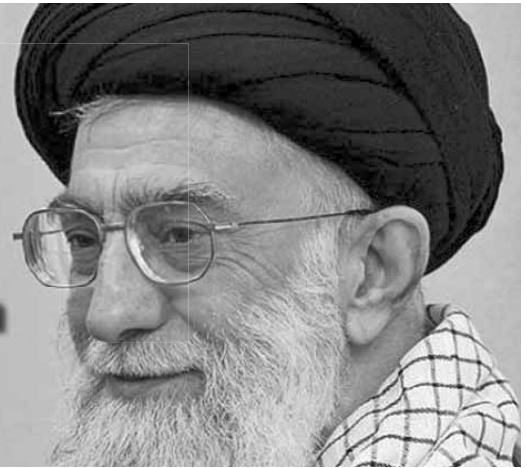


The Long March Forward:

From Cyrus to the Ayatollah

Krikor Markarian



The first non-Jewish worshippers of Jesus may have been Persian Zoroastrians. The “magi from the east” recorded in Matthew’s gospel were likely members of an ancient Persian tribe who, like the Levites in Judaism and the Brahmins in Hinduism, had become the priestly caste in Persian society. They were astrologers who looked to the heavens for guidance, and when the sign of Christ’s birth appeared, they knew what it meant.

Although astrology was something forbidden under Jewish law, here we find God giving a graphic demonstration of what would become the hallmark of the Christian faith: meeting people where they are to take them where they need to go. Thus in our first New Testament example of contextualized cross-cultural evangelism, God decided to make known the mysteries of the gospel through means of an astrologically significant event in order to reach the priests of a foreign, non-Jewish tradition.

Of course, this was not the first time that God spoke to the Magi in the Bible. It was King Darius who was so impressed by the young Daniel’s ability to interpret dreams that he appointed him as *Rab-Mag*, or chief of the Magi in his kingdom. Daniel’s influence on the Magi may be more than history records, for it was the Magi that developed an alternative to Zoroastrianism known as Zurvanism that historian Samuel Moffett describes as a “creeping monotheism, undercutting the radical dualism of the popular orthodoxy.”¹

The Persians encouraged pluralism and religious tolerance within their empire, and even supported the rebuilding of local temples with state funds, including the Jewish temple under King Cyrus. By the

first century AD the Jews formed a large and significant minority within Persia, rivaling the numbers of their cousins in the Roman Empire. And unlike in Rome, where the Jews were considered impossible to govern and even seditious, in Persia they had come to be regarded as a beneficial addition to the empire. Here they learned to contextualize their faith to a much greater degree, and were taught by their leaders that the “civil law of the government is as valid for the Jews as their own law.” As a result they were willing to adopt regulations regarding the use of fire and water, which had religious significance for the Zoroastrians, without feeling that they had compromised their own orthodoxy.

Due in large part to these favorable circumstances, Persia early on became a strong center of Christianity and a place of refuge for persecuted Roman believers. Christians from all throughout the eastern part of the Roman Empire emigrated to Persia and formed a truly international church.

This, of course, had its advantages and disadvantages. What it meant for Persians was that Christianity increasingly became associated with foreigners, and as a result, the formation of an indigenous Persian-speaking Church suffered. Rather than use Farsi, the Eastern Church adopted the use of Syriac as its liturgical language. (Syriac was a form of Aramaic that came to be widely used beginning in the 2nd century AD and which became for the Eastern Church what Latin would become for the West.) Regrettably, as far as history records, the Bible was never translated into the Persian language until Henry Martyn took on the task in the early 19th century. The significance of this speaks volumes about the importance of using the mother tongue in Bible translation. For although today a community of at least 1.5 million Syriac-speaking believers have survived in Iraq and Iran, the Persian church would eventually vanish until its recent reemergence in our day.

Krikor Markarian is a pseudonym for a frontier mission strategy coordinator. He has served Muslims in Asia for the last 15 years, and is presently focused on the Persian bloc, which includes over 100 people groups in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Enter Constantine

The reasons for the extinction of the Persian church comprise one of the greatest lessons history has to teach us concerning the dangers of political associations with the faith. While Constantine's conversion to Christianity was heralded as a triumph in the West, it was deplored as a disaster in the East. His infamous letter to the Shah in Persia announcing his conversion would unleash the greatest, most systematic and violent persecution against the Church ever known in history. Constantine's letter was interpreted by the Shah to mean that the emperor of Rome was now the protector of Christians everywhere and that the Persian Empire was answerable to him for their treatment.

Though it is hard to decipher Constantine's motives, it is even harder to believe that he did not understand the consequences of such a letter to his archenemy. But one thing is certain, as a result of the persecution of Persian Christians which followed, all of the border kingdoms between Persia and Rome permanently switched their allegiance to Constantine. These border kingdoms, such as Armenia, Adiabene, and Edessa were strategic buffers that had been constantly fought over by the two eastern and western empires throughout history. But by the early 4th century they had all become Christian, and due to Constantine's support of their faith, unswerving allies of Rome. What is more, the ruthless persecution of Christians in Persia gave Constantine the justification to go to war with his empire's historic nemesis. At the time of his death, Constantine was preparing for the Church's first crusade, summoning the empire to a holy war in the name of the cross.

From this point on, everything changed for Christians in Persia. To be Christian was to be Roman and a traitor. Wisely, perhaps, the Persian church began to distance itself from Rome and adopted a controversial movement known as Nestorianism. The founder of this movement was regarded as a heretic in the Roman Empire, and as a result, the Persian Church would eventually be condemned as apostate. (Nestorius opposed the use of the phrase "Mother of God" in the 5th century, and was summarily condemned, defrocked and sent into exile.) They in turn condemned the Roman Church, and as a consequence, the Persian Shahs once again began to smile upon the Christian faith.

By the 7th century, Chosroes II, the last "great Persian emperor to rule," openly departed from Zoroastrianism and made known his favorable intentions towards Christianity. This was due in part to the sanctuary

given him by the Byzantine emperor Maurice and the witness of a wealthy Christian family that provided him protection when he had to flee Persia as a young man. Once restored to power, like Constantine, he helped finance the building of churches and had Bibles imported into the empire. However, the united power of the Zoroastrians was too much for any Persian emperor to move against, (unlike the divided nature of the Roman pagan religions in Constantine's day), making any possibility of declaring Christianity the state religion rather remote.

Ironically, the undoing of Chosroes II, and by extension the Persians as well, was the murder of Emperor Maurice by his enemies, who usurped his throne. Chosroes declared war against them to avenge Maurice's death, and the subsequent battles that followed would so weaken the Persian and Byzantine empires, neither would have the strength to withstand the Arab onslaught that was soon to follow.

Under the Crescent

Just at a time when the Persian church was beginning to gain momentum, and its missionary zeal was impacting peoples throughout Central Asia, China and India, another changing of the guard would confront the resilience of this expanding and dynamic movement.

Between 634 and 652 AD half of the Byzantine Empire and all of the Persian Empire would fall to Arab armies. Within a span of less than twenty years, Arab nomads would accomplish the unthinkable, establishing an empire that spanned from North Africa to the Khyber Pass of Afghanistan. For the first few centuries, the Arabic conquerors were greeted with enthusiasm by the Persian church. After all, they shared the same holy book—the Bible—as the foundation of their faith. And far from being regarded as a new religion, the new Arab faith was seen as yet another viable alternative to Roman Christianity.

A Nestorian chronicler writing in the 9th century describes how the Persian believers viewed their conquerors and how they fared under their rule:

"The Arabs treated them with generosity and by the grace of God (may he be exalted) prosperity reigned and the hearts of Christians rejoiced at the ascendancy of the Arabs. May God affirm and make it triumphant!"

Since it cannot be known what the early Muslims actually believed doctrinally speaking, the embrace of many Persian Nestorians of Islam need not be seen as apostasy from orthodoxy. The first copies of

the Quran would not appear until much later, and there is much evidence that the Quran as it exists today was developed over many centuries. What we do know with certainty is that Zoroastrianism was permanently dethroned, and this was viewed as a triumph for all those claiming a biblical faith.

Rebirth

Over time, Islam in the East and Catholicism in the West went their separate ways due almost entirely to those politically-generated hostilities that throughout history have been the driving force for most theological divergence. Indeed, Islam would not be the first faith to develop politically—and culturally—motivated doctrine and apologetics, nor the last. Those who consider themselves Protestant Christians are proof enough of that reality!

If anyone wonders why Muslims have such an aversion to the cross, one only has to recall its use as a symbol of bloody conquest by Roman Catholic armies, beginning with Constantine and culminating in the Crusades. Of course the Crusades were not the only factor in creating this divide, but they certainly widened it more than any other force.

Widening it even further were the Christian colonial powers that imposed their will upon a decaying and fractured Islamic world in the 19th and 20th centuries. The culmination of this Western Christian dominance resulted in the ultimate shame for the Muslim world: the loss of the Caliphate and Jerusalem's Haram al-Sharif (the third most holy site in Islam) to the "idolatrous" West and an occupation of Jews.

In the midst of this shame has risen a fundamentalism that asserts the reason for loss of power and honor has been a lack of devotion to God. And so in Persia began a movement to reverse the effects of westernization and secularization that led to the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution. But the results were far from what was expected. Had the Mullahs known their revolution would tear down in 30 years what took 1200 years to build, perhaps they would

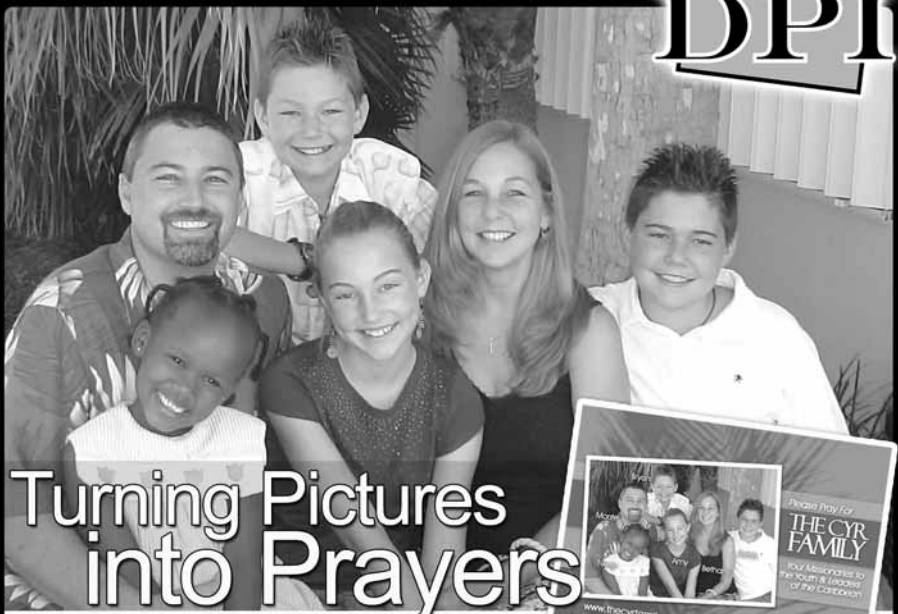
have given it a second thought. But then again, it seems history left them no choice.

Now today, after over a millennium of silence, praises to Jesus in the Persian language are once more beginning to rise from this ancient land. Redeemer, Savior, and Coming King—a new Hope is rising that may yet transform the nation. With an estimated one million new believers who call themselves *farsi-masibi* (Persian-Christians) coming to faith in the last seven years, the rebirth of a Christward movement in Persia has been nothing short of supernatural.

Truly, it has been a long journey—perhaps the longest for any people besides the Jews themselves. But the story that began in the 6th century B.C. with the Jewish exile to Babylon may yet have an ending that will surprise even the greatest skeptic. This is truly His story, and as such, we are far from its glorious ending.

¹Much of the history in this article is indebted to the research done by Samuel H. Moffett in his seminal work, *A History of Christianity in Asia*.^f

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