

The Christian Struggle in Iran

Christians in Iran work to maintain their faith in a hostile environment. Some, like the Armenians, have found a way to survive. Others worship in secret. Many are convinced radical Islam is a passing phenomenon that will eventually be replaced.

text by *Andrea Milluzzi* photos by *Linda Dorigo*

On the first day of the pilgrimage, smiling boys greet the faithful, “Welcome, you now are in Armenia.” In fact, we’re still in Iran, on the border between Turkey and Iranian Azerbaijan. Nearby is towering Mount Ararat. The sounds of grazing goats and cows break the near-total silence.

This is the place where the apostle St. Jude Thaddeus was martyred in 48 AD. Less than three centuries later, the Christian faithful built one of their first churches, known as the Black Church, which has been destroyed and rebuilt many times over the centuries.

Qara Kilise is a small village populated mostly by Kurdish shepherds and located in northern Iran. Sunni Muslims, Christians, Armenians and Turks all coexist in this no man’s land. Every year in July, the Iranian-Armenian community organizes three days of prayers, dances and songs to honor their traditions. For them, the appearance of a Western tourist is a strange and gratifying experience.

That’s because the annual festivities conceal a tense reality. Tehran government officials impose themselves on all Black Church ceremonies. Every word spoken by local participants is recorded. Foreigners who visit are carefully monitored. References to politics are banned.

Iran’s constitution recognizes religious minorities, except for the persecuted followers of the Bahá’í faith. Bahá’í is monotheistic religion founded in Muslim Persia in the mid-19th century as an alternative to the Muslim faith. It emphasizes spiritual unity and seen by Islamic officials as an “imposter” religion, since Islam is considered the only and “definitive” religion and Muhammad the last messenger of God.

In Pataver, northwest Iran, villagers honor St. Mary at a shrine.



More troubling to the Iranian governing class, the Bahá’í faith contains a number of innovative social principles. Men and women are seen as equal and the harmony between science and religion is honored, two viewpoints Iranian Islam rejects.

By contrast, other religious minorities have parliamentary representation (one man for each religious) and the

state respects the teachings of indigenous language and customs.

But government management of minority religions is inconsistent. It often changes standing rules to suit perceived threats.

For example, Farsi, the Persian language, once permitted at Friday religious functions (the public holiday for

Muslims), is now banned, mostly for fear of Christian proselytizing.

Every week without fail the Farsi Christian News Network reports some new incident of intimidation and arrests toward the minority Christian community. "They say that man is afraid of two things, God and the law. But Iran, the two things coincide," Melik, a young Christian computer technician, tells us, as pilgrims gather to board a bus leaving for Tabriz, where inter-faith services are still held. "I feel like a foreigner in my country." Melik usually joins the pilgrims, but not this year. "It makes me suffer that I can't go because the pilgrimage is the only chance [non-Muslims] have to live in freedom, to drink, sing and dress like we want."

The bus slowly fills with people carrying blankets and groceries. On the bus roof is luggage enough for an immigrant ocean crossing. A police car pauses near the bus. "We're always under surveillance," says Melik, "which is paradoxically useful because otherwise we'd be constantly attacked by the Turks."

Tabriz, Iran's third largest city, tolerates the presence of Kurds, Armenians, and Turks, who live in ghettos where

religious traditions are more or less free from interference. But the religious cohabitation is never entirely peaceful.

Says Father Vaghinagh, the 40-year-old pastor of Tabriz's Armenian community: "Three years ago some Turks tried to break down the door of our Ararat [a Armenian community gathering place] to demolish our church. We alerted local government officials and the police ended up giving us two guns. I'm ready to kill to defend myself and defend anyone who would try to attack the church."

Vaghinagh, of Syrian descent, grew up in Lebanon, but knows Iran well, having served at the Armenian church in nearby Urmie.

"If Khamenei accidentally uttered the word jihad, you wouldn't find a single Christian in Iran [*editor's note: Ali Khamenei is Iran's hard-line president*]. But I still feel

BELOW The Saint Thaddeus Monastery (Qara Kilisa, or Black Church) in Iran's West Azerbaijan Province during the annual pilgrimage.

FACING PAGE Vaghinagh Miloian, priest to Tabriz's Armenian community.



much more comfortable here than I would in the United States,"

Europe and the U.S. represent both opportunity and damnation for Iran's Christians, estimated at about 60,000 (before the 1979 Islamic Revolution the figure was estimated at two million). The Diaspora following the Shah's ouster was unstoppable. "Being Armenian means not only find yourself in religion, but also protecting your identity," says Father Ratevosian, an Armenian priest, in the city of Isfahan, south of Tehran. "If we didn't speak Armenian to our children they wouldn't learn the language. What would happen if all of us went to live the good life in Europe or the U.S.? We'd just be assimilated."

Twenty-eight-year-old Armond has been to the U.S. and back. He's now living in Tehran after spending nearly all his adult life as a political exile in Los Angeles. Back in

A visitor to the Assyrian cemetery at Salma, where most tombs have been removed, destroyed or desecrated.





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Salmas, in northwest Iran, is divided between Kurds and Assyrians. The Kurds generally work on lands owned by Christians.

ABOVE

The Catholic Church in Tabriz, undergoing restoration.

the Iranian capital, he invested \$60,000 to open “Bistro,” an Italian restaurant located a few meters from Tehran’s Ararat. “I came back because I got tired of having to pay taxes for everything and having no real freedom,” he says. “In U.S. unless you have money, you can’t do a thing. Iran has its rules, sure, but once you know them well and respect them you can live well. Armenians are also privileged because we’re part of the country’s upper classes. If we drank or sold drugs, things wouldn’t be so easy, but that’s not the life that interests me.”

In all, about 2,000 Armenians live Tehran, most concentrated between the Vanak district and the northern outskirts of town. The generally wealthy area is filled with modern condominiums, in direct contrast to the



overcrowding and poverty common in the city's south.

Rafik, Learnik, and their son Kajuni live not far from Vanak. The family is active in the community. Rafik is a photojournalist for a local Armenian journal while Learnik works in the Armenian Quarter's elementary school. They live on the second floor of three-story building occupied by Armenians. Their daily lives are inextricably tied to relations with other Armenians, both family and friends. "We are the Christians of the Middle East," says Rafik. "First come the Armenians and then the Catholics. The Ottoman Turks exterminated us. They made members of our faith march for miles just to see them die one by one. That's why we moved here. We're important for that reason."

Community life, from weddings to sporting events, is contained within the local Ararat. While we're there, Armenians and Muslims are playing a football match. We can't sit on the sidelines and watch because there are women in our group. Says Artemise, a neighbor of Rafik and Learnik: "Muslims are stupid and ignorant. That's the real problem. They destroyed everything that existed before the revolution and continue to do so."

ABOVE

Wedding celebrations during an Armenian marriage in Tehran's "Ararat."

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Prayers in the Black Church.

Cultural and social differences alone aren't sufficient to explain the gap between Christians and Muslims in Iran. Christian converts are afraid of being seen professing their faith, so they operate in secrecy. "Christianity is based on respect and love of neighbor, which is all I need," says a male Christian convert who won't give his name. "As a child I saw the pictures of the Shiite Ashura [editor's note: annual celebrations marking the martyrdom of Imam Hussein ibn Ali, which includes whippings] and I disliked all the violence."

The convert, if discovered by Islamic officials, would risk the death penalty for apostasy. He uses his house as a place of prayer and proudly shows off his Bible. "I have always had feelings of faith inside me," he says. "I always



sought an opportunity to convert, and finally found it, going to Sweden secretly. My faith was too big to keep locked up. I had to act."

Christian conversions appear to be growing. "If this regime fell, many Iranians would turn to Christianity or Zoroastrianism," says Villbert, a 36-year-old oil extraction consultant in the city of Ahwaz. "The Islam that these fanatics have imposed on the country nothing to do with the true Islam. Ayatollahs and the government interpret the Koran to justify their own political ends... I have many Muslim friends, both at home and at work, but they drink alcohol and eat pork. And they never talk about religion."

According to the World Health Organization, Ahwaz, an oil and gas extraction center a few kilometers from the Iraqi border in Kuzhestan, is the most polluted city on earth. Summer days average 50C, winter ones about 30C. "There's a lot of money to be had," says Villbert, "and I do it so we can ultimately leave it all behind and return to our hometown in the North." Villbert and his wife Juliana are members of Iran's second-largest Christian community, the Assyrian. Its 2,000-strong Iranian mem-

bership lives mostly in the northwest and Ahwaz.

Jean, another Assyrian, lives in Tehran with Clara, his wife of 30 years. He hates Muslims and the Israeli government and prefers to talk about love. Light-spirited Clara is always laughing, except in the morning while reading the newspaper or listening to a Prague-based independent radio station that broadcasts anti-regime programs. The couple has two sons who live in California and often invites them to visit. "What could I do at my age in America? I wouldn't have a friend or a job," says Jean. "We Assyrians we have always moved from one country to another to defend our history and religion. If we left we'd be swallowed up into something that isn't of us."

Once regional leaders, Assyrian Catholics are now a small minority in Iran, Iraq and Syria. Unlike the Armenians, they possess no one geographical setting, but, as Jean says, work to defend their identity and religion outside the context of political borders.

"The Assyrian civilization ended before the Christ, but we've retained our identity even without a homeland. That's fine with me because I don't need to say I'm an Assyrian, just that I'm a Christian." ●