

ETHNOGRAPHY WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS  
PERSIAN CHRISTIANS

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## ETHNOGRAPHY WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

### PERSIAN CHRISTIANS

Several years ago I waited with my children at the school bus stop. It was a cool, sunny morning and a neighbor and her child walked towards us. She had a Middle Eastern accent and an olive complexion. Having learned some Arabic in Iraq I greeted her with “Sabah al khair” (“Good morning”) and she replied with “Sabah al noor.” Curious, I asked where she came from, expecting the answer to be an Arab country in the Middle East. She replied “Iran”, where the dominant language is Farsi. I asked if she spoke Arabic as well as Farsi and English. She answered “no, but Farsi has adopted many Arabic words and phrases since they invaded us.” What strange words to American ears, “since they invaded us.” Her explanation was shockingly personal and immediate, as though it had happened to her, even though the invasion of which she spoke was in 636 AD, climaxing in the famous Battle of al-Qadisiyyah. I couldn’t imagine saying of the British “since they invaded us”, as though it happened to me personally, but the history rolled off her tongue as if it was a current event. I asked if that was the invasion that she was referring to and she said “yes”. The centuries that had passed had no bearing on her feelings about it.

### **Introduction**

Cultural chasms such as this form a huge barrier to Westerners who try to understand the Middle East. Yet the Middle East is one of the most important, and most volatile, places on earth. Businesses wish to capitalize on the oil, and oil wealth, so plentiful under the sands. Politicians want to make peace in a land long accustomed to bitter war, and Christians want to reintroduce Christ in nations that served him 1500 years ago. To accomplish these goals, we must study the lands, meet the people, and not only understand them, but come alongside them in compassion and trust.

Iran is one of the most important nations in the Middle East. Occupying the Iranian plateau, it forms a land bridge between Central Asia, Arabia, and the Persian Gulf. It forms a cultural bridge between Islam to the west, Hinduism to the east, and Christianity to the north. Alongside Egypt and China, Iran (Persia) is one of the oldest civilizations on earth, dating from the Elamite Kingdom around 2,500 BC.<sup>1</sup> Home to 81 million people and with a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of \$16,500, it is one of the most powerful nations in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, Iran is the leading nation of Shia Islam and the leading nation of Persian Islam, often setting it at odds with its Sunni Turkish and Arab neighbors.<sup>3</sup> The median age is 28.3 years and the fertility rate is 1.85 children per woman, thereby not sustaining the population.<sup>4</sup> The 2014 net migration rate was 0.08 people per thousand, demonstrating that more people are leaving than are coming in.<sup>5</sup>

The country covers 636,000 square miles, a land area slightly larger than Alaska. Only 10% of Iran is arable, the rest being inhospitable deserts and mountains. Most of the country is semi-arid but the land near the Caspian Sea in the north is subtropical. Nonetheless, Iran can feed its population and is even a net exporter of wheat.<sup>6</sup> According to the Joshua

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (New York, NY: Facts on File, 1990), 96-98.

<sup>2</sup> "Middle East: Iran," CIA The World Factbook, accessed May 13, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Philosophy: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 137-8

<sup>4</sup> "Middle East: Iran," CIA The World Factbook, accessed May 13, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid..

<sup>6</sup> Ali Etefagh, "Dependence On Food Imports Doesn't Help," *PostGlobal*, April 16, 2008, 1, accessed May 13, 2015, [http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/ali\\_ettefagh/2008/04/stagnate\\_wages\\_for\\_high\\_prices\\_1.html](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/ali_ettefagh/2008/04/stagnate_wages_for_high_prices_1.html).

Project, 98.6% of Iranians have never heard the gospel.<sup>7</sup> Iran is one of the worst countries in the world for religious freedom.<sup>8</sup>

Historically known as the land of Persia, Reza Shah Pahlavi officially changed the name in 1935 to Iran, “Land of the Aryans”. In 1941 Britain and the USSR invaded Iran.<sup>9</sup> The line of autocratic rulers who had ruled Iran for centuries was stopped when the Islamic Revolution overthrew Mohammad Reza Shah Palavi in 1979.

Since my encounter with the Persian mother at the bus stop I have grown more interested in Iran and its people. I have traveled to the surrounding lands to provide medical care, preach and lead Christian worship for Persians, since I cannot do so in Iran itself. We have a young Persian Christian living with us now. My goal in this paper is to write a realist ethnography, a cultural study, of Persian Christians, both in Iran and in the United States.

### **Methods**

My key informant for this project has been our Persian Christian friend, NM. I have spent many hours with her asking about her life and her culture, both in Iran and in the US. I made a brief survey of Persians in the US, and have received input both in writing (2 respondents) and verbally (3 respondents). Of the three, one was a Persian born in the US whose family immigrated and two were Persian women that I met at the Nowruz exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum on 7 March 2015. All of these respondents were female, and ages ranged from 20s to 50s. None of my respondents were currently living in Iran, though my key informant visited her parents there less than one year ago. We also went to a Persian Church one Sunday to

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<sup>7</sup> “People Cluster: Persian,” Joshua Project, accessed May 14, 2015, <http://joshuaproject.net/clusters/268>.

<sup>8</sup> “Uscirf Issues Its 2015 Annual Report,” United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 30, 2015, accessed May 14, 2015, <http://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases/uscirf-issues-its-2015-annual-report>.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: 2000 Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day (History of Civilization)* (London: Orion Publishing Group, 1995), 350.

ask questions and observe members of the community as participants. My sample was of necessity a convenience sample. The survey questions were as follows:

1. Why did you come to live in the United States? How old were you? Did you want to come?
2. What family do you have living in the US? What family do you have living in Iran? How often do you return to Iran?
3. What was the first thing that you noticed about US culture that you like better than in Iran? Worse than in Iran?
4. What happened during your first six months in the US? What was good? What was bad?
5. What has happened in the years after that? What was good? What was bad?
6. What do you like about the Washington DC area? What don't you like?
7. What goals do you want to achieve while in the US? Education? Work? Family? Do you want to become a citizen?
8. Name three things that you would like to do before you die.
9. Other than people, what do you miss the most about Iran?
10. What do you do in your free time? Where do you do it?
11. Name 10 of your favorite things (fiction book, non-fiction book, magazines, TV shows, movies, musicians, foods, places, etc.)

I have avoided using names, especially of Christians in Persia, to protect them. The Iranian police, the NAJA, strike fear into the hearts of many Persians, even those living abroad. While terrorists can harm anyone anywhere, Persian believers in America often fear for family and friends back home.

This study has used research methods including interviews, observations, surveys, objects, and other archived material such as maps.<sup>10</sup> Triangulation, a technique which involves using multiple sources helps ensure that the knowledge from each source is correct.<sup>11</sup> Intelligence communities in militaries and governments around the world do the same thing to ensure that their information and interpretations are as accurate as possible.

Interviews are a traditional method and can be the most effective if the people interviewed are knowledgeable and trustworthy. The interview has been around since before Luke interviewed his subjects in writing Luke and Acts. As powerful as they are, interviews require a great deal of time and rapport between the researcher and the informants. Unlike observations, the act of interviewing someone will change the interpersonal dynamics and

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<sup>10</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2012), 45.

<sup>11</sup> Michael V. Angrosino, *Projects in Ethnographic Research* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2005), 15.

probably also the results. Therefore I tried to be careful during the interviews, making every effort to follow Spradley's recommendations.<sup>12</sup> The biographical and historical focus of the interviews is similar to the approach of Denzin and Lincoln (1994).<sup>13</sup>

Observations in ethnography have also been done for a long time. Researchers can try to be unobtrusive (outsider observation) or get into the action (participant observation). The former may be more objective, but the later can build rapport with a new group and produce explanations about what the ethnographer sees.<sup>14</sup> When I was at the Persian exhibit at the Smithsonian and in the Persian congregation, I observed as a participant.

Surveys are the best way of ensuring that everyone is asked the same questions and might also produce statistically analyzable data. I did not get design the survey for statistical analysis but still got useful information. Analyzing artifacts, such as the items on a Nowruz table, is a useful way to get tacitly held information; things about which the respondent may not even be aware. Slife and Williams include this in their approach.<sup>15</sup> Maps are important to show the geographic relationship of people and events in any culture and I used those as well.<sup>16</sup>

There was one major ethical consideration in this study. NM, my key informant, is a young Persian woman that is living with us in Virginia. Because of our relationship, she may have felt unable to speak honestly about certain things. However, she and I discussed the project at length and she said that she was happy to help. Many Americans do not understand Persia, some even think that Persians and Arabs are the same, and NM was willing to do whatever she could to explain her people to us.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 58-60.

<sup>13</sup> Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), 47.

<sup>15</sup> Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Angrosino, *Projects in Ethnographic Research*, 56.

<sup>17</sup> David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step-by-step*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2010), 145.

## **Life in Iran**

### **Birth in Iran**

The birth of a child in Iran is, as in most other places, a joyous event. Parents want to know the sex of the baby as soon as possible. Since the mother's parents are responsible to purchase everything that their grandchild will need, they want to get an early start. Families compete to see which babies have the nicest nurseries, clothes and strollers. Frequently they go overboard, buying things that the child won't need until they go to school. Many families prefer boys, which may reflect a historic religious and cultural idea that men are superior to women. Nonetheless, this bias against girls has faded in recent years.

Babies are generally born in hospitals and almost half by Caesarian section. Some mothers are fearful of the pain of labor, some believe that they will look better after an operative delivery, and some think that babies born by C-section are smarter. A mother will spend several days in the hospital after her baby is born and then travel with the infant to her parents' house. When mother and baby come home from the hospital for the first time, the grandfather on the father's side will say a prayer in the newborn's ear. Muslims will whisper "There is no God but Allah" and Christians will sometimes whisper a Bible verse. For at least ten days her parents will care for all of their needs while their friends lavish the mother and newborn with gifts. Ten days after birth the family will celebrate a Dah Haamum, essentially a baby shower, and all of their friends and relatives are invited.

Little boys will receive a circumcision party, in which the paternal grandfather gets to show off the one who will continue his line. These parties demonstrate that the Muslim families are walking in the ways of Allah.

During formal parties for any reason, Muslims will usually separate men and women, even having them eat in different houses. In Christian families everyone celebrates together unless Muslim family members are present.

## **Childhood and Education in Iran**

Preschool begins at age six, followed by primary school until age 11, middle school until age 14 and high school until age 17. Public schools are free and private schools are costly, especially in larger cities. All schools are segregated by sex for students. Private girls' high schools will occasionally have male teachers, and public and private boys' high schools will occasionally have female teachers. Boys and girls wear uniforms through middle school, but only girls wear them in high school.

Boys and girls have different experiences growing up. Girls are discouraged from playing with boys, or even from playing outside the house. Girls at any age may not wear shorts, and have to be accompanied by an older woman at all times while outside. Boys have none of these restrictions. The Iranian government has a special branch of police whose task is to enforce social standards, such as the wearing of the hijab, even in young girls. One Persian woman said "Humiliation – not necessarily from family but more from society - starts from childhood and continues throughout our life." In response to this pressure, some women in Iran have started a movement called My Stealthy Freedom. The website features Iranian women without the hijab, making a social statement of freedom from oppression.

Traditionally Iranian mothers taught their daughters to serve at home, but increasingly they are teaching them to study hard and gain their financial independence. Christian mothers emphasize living in purity and helping others. Christians and Muslim fathers still teach their sons to care for their mothers, sisters and wives, working hard to support their future families.

## **College and Young Adulthood in Iran**

Education has become a top priority in Iranian culture, regardless of a family's economic or social standing. After high school, students spend one year preparing for the Iranian University Entrance Exam, the Konkour. The test is considered very hard and differs by field of study. For example, the math and physics test requires students to answer 135 questions in 175

minutes. Many students complete a one or two year pre-university course in order to earn the Peeshdanesghahe, a pre-university certificate. Students with high enough scores on this test can be admitted to foreign universities.<sup>18</sup> If they attend an Iranian university, students commit to government service for several years after graduating, or pay off their debt. This debt can be to the tune of \$30,000.

Men who do not enter college will enter the army for at least two years. Despite Military Day (18 April) and patriotic parades, as a branch of the government, the military is not widely respected by many young adults in Iran. After completing their military service the men can get jobs or resume their education. Medicine, engineering and technology are popular fields of study. A few people, typically children of mullahs, go into religious careers.

Men and women typically meet in college or at parties. Unmarried and unrelated men and women cannot be seen together in public, and police officers may arrest them. There is no word for “date” in Farsi, so if a young man wants to begin a relationship with a young woman, he tells his father and his father approaches the girl’s father. The man’s father says “My son wants to be your slave”, which means that he wants to marry his daughter. The girl’s father can reject the offer outright or can begin investigating the young man. He will ask everyone in his circle of extended family and friends about the boy and his family, even interviewing leading figures in the university or workplace. Eventually the young woman’s father will insist on meeting the young man. Only after receiving the opinion of family and friends will the father decide; he will not make the decision alone. If the man passes the investigation, the woman’s father will give his blessing to the relationship, and the two can be seen together in public. Within a year, unless there is some horrible incident or revelation, the two will marry. This process incorporates elements of the traditional arranged marriage, most common in rural Iran, and includes the individual choice of the more modern “dating”, most common in urban settings.

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<sup>18</sup> “The International Office,” The University of Edinburgh, accessed May 14, 2015, <http://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/international/country/middle-east/iran>.

The average age of marriage for men is 27.8 and for women is 23.1 years, the highest in recent memory.<sup>19</sup> Fewer Iranians than ever seem interested in marrying. One ayatollah warned unmarried public workers that they needed to marry or lose their jobs, and in January 2015 the government set up a matchmaker website that they hope will lead to 100,000 marriages.<sup>20</sup>

## **Marriage in Iran**

Once the groom and his family let the bride's family know of their desire for union, they go to the brides' home with flowers, sweets and sometimes gold coins or jewelry and ask for her hand. If the offer is accepted, more presents will follow. The couple becomes engaged at a lavish party. The couple exchanges rings; and the bride's will be expensive with precious stones. The grooms' family must pay for all expenses. If they cannot, they will be ashamed. The higher the status and social standing of the bride, the costlier the banquets and the presents will be, especially the jewelry. An elaborate wedding in Iran costs around a hundred thousand dollars. There are efforts by the government to encourage people to simplify the weddings and lower the cost.

The Iranian wedding ceremony harkens back to an ancient Zoroastrian tradition. It is the most conspicuous of events and must be celebrated with glory and distinction. Many family and friends will attend the ceremony, which may last hours. Unlike weddings in the West which are often held in churches, those in Iran are held in large homes or in restaurants dedicated to special occasions. In Christian families in Persia, couples will often have a wedding in a house-church, but will still have an official wedding with many guests. The wedding for NM's Muslim sister had 700 guests and that was considered a moderate size. Since Islam bans music and dancing, weddings are not held in mosques. Muslim weddings are usually officiated by a mullah

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<sup>19</sup> "Marriage Age Up," *Iran Daily*, October 8, 2014, accessed May 14, 2015, <http://www.iran-daily.com/News/3008.html>.

<sup>20</sup> *The Economist*, Marriage in Iran: The No. 1 Mullahs Dating Agency, February 7th 2015, 47.

and often in Arabic, and few understand what was spoken. Marriages between two people who are accepted by the Iranian government as Christians, such as two Armenians, are legally done at church by a minister. Marriages between Christians who are converted Muslims are not legal in Iran. The couple will have two ceremonies, the legal one with a mullah and the real one in a house church.

On the day of the wedding, aunts take the bride to the beauty salon for a makeover. Beauty is very important, with brides shaping their eyebrows for their coming wedding, and getting whatever else \$2,000-\$5000 buys. After hours at the salon the bride and groom go to the photographer for pictures and then to the wedding ceremony. The ceremony takes place in a specially decorated room with flowers and a beautiful and elaborately decorated spread on the floor, known as the 'Sofreh Aghed', which traditionally faces towards the sunrise. The bride and the bridegroom will each have at least one official marriage witness, usually an older and married male.

First the bridegroom is asked if he wishes to enter into the marriage contract, then the bride is asked the same question. When the bride is asked, she pauses and remains silent. The officiator repeats the question three times and it is only on the final time will she say yes. This signifies that it is the husband who is anxious to have her for his wife and not the other way around. The wedding ring goes on the left ring finger.

After the ceremony, there are lavish feasts, dancing, music and entertainers. There will be more parties given by close relatives and friends for the next few weeks. These parties are called paghosah, meaning "clearing the path". They introduce the two newly related families to each other. In the past horsemen and carriages were used with songs, clapping and other merry making gestures, but today several cars will follow the couples' decorated vehicle while honking. The family of the bride and groom will throw money at them. In highly religious Muslim weddings, families will sacrifice a lamb at the feet of the bride at the threshold of their home.

To many, modern marriage in Iran seems more like a contract than a promise of love and commitment. NM noted “In the Quran, men are valued twice as much as women.” A woman has no right to her children, to divorce, to work or to leave the country unless her husband allows it. It almost feels like the woman is being bought.

Marriage for Christians is difficult. A Muslim man may pretend to convert to Christianity, find and marry a Christian woman, and then convert back to Islam, forcing his new bride to convert with him. In one instance NM’s father asked the central church in Iran to send someone to bless the wedding of a local Christian couple. Fearful of the authorities, the church refused. Her father blessed the marriage, and the ceremony, held in strict privacy and simplicity, was one of the most beautiful that NM had ever seen.

### **Adult and Working Life in Iran**

In the past, families were large, but today couples typically have only one or two children. This changed because parents are very concerned about the expense of raising children, and because most women work outside the home. Formerly couples lived close to their extended families, but today many live far away. Husbands and wives talk together, but spend much of their non-work time watching television. American programs are very popular. Some people read books, visit friends, and have guests.

The most popular jobs are those in manufacturing, construction, and import/export. Working in high rise office buildings is especially prestigious. Though people like to watch TV, the government controls the television industry. This government control casts doubt on the reliability of the people working in television. Some people enter government service but the pay is poor. Journalism is a respected career field, but dangerous when someone begins questioning the government. Many journalists have been forced to leave the country. Many people open their own businesses, like a machine shop. NM’s father owns a small business making gazeboes, canopies, and tents. He has built a good reputation over 30 years of business. Because he is a Christian, the secret police hold his business license and have tried to discredit him.

Anyone who has worked over 30 years can retire; including men at age 60 and women at age 55. Retirees will often travel. Few get second jobs unless they need the money, and fewer still volunteer.

## **Domestic Life**

The head of the household is the father and husband. He provides financially, spiritually and socially for the family and expects respect and obedience in return. Muslim men can have up to four wives provided that they support them and their offspring equally. Rural Persians are typically farmers and live in single story, wood and clay dwellings. Urban Persians range from the manual laborers through skilled craftsmen to professionals such as merchants and businessmen. The government controls most of the economy, with private enterprise limited to agriculture, small scale workshops and services. These key economic facts reflect a country with limited opportunity for its citizens and may help explain the Iranian exodus. Clergy form a class called the Ulama.

The work week is Saturday through Thursday. Due to sanctions, international credit cards and bank cards cannot be used in Iran. Women must keep their heads, arms and legs covered at all times while in public. Photography is considered suspicious and can get the most innocent of people, natives and tourists, into trouble.

Like all peoples, the life of Persians flows with the cycles of the year. Farmers follow the natural rhythm of planting and harvest, students and educators follow the academic year, and government and businesses follow their fiscal year. Annual holidays are as follows:

1. New Year (Nowrooz) – Vernal equinox, 20/21 March.
2. Sizdah-Bedar (public outing to end Nowrooz, Nature Day) – 1 April
3. Oil Nationalization Day – 20 March
4. Victory of the 1979 Islamic Revolution – 2 April
5. Prophet's Birthday and Imam Sadeq - 4 June
6. Death of Imam Khomeini – 5 June
7. Islamic Republic Day – 20 January
8. Uprising against the Shah – 30 January
9. Ashoura – 11 February

## 10. Charshanbeh Suri – the Iranian festival of fire

The government often broadcasts special programs on the national television system for the patriotic holidays (3-8 above), but many Iranians do little to celebrate them.

Nowruz is a time of fun and family for most people. Just as eggs are used at Easter in western cultures, Persians use an egg at Nowruz to suggest fertility and grain to represent a plentiful harvest. Flowers speak of the rebirth of spring. Candles reflect light and the sunrise. The Nowruz table also includes a book, sometimes the Quran but often a book of famous Persian poetry such as the Shahnameh, the national epic of Iran. The Smithsonian exhibit that we attended on 7 March had a Nowruz table attended by Persian women who were delighted to explain it.

Persian rugs are very important. When an Iranian girl gets married her family will usually buy the best silk handmade rug for her new home. This is part of her “jahiziye“, the household goods that her parents purchase. Dishes with rice, chicken and tea are Iranian favorites. In Tehran and other large cities most people live in apartments because houses are too expensive. In smaller cities and villages people often live in houses and have small gardens

### **The House Church in Iran**

The Iranian constitution grants protection to its citizens who were born Christian or Jewish, but Muslims who become Christians are considered apostates (takfir) and can be punished by imprisonment or even death.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Christians assemble in private houses to conduct worship. Sometimes they will close windows and doors and turn off lights. Congregants will sing softly to avoid attracting attention. Authorities often crack down on house churches, imprisoning pastors and other leaders.<sup>22</sup> Despite the constitutional guarantees, the government frequently closes even “recognized churches”. In 2012 Iranian authorities closed the Assembly

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<sup>21</sup> Liana Aghajanian, “Iran’s Oppressed Christians,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2014, accessed May 14, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/15/opinion/irans-oppressed-christians.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/15/opinion/irans-oppressed-christians.html?_r=2).

<sup>22</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, “Iran Cracks Down On Underground ‘illegal’ Churches,” *Jerusalem Post*, October 15, 2012, accessed May 14, 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Iran-cracks-down-on-underground-illegal-churches>.

of God Central Church of Tehran, and limited services at the Immanuel Protestant Church and St. Peter's Evangelical Church.<sup>23</sup>

NM's father is a house church leader. He meets with different groups at his home on different days of the week so that they won't know each other. Over the course of one week, more than 200 people may attend. Friday services begin by eight o'clock in the morning and often last until midnight. On warmer days the house church members may go to a local park (or a beach on the Caspian Sea) for a picnic. While her father is teaching, her mother and sisters take turns caring for the children, and listening when they can. Adults will often receive assignments on Bible passages during the week and discuss them with the group when they meet. Once it is all over, many attendees are reluctant to leave. The hours he spends in ministry take a toll on his business, and he has had to cut back the Christian services to meet ends meet.

Bible teaching materials are scarce in Iran, and the country has no seminaries or Bible schools. House church leaders sometimes attend conferences in neighboring countries such as Turkey or Armenia where they receive Bible training from Western, often American, teachers and pastors. Sponsoring churches provide teaching teams and pay travel expenses for the Iranians.

### **The End of Life in Iran**

People usually die in the hospital, and the first priority is to get out the bad news. Almost everyone who knew the deceased converges on their house, and the mourning and crying of women can be heard from far away. The family brings the body home and family members of the same sex as the descendant wash it. Then they clothe it in white and keep it in the house for one night so that loved ones can say their goodbyes.

The next morning men carry the body on their shoulders while walking through the city to the graveyard. Muslims chant "there is no God but Allah". When the procession reaches

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<sup>23</sup> Compass Direct News, "Iranian Authorities Shut Church in Tehran," *CP World*, June 10, 2012, accessed May 14, 2015, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/iranian-authorities-shut-church-in-tehran-76399/>.

the burial site two men begin digging the grave and the men, led by a Mullah, pray an Islamic prayer for the dead, Namaze Mayet. A son of the dead person lays in the grave for a moment and then the group puts the body in. They cover the body with earth, put three large stones on it, and then fill the rest of the grave. Throughout the ceremony women cry aloud; visibly mourning the dead. The family hosts memorials on the seventh and again on the 40<sup>th</sup> day after the burial.

Evangelical Christians are not entitled to these rites. They can neither be buried in Muslim cemeteries nor in the Orthodox (Armenian) Christian cemeteries. When Christians die an older male Muslim (such as grandfather or uncle) will usually make the arrangements for a Muslim funeral. If the deceased did not want a Muslim funeral, there is no official place to put the body.

### **Persians in the United States**

Up to 1.5 million Iranians live in the United States, of which many are Christians. The largest concentration is in Los Angeles County, California, and the second largest is near Washington DC.<sup>24</sup> Many emigrated from home after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The majority are Muslim, as would be expected since most people in Iran are Muslim. A significant minority is Christian, more than the percentage of Christians in Iran.

According to our survey results, respondents came to America seeking political or religious asylum or pursuing an education. Most have no family in the US. Those who come for school can return to Iran to visit family, while those who are given asylum cannot. New Iranian émigrés are generally struck by the straightforwardness of Americans, but some find us emotionally cold. No one stated that they felt discriminated against as foreigners, but thought that Americans were just too busy with their own lives to bother with others.

One woman noted that American thinking is based on advertising, no matter how good or bad the underlying product or service. Another felt that the US was so expensive she wasn't

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<sup>24</sup> "Persian-Speaking People Outside of Iran," accessed May 14, 2015, <http://www.persianwo.org/Disporia.htm>.

sure how she could make it work here. People liked where they were, including two from the DC area and one from New York. Of the five who replied, four were already citizens and one wanted to gain her citizenship. Everyone who came to America as adults spent their first six months getting established, handling government paperwork and looking for a job or school. One immigrant who was involved in Christian ministry first had trouble finding a job and then her good friend was arrested in Iran. The first six months was a trying time for her.

Most of those surveyed wanted to visit Iran again, but none wanted to live there. The two at the Smithsonian exhibit were thoroughly American, though they prized Persian culture and wanted to help others to appreciate it. They visited family in Iran occasionally. The asylum seeker wanted to visit someday but feared that she never would. Respondents who had family in Iran missed their families the most, but also missed the sights, sounds and smells of home. One woman missed her town, Isfahan, and its beautiful river, the Zayandehrood.

The Persian woman who was born to immigrant parents in the US was secular, as were her parents, holding to neither Christianity nor Islam. Her whole family lives in the US, and she has no desire to visit Iran. Since she is in the US military she probably would not be authorized to go anyway.

When asked what they wanted to do before they died, the Christian respondents emphasized their Christian goals. They especially saw themselves using their professional skills, like dentistry, to serve God and man in Christ. The ten “favorite things” included many of the same artists that are most popular in the respondents’ age group in America today. Persians and Christians, just like everyone else in the world, are heavily influenced by the prevailing culture.

Our visit to the Persian church was informative. The congregation worshipped at 1530 on Sunday afternoon in a Lutheran Church which was also home to a Korean congregation. About 20 people attended, most of whom later introduced themselves as refugees from Iran. Of the nine men present, six appeared to be middle aged or older. Of the 11 women present, five appeared to be middle aged or older. Couples sat together, but single men sat on the right side of the sanctuary and single women on the left side. They had no pastor but the sermon was given

via Skype from a Farsi-speaking pastor in Tulsa, Oklahoma. NM accompanied me and she recognized all of the Persian songs that we sang. Some of the members of the congregation knew her parents in Iran.

After the service we had snacks in the fellowship hall. I spoke with several deacons and a few others, mostly men, while NM spoke with mostly women. Though they have been without a pastor for over two years, one deacon saw no reason to find one quickly. He wanted the pastor to be Persian, not American. Another deacon was not so picky; church attendance had dwindled from 50-60 to 20-30 since the last pastor left.

Members mentioned a few life concerns. The Persian congregation had no sign in front of the church because the county only allows two signs per property and this church already had signs for the English speaking and the Korean congregations. One man was a carpenter and truck driver and worried about his job. One young single man was an Iranian Mormon who came to this church occasionally just because he wanted to hear Farsi.

## **Persian Cultural Themes**

### **God**

Though Zoroastrianism is trying to make a comeback,<sup>25</sup> Persians remain overwhelmingly Muslim, with small minorities of Christians, Jews and secularists. Islam, Christianity and Judaism all have roots in Hebrew monotheism and therefore Persians tend to conceive the Almighty similarly. The biggest difference is that Persian Christians hold to the divine Trinity while Muslims and Jews do not. Secularists hold a wide variety of beliefs, and Zoroastrians believe in Ahura Mazda (god).

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Foltz, "Zoroastrians in Iran: What Future in the Homeland?," *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 1 (2011): 73-84, accessed May 14, 2015, [http://www.academia.edu/9387081/Zoroastrians\\_in\\_Iran\\_What\\_Future\\_in\\_the\\_Homeland](http://www.academia.edu/9387081/Zoroastrians_in_Iran_What_Future_in_the_Homeland).

## Man

In this area as well, Persians align with their respective religions. Christians believe in original sin and salvation through the work of Jesus Christ, while Muslims reject original sin<sup>26</sup> and any need for a savior. Those who are faithful to Allah's will, by His mercy, be saved.<sup>27</sup> While on earth, Muslim's believe that the role of man is to create a just society,<sup>28</sup> while Christians hold that the purpose of man on earth is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.<sup>29</sup>

## World View

While America has thoroughly absorbed the Modernist/Postmodernist world view, Iran remains divided between modernism/postmodernism and the traditional world view of small societies and of Islam. This conflict produces much of the tension in Persian life.

Americans may be known by what they have done, while Persians will be known by who they are related to. The value of a person is found in the context of their relationships, a traditional perspective.<sup>30</sup> NM is not known by her name but as her father's daughter. Parents and grandparents are afforded great respect, and even ancestors are likely to be remembered for many generations. In traditional Iranian society, the group is more important than the individual and fertility, required to sustain the group, is highly valued.

Conversely, Iranians in large cities, and certainly those in the West, lean towards modernism and postmodernism. The individual reigns supreme, and others are important but not vital to one's identity. To have many children would interfere too much with the lives of the parents, including their career goals and their entertainment, so couples do not do it. Not only

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<sup>26</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> "Westminster Shorter Catechism," Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, accessed May 14, 2015, <http://www.reformed.org/documents/wsc/index.html?top=http://www.reformed.org/documents/WSC.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: an Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 108.

dead ancestors but grandparents and parents can be forgotten. Self-aggrandizement and self-gratification are the goals of many in Iran, just like they are the goals of many in Washington DC.

### **The Nation**

Persians are very proud of their heritage. As noted above, Persia is one of the great ancient civilizations of the world, alongside China, Egypt and Greece. It has its own religion, Zoroastrianism, and for centuries was a regional superpower. Though some Muslims such as ISIS try to suppress the pre-Islamic history of Islamic nations, Persia has millennia of history before the coming of Islam and many Persians are proud of it. NM would like to marry a Persian, and the deacon at the church wants only a Persian pastor. Both find it troubling that Americans so often view Iranians as the enemy.

### **Conclusion**

Persia is one of the oldest and most important cultures in human history. Even today with the Iran nuclear crisis, the War on Terror, and a hundred other issues, Iran is an important actor in global politics. Lying in a key geographic area and containing significant oil reserves, Iran could be a business giant. Heavily influenced by Jewish and later Christian thought, Persia became thoroughly Islamic after the Arab invasions, and it has remained so for almost 1500 years. It is one of the least Christian nations on earth. For all of these reasons Iran is worth understanding and caring about.

Christians in Iran are a tiny subgroup who endure almost daily persecution. Life is fraught with difficulties and still they persist in living out the gospel of Christ. The Church throughout the world will do well to come alongside them.

Iran sits astride two major cultures, the modern Western culture and the traditional Persian culture as heavily modified by Islam. By carefully studying the Iranian people, both in

the native land and in their American diaspora, not as quasi-objective academics but as co-laborers, we can better achieve peace and prosperity in the region, and share the story of Christ.

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