Islamic loyalty is declining in Iran

What’s replacing it?

by Philip Jenkins in the October 21, 2020 issue

CHRISTIANS OLD AND NEW: The ancient Armenian Monastery of Saint Thaddeus in the mountains of northern Iran. (Photo by Rezakhan kiani via Creative Commons license)

When I do public talks on global Christianity, I often face a question about Iran. Is it true that Christianity is spreading like wildfire in that country, that it is an emerging center of the faith in the Middle East? My answer is that I hear many anecdotal stories about such growth, but without hard evidence, I keep an open mind. Now we actually have such evidence, and the picture it gives is both more and less than enthusiasts might wish.

This summer, the Netherlands-based Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran published the results of a survey of the religious opinions of a large sample of Iranians, of whom 1.5 percent declared themselves Christian. That figure is unlikely to be too exaggerated, because it takes some nerve to admit publicly to something the government might find seditious. We can reasonably say that Iran has some 1.2

million Christians, which is impressive in that harsh political setting, and we could argue that this represents a foundation for future growth.

Even so, it is still a small minority. It corresponds roughly to the number of Muslims or Buddhists in the US. And it includes members of small, long-established Christian communities, not just recent converts.

But the GAMAAN survey points as well to some other interesting facts of Iranian religious life. The harshly Islamist dictatorship that rules Iran has for decades been presiding over a society in which Islamic loyalty is slipping away. Mosques and prayer services are poorly attended, to the point that the vast majority of mosques are all but abandoned, even during great celebrations or holidays.

I have previously argued that a society's fertility rate is an excellent guide to its levels of religious practice and loyalty, and if so, Iran stands in a very special category. As recently as 1982, a typical Iranian woman could expect to bear 6.5 children over the course of her reproductive life. Today, that figure, the total fertility rate, stands below 1.7, below that of Denmark. Such a decline in such a brief historical period has no global parallel or precedents. The theory would predict that such an astonishing drop would be reflected in a major shift toward secularization and secularity—exactly what many observers have noted.

Now the survey confirms such anecdotal accounts, to an almost incredible degree. Only 78 percent of Iranians believe in God in any form, and just 32 percent consider themselves Shi'a Muslims, the nation's official and militant creed. The 22 percent who do not affiliate with any religion correspond to a similar number in the US. Nine percent of Iranians are outright atheists, a far larger proportion than in the US. Even many of those who profess Islam are unorthodox or skeptical. Just a quarter of Iranians believe in the messianic coming of the Imam Mahdi, a cardinal belief of the Twelver Shi'a. Sizable numbers think that religion should be a private matter and that institutions should not receive state support.

If Iran ever had free elections, the country would look very secular indeed. In their religious approaches, Iranians sound very American, even like New Englanders at their most skeptical. Forty years of ruthless theocracy will do that to a country.

Secularization is not synonymous with the rejection of religious belief as such. Rather, it implies a sharp decline in support for religious institutions and for the public role of religion. Often, as in Europe, such a secular drift is associated with an

upsurge of individualistic or nonorthodox spiritual ideas or practices, which might include pilgrimages, popular devotions, and even New Age ideas. In the Iranian context, the chief beneficiary has been the Sufi mystical orders, which exercise a vast appeal for those seeking a passionate personal spirituality far removed from repressive clerical structures. A decade ago, scholars estimated that Sufi numbers in the country had grown from 100,000 before the 1979 revolution to perhaps 5 million.

That situation provides an instructive context for understanding recent Christian growth and for prospects in the near term. Given the near collapse of official Iranian Islam, it is not surprising that individuals would be seeking some spiritual alternative, as occurred in China after the political turmoil of the 1980s. In the Iranian case, some drift to Christianity is only to be expected, given the faith's high international profile. But thus far, Christian numbers are not that large, and there are no signs of anything like an underground revival. The main enemy facing Christian evangelism is not militant Islam but a popular suspicion of all religious movements and their claims.

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