The Presbyterian missionary who became a revolutionary in Iran

“Howard Baskerville believed there was no separation of religion and politics,” says Reza Aslan, “that democracy was a divine gift.”

Elizabeth Palmer interviews Reza Aslan

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Reza Aslan's forthcoming book, An American Martyr in Persia*, is the first English-language biography of Howard Baskerville, a Presbyterian missionary who died in 1909 after joining the revolutionaries during Iran's Constitutional Revolution.*

What was the political situation in Iran in the years before Howard Baskerville arrived there?

At the dawn of the 20th century, Iran (or Persia, as it was known at the time) was ruled by the Qajar dynasty and had been so for nearly a century. The Qajars

essentially unified Iran from a series of disconnected villages and fiefdoms into a true nation—an empire, if you will. They were responsible for enormous advantages in Iranian culture and society, arts and sciences. But by the time of the 20th century, it had become a bloated monarchy with a kleptocratic bureaucracy filled with sycophants and bootlickers and a whole class of professionals whose entire job was to simply feed off the excesses of the monarchy. This created a centralized state, but one that didn't really have the ability to care for the people in distant provinces like Tabriz.

The capital of Iran at the time was in Tehran, and all the power was concentrated in the court. Provincial governors would purchase their offices directly from the Shah. Whoever was the highest bidder would become a governor, and then he would make up the money that he spent to get the position by indiscriminately taxing the citizens, keeping the surplus for himself and then passing the rest on to Tehran.

At the same time, the shahs maintained their lavish lifestyle by taking out massive unpayable loans, usually from the Russian Empire, although also from the British. While Iran was never colonized in the way that India or Iraq was, nevertheless, Iran was carved up into two separate zones of influence. The Russians more or less controlled the north, and the British more or less controlled the south. So it didn't act as an independent empire; it acted as essentially the proxy of these two larger empires.

This created a situation in which Iran's economy was in shambles. There was a small, wealthy elite connected to the royal family, and then everyone else existed in a lower-class position. But it also created a situation in which the national sovereignty of the country was not its own. All of this contributed to the feeling of disaffection and anger that ultimately resulted in what we now know as the Persian Constitutional Revolution.

The goal of the revolution was to reclaim a sense of Persian sovereignty and create a constitution that would severely curtail the absolute powers of the shah. The idea that an elected parliament could create laws that the shah himself was accountable to was completely new in Iran. Not only was this the first democratic revolution in the Middle East, but it resulted in the first constitutional monarchy in the Middle East. This was the extraordinary set of circumstances that Howard Baskerville walked into.

How did Baskerville end up in Persia as a missionary?

Baskerville, who was born in Nebraska and raised in South Dakota, was the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers. In 1903, he followed in his father's footsteps and went to Princeton to study Christian ministry. He took two electives during his junior year with the university president at the time, a man by the name of Woodrow Wilson. And in those classes, Baskerville heard an inspiring vision of the fusion of religion and politics. Wilson taught that democracy was a gift granted by God to all peoples everywhere, and that it was the duty of Americans, particularly young, privileged Americans like Howard Baskerville, to ensure that the freedoms that they took for granted in America were spread to everyone everywhere.

This really lit a fire under Baskerville, and so instead of going straight back to South Dakota after his graduation from Princeton in 1907, he made a fateful decision that he was going to take a position as a missionary teacher abroad, under the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. He desperately wanted to go to China or Japan. He had been hearing missionary reports and dispatches coming from those two places, speaking about the enormous success that the Presbyterian Church was having in converting the masses in China, of the beauty of Japan and the way in which the people there were so gentle and loving and open to the gospel. He wrote a letter to the head of the Board of Foreign Missions, Robert E. Speers, saying that he truly felt like God was calling him to China or Japan, that that's where he would be best used in serving the kingdom. Much to his dismay, he was instead assigned to Persia, to teach at the American Memorial School in Tabriz.

He did not want to go to Persia. He had read the missionary reports coming out of Persia detailing how terrible the country was, how awful and deceitful the people were, how the solid wall of Mohammedanism was still unbroken. He went there reluctantly.

He arrived in Iran in the fall of 1907, and two things happened. One, he immediately realized that all those dispatches that he'd read, talking about how awful Persia was, were incorrect. He absolutely fell in love with the country, the culture, the people. He developed a particular fondness for Persian food. He almost instantly became the most popular teacher at the school. He was essentially having the time of his life.

Secondly, he arrived in the midst of a revolution. Although the constitution was signed in 1906 by the shah, he died soon afterwards and his son, Mohammad Ali,

became the new shah. Mohammad Ali very quickly tore up that constitution and declared war on the parliament and on the revolutionaries. In a very brief amount of time, through 1907 and 1908, the new shah reconquered almost all of Iran. The exception was Tabriz, the city in which Baskerville now resided. Tabriz became the center of the revolution, a place where revolutionaries and anti-imperialists from all over the world began to gather to fight against the shah. That's the situation in which Baskerville found himself.

What were some unique characteristics of Tabriz that made it conducive to a revolutionary uprising?

Tabriz was at the time the second-most important city in Iran. It was a border town, a crossroads of trade along the old Silk Route. Like most crossroads, it was eclectic, both culturally and religiously. Almost every religion of the time in that area had a foothold in Tabriz, including indigenous Christianity. It was what we would nowadays refer to as a globalized city. Azerbaijani, the primary language at the time, wasn't even Persian: it was Turkish and Azeri.

All of this allowed Tabriz to become the center of the revolution rather than easily give in to the Persian national identity that was being force-fed to the population by the crown. The people of Tabriz saw themselves as fiercely independent and were unwilling to allow the shah to ascribe a ready-made national identity upon them. The city's eclecticism became a strength during the revolution. The fighters in Tabriz came from all over the place and were able to put aside their national and ethnic identities and to unite as one in this anti-imperialist struggle.

How did Baskerville's view of the relationship between religion and politics change as he began to incorporate revolutionary activism into his missionary work?

Baskerville was profoundly influenced by Wilson to believe that there was no separation of religion and politics; that democracy was a divine gift; and that people who were out there promoting democratic rights, freedom of individuals, and popular sovereignty were essentially doing God's work. I think in Baskerville's mind his role as a missionary and his role as a revolutionary were one and the same. Wilson had taught that revolution was necessary in order to create a situation where all of God's creatures could live in freedom and dignity. Baskerville truly believed that.

Still, it took him a long time to become activated. He was told repeatedly, not just by the American Memorial School but by the board of missions and the State Department, that revolution in Iran was none of his business. He was there to save souls, not lives. He could not engage in any way with the revolution because the United States had already declared that the Persian Constitutional Revolution had no hope of succeeding. Islam implies autocracy, the State Department said in a memo it sent to US citizens abroad in Iran. Baskerville essentially was told to mind his own business: teach his classes, preach the gospel, but do not support any revolutionary activities.

By winter 1909, Tabriz was the last bastion of the revolution. The entire city was undergoing a severe and horrific blockade by the shah's troops. The shah had given up trying to defeat Tabriz and had decided simply to starve it into submission. He'd cut off all food and water, and the population was undergoing a horrific humanitarian crisis. In fact, the Siege of Tabriz is one of Iranian history's gravest moments. People were starving in the street.

At this point, Baskerville could not continue to go on as normal. He could not bear to see the suffering around him. It's not as though his fellow missionaries didn't feel sympathy for the Persians. They tried their best to ameliorate that suffering. But for Baskerville, the solution wasn't just to put a Band-aid on a wound. The solution was to get rid of the sword causing the wound.

And so, one day he stands before his students and tells them in no uncertain terms that he cannot continue to teach his courses and ignore the suffering on the streets, that the only way he knows how to help the Tabrizis that he has come to love is to leave his position as a teacher and missionary and to go join the revolution. Remarkably, in a moment fit for Hollywood, his students stand up and join him. They also leave the school; they also pick up guns and join the fight for Tabriz.

As you can imagine, this caused an enormous amount of consternation at the school. It's one thing for them to lose one of their teachers to the revolution. But the fact that he took a bunch of students with him was quite remarkable. And indeed, he turned those students into a militia. It is that militia that fatefully, on April 20, 1909, went out to try to break the siege and bring assistance and food to the city.

Why did you decide to write a book about Baskerville, and why now?

I feel like I've always known the name Howard Baskerville. When I was growing up in Iran as a child, his name was everywhere. There were schools and streets and coffee shops named Howard Baskerville. I didn't know much about who he was, other than that he was an American who died in one of Iran's revolutions. But his name stuck with me after I left Iran and came to the United States. Every once in a while, I would hear about him. There would be some anniversary, or some American scholar would go and visit his grave in Tabriz and write something about it.

When it came time for me to plan my next book a few years ago, I decided to tackle this subject. The problem was that there is hardly anything written about Baskerville, especially in English. He's someone who has been lost to history. After the 1979 revolution, his name was wiped from the consciousness of Iranians as well. But I discovered a treasure trove of information, and not just in Persian and Russian. There were documents in the Presbyterian Historical Society archives and in the Princeton University archives. I was able to piece together the actions of his life and the motivations that led him to abandon his missionary post, to give up his teaching job, ultimately to surrender his citizenship, and to fight alongside his students for the freedom of a foreign land.

That was astonishing for 1907. And frankly, it's astonishing nowadays, when issues like democracy and popular sovereignty aren't all that popular here in the United States, let alone being promoted by Americans abroad. I think reviving his name now provides a model, and not just for a different kind of relationship between Iran and America at a time in which Iranians are yet again on the streets clamoring for their most basic rights. Baskerville's memory also serves to remind us as Americans of the duty that we have to peoples in the rest of the world, that the rights and the privileges and the freedoms that we take for granted here in the United States are universal rights.

Baskerville forces us to consider a very important question: What responsibility do we have, when faced with the suffering of someone far away, to ameliorate that suffering in some way? That is certainly the question that all missionaries must ask themselves, but it's also a question that every one of us needs to ask ourselves. Baskerville provides a pretty extreme answer. This was a kid who was willing not only to do something about the suffering of others but to sacrifice himself in order to try to alleviate that suffering. I think he can become a hero and a model to other Americans the way that he's been a hero and a model to me.

You tell the story of Justin and Charlotte Perkins, the first American Christian missionaries in Persia, who endured great suffering during their missionary years. How does their story connect to Barkerville's story?

Justin and Charlotte Perkins were the first American missionaries ever assigned to Persia. They essentially built the mission that Howard Baskerville entered 70 years later. When they came to Iran, Christian missionaries were not exactly welcomed. Conversions from Islam to Christianity were punishable by death, at least in theory. Despite the danger, the Perkins left a physical legacy: the school that they built, the people who they helped, the countless women who they educated. In this way, they paved the way for Baskerville's experience as an American missionary in Persia.

But there is more to their story. There's a second legacy, because Charlotte and Justin were the first Americans that a lot of Persians had ever met. It's hard to say just how successful they were in preaching the gospel among Muslims. Their primary concern was to preach the gospel among Iran's indigenous Christian community and to convert them to a particularly American brand of evangelical Christianity, and they did: they were very successful in that way. But they also managed to gain an enormous amount of respect and affection from the Muslim community in Iran because of their activism and the sacrifices they were willing to make. Six of their seven children died in Persia.

By the time the next generation of American missionaries showed up, there was an enormous amount of respect for American missionaries—even among those Iranians who were suspicious of Christian evangelism. The American Memorial School was celebrated by the provincial governors and given unusual resources and benefits. For instance, at the time, Persian law forbade Christian churches from using a bell or a bell tower of any sort, and yet the American Memorial School was allowed to build a giant bell tower and to ring it on Sundays in preparation for church service. That seems like a small thing, but it's an indication of the respect and appreciation that the Persian community had toward the missionaries because of the way that Justin and Charlotte laid the groundwork for the thriving mission that came after them.

What kinds of questions do you think missionaries should ask themselves about who is being sacrificed for the sake of their ministry?

This is a very sticky question. I think the answer goes back to the larger issue of giving agency to the people that you are trying to serve. In some ways, missionary

activity does the opposite. The missionary believes that he is privy to a secret knowledge that he must share with people and that if people don't hear this secret knowledge then they will face the consequences of it. While it is true that missionaries do a great deal of good in the world, I think what often gets lost is listening to the people who you are trying to serve so that the sacrifices you make—and there are many sacrifices, obviously—have the maximum benefit to those people.

What lessons do you hope readers will take away from the story of Baskerville?

Well, here we are watching yet another Iranian revolution, with young people on the streets asking for the exact same rights that people were asking for 115 years ago when Baskerville joined them. I think Baskerville can become a bridge between the Iranians and the American people. Perhaps not between the American and Iranian governments. But a recognition among these two peoples that they are so much more alike and have so much more in common than they've been told.

In another way, I think Baskerville reminds us of the responsibility that we as Americans have to make sure that we are promoting our values, that we are actually putting into action the things that we believe as Americans, that we are fighting for people's rights regardless of where they are in the world, that we have a responsibility to them.

And more generally, Baskerville forces us to ask a fundamental question of ourselves: What do we owe one another? How far are we willing to go to alleviate the suffering of people around the world? What can you sacrifice in order to help people you don't know, people suffering on the other side of the world? Is there something that you can do? Can you learn from Baskerville what it means to put your faith into practice?

How (if at all) is Baskerville regarded today by the Presbyterian church? Does the PC(USA) have any official opinion on him?

When the State Department, having exhausted all of its own efforts to get Baskerville to cease his revolutionary activities, told the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions that it needed to come and do something with Baskerville, the board responded that actually Baskerville's not really a missionary, he's a teacher at a missionary school, and so therefore, he's not their problem. This, as you can

imagine, was quite a surprise to everyone.

What is clear is that the Presbyterian church of Baskerville's time wanted nothing to do with him. They were understandably worried that if news starts to get out that one of their missionaries took up arms against the government of the country he had been sent to serve, then it could have catastrophic consequences for their future missionary work around the world, and so they actively suppressed this story.

But that was 116 years ago, and the Presbyterian church is today one of the most active churches in the world promoting peace and social justice everywhere on the planet. So I certainly hope that a century later the Presbyterian church is willing not only to accept Baskerville as one of its own but to celebrate him as a model for what it means to be a Presbyterian in the world, how to fuse your spirituality and your activism into a single force for good in the world.

If I were a Presbyterian, I would want to know who Howard Baskerville was. Particularly for the younger generation of Presbyterians, many of whom are moving away from formal religion, the memory of this 22-year-old who died for his beliefs might be really attractive and appealing. It provides a different sort of model for what it means to be Christian in the world.

The lively way that you tell the story in this book makes it hard to put down. How did you become such an effective storyteller? Was telling stories a part of your childhood?

I have a lot of jobs, but I think of myself first and foremost as a storyteller. Stories are how we understand the world and our place in it. Even as a scholar of religions, I recognize that religion is fundamentally storytelling. And politics is fundamentally storytelling. It's all just storytelling.

I learned from a very young age that the best way to convey information, values, aspirations, anything, is to wrap it in a compelling story. That's what I try to do with all of my books. When I write about Islam or early Christianity or the evolution of God or religion and violence, I always do so in the form of story—because I know stories are the most powerful way for people to retain information and then to act upon that information.

What's next for you? Any hints about your next book?

I think that I am going to transition fully into fiction. I have an MFA in fiction from the Iowa Writers Workshop, and I got into the nonfiction business accidentally because my first book, *No God but God*, was such a success that my publisher wanted more of the same. This biography of Baskerville really allows me to show off some of my fiction chops, the ability to tell a sustained story with a compelling character arc. Fiction writing is what I’m likely going to be doing from here on out.