keep quiet to protect the honour of her cousin. Legally devalued by their government and sometimes demeaned, or worse, by their family situations, the prospect of becoming a Christian has much to offer: women



are of equal value; polygamy is condemned; and the constant example of Jesus Christ – unlike rival religious leaders – was to show respect towards women.

Walking away from the splintered reputation of their national religion, often pushed by tragic events in their personal lives, many Iranians are ready to consider Jesus Christ.

But how does an Iranian Muslim – man or woman – make that journey from being sympathetic towards Jesus Christ to becoming a committed Christian, active in a house church?

That is the question the next chapter will attempt to answer.

## CHAPTER 6

### HOUSE CHURCHES: FIVE STORIES

For well over ten years there has been talk in Christian circles about what people called the house churches in Iran. It was well known that the Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Assemblies of God churches whose ministry was based in buildings (so sometimes known as “building churches”) were facing immense pressure from the government; but, it was said, there was growth among the “house churches”.

So Professor Richard Foltz, an expert on Iran’s religions, writes: “No new churches have been issued operating licences since the revolution of 1979, but an estimated 40,000 people attend underground churches and estimates of recent converts reach as high as 500,000.”

This is the professor’s last sentence at the end of a chapter on Christianity in his book *Religions of Iran*.<sup>237</sup> This sort of sentence, and others that appear in articles about Christianity in Iran, invite a lot of questions. The phrases “house church” or “underground church” tell us a little: these are groups of Christians meeting in homes, unbeknown to the government. The curious will have other questions. How did these groups start meeting? How many come to the meetings? What happens at these gatherings? What does the leadership structure look like? How are activities financed? And how are people, disillusioned with Islam and sympathetic to Jesus, drawn into these groups?

237 Richard Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, Oneworld, 2013, p. 124.