

A Quaker in Iran

by
Stephen W. Angell



Quaker Universalist Fellowship

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FOREWORD

In these times of widespread and often intense religious prejudice and conflict, the Quaker Universalist Fellowship joins with many others in seeking to open doors to dialogue, understanding, and cooperation. One important way in which we do that is through visitation and conversation with persons of other cultures and faiths. In this pamphlet, Stephen W. Angell, a member of the Fellowship's Steering Committee, relates his experiences and reflections during a visit to Iran. He reports not only on his encounters with others, but also on the relationships among divergent religious traditions there, and his report is enriched by his personal reflections on the experience and its implications regarding the relationship between the United States and Iran. By helping bridge the gaps of misunderstanding and misinformation while offering an honest report of some of the real problems that separate us, this pamphlet – like the visit itself – is another small step toward mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. It is also a pleasure to read.

George Amoss Jr., QUF Pamphlet Editor

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A Quaker in Iran

I am convinced that God led me to Iran in the spring of 2009, but this happened in a complicated and rather unexpected way. Sam Neff, a retired Earlham College professor and a member of Clear Creek Friends Meeting in Richmond, Indiana, met in June, 2008, with Jay Marshall, dean of the Earlham School of Religion (ESR) where I work, to acquaint Jay with an opportunity for an Earlham or ESR professor to submit a paper proposal to present at the Second International Conference on Religion and the Media, to meet in Tehran, Iran, in November, 2008. At Jay's suggestion, I submitted a proposal. When my proposal was accepted, I began preparations to visit Iran. ESR bought a plane ticket for me, and I began the tricky process of applying for a visa.

Then, in mid-October, the conference was cancelled. This seldom happens with scholarly conferences; in fact, during more than two decades of attending such conferences, I had never known it to happen before. The reason given for canceling the conference was that the university president scheduled to chair the conference had to undergo open-heart surgery. Also, none of the 61 American participants, including myself, had obtained visas. ESR and I were left with a plane ticket to Iran; my ticket could be rescheduled, but not refunded.

It turned out that Sam and Ruth Neff had planned a tour of Iran in the spring. The tour would be under the auspices of Neighbors East and West, a citizens' peace advocacy organization founded in 1986.¹ We would travel the country, including some of the larger and most famous cities (Tehran, Qom, Kashan, Esfahan, and Shiraz) as well as a humble village (Abyaneh). We would talk to a lot of ordinary people about their country of Iran, our country the United States, and what we hoped would be our mutual desires for peace. I proposed that I should join the Neff delegation. Jay and I conferred,

and he agreed. This time the visa process proceeded flawlessly. My ticket acceptably rescheduled, I joined a group of 24 extraordinary people whom the Neffs had recruited. Our group included African Americans and European Americans, Christians and Jews, religious leaders and social and political activists, academics, farmers, lawyers, nurses, one retired doctor, social workers. We flew to Iran on April 25, and most of us were able to stay a full two weeks.

I had traveled to Europe and Central America before, but never to the Middle East. It was my first opportunity to visit a predominantly Muslim country. For someone whose scholarly work was in the history of Christianity, but with a strong interest in the broader history of religions, this was a wonderful opportunity.

But while Iran is a predominantly Muslim country, it also has religious minorities, including Jews, Armenian Christians, much-persecuted Bahaís, and the Zoroastrians whose presence in Iran pre-dates the coming of Islam to Iran in the 7th century. Our visit to Iran was an encounter with all of these religions.

Encountering Cyrus

Isaiah 45

¹Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him
and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him—
and the gates shall not be closed:

²I will go before you
and level the mountains,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron,

³I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,

so that you may know that it is I, the Lord,
 the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
⁴For the sake of my servant Jacob,
 and Israel my chosen,
 I call you by your name,
 I surname you, though you do not know me.
⁵I am the Lord, and there is no other;
 besides me there is no god.
 I arm you, though you do not know me,
⁶so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
 and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
 I am the Lord, and there is no other.
⁷I form light and create darkness,
 I make weal and create woe;
 I the Lord do all these things. . . .
¹³I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness,
 and I will make all his paths straight;
 he shall build my city
 and set my exiles free,
 not for price or reward,
 says the Lord of hosts.

While there was plenty of the strange and unfamiliar in Iran (or, as it was more commonly known in ancient times, Persia), I often found myself coming full circle – I had the feeling of coming home and of being at home in Iran. One day of our trip was dedicated to exploring the ruins of Pasargadae, including the tomb of Cyrus, extolled in the 45th chapter of Isaiah. Cyrus was the early Persian king who conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.E. while the exiles from Jerusalem were living there. The Jews were not the only conquered people he found in captivity. He sent them all home, and he respected the religious customs of all of the peoples he found there. He allowed the Babylonian Jews to return to Jerusalem, where they eventually rebuilt the temple. Iran brought me home to the Hebrew Bible that I love and cherish.

Our tour guide, Mana, was a young Iranian woman, extensively educated in the humanities. Her adherence to the strict Iranian dress code was casual and grudging. Her own religious orientation was profoundly secular, although she was also profoundly in love with Persian culture. She was uninterested in Islam, which she saw as an unfortunate import by seventh-century invaders of Iran, namely, the Arab armies of Omar, one of the Prophet Muhammad's successors.

Mana loved Cyrus, and she labored to have us appreciate him. "Many of the peoples among whom Cyrus went wanted to worship him," she told us. "But Cyrus did not want to be worshiped. He did not want people to regard him as a god, which would have been common for a ruler of that period. Cyrus said, 'I am a man. I am human like you.' All of his inscriptions emphasized that he was a human." Of course, humility was not Cyrus's only notable characteristic; one scholar, Edward L. Greenstein, notes that "Cyrus combined great ambition, shrewd calculation and military expertise to establish" his large empire.²

One of my companions on this journey, a retired physician by the name of Will Rutt, and I were puzzling over the title given to Cyrus – he was often called "Cyrus the Great." After listening to Mana, we agreed that the reason that "Cyrus" was regarded as great was paradoxically because of his humility.³ How often is humility a vital ingredient of greatness?

The divide in Iranian culture between Persian and Arab influences can run deep. At the time of the Iranian Revolution thirty years ago, there were Muslim clerics who wished to obliterate the ancient ruins at Pasargadae and Persepolis. Prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Shah had often appealed to Cyrus and the Achaemenian dynasty that he founded as a precedent for the Shah's oppressive rule, and he held a terribly extravagant party for Cyrus' 2500th anniversary in 1973, a party to which many world leaders were invited (and actually attended) and from which most ordinary Iranians were excluded.

Moreover, for Muslims, this period before the time of Muhammad is often referred to as the "Age of Ignorance"; to suggest that there is greatness to be found in this period is farther than many

Muslim clerics would want to go. Fortunately, wiser heads prevailed and the cultural treasures of ancient Persia were preserved. But many Iranians still get caught up in the rather limited conundrum, baldly stated: Who is greater, Cyrus or Muhammad? What is greater, Persian culture or Islamic culture? From the outsider's viewpoint, the way that Persian and Islamic influences can intertwine and intermingle is extremely impressive. It is impossible to imagine contemporary Iran without either the ancient Persian or the Islamic influence, just as it would be impossible to imagine Christianity without either the Hebrew or the Greek influence. God has quite evidently worked through both strands. I keep coming back to the thought that God delights in the synthesis of Persian and Islamic cultures in Iran, just as God delights in the synthesis of Hebrew and Greek strands in Christianity.

As we have seen, through the second Isaiah God addresses Cyrus thusly: "I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me." (Isaiah's reference is to God's "surnaming" of Cyrus as "the anointed" – a very exalted title used in the Old Testament for King David and some other kings of Israel and Judah, and in the New Testament for Jesus. In fact, the word "Christ" is the Greek translation of "the anointed.") The prophet is stating that a complete outsider, someone who neither knows nor worships the God of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob, can be the savior – of the Jewish people, at least. And again, God tells Cyrus: "I arm you, I empower you, though you do not know me."⁴

This may be one of the most under-utilized universalist passages in all of the Hebrew Scriptures. Often, universalism is approached from the viewpoint of the question, "Who can be saved?" with universalists giving an inclusive answer to that question. This passage from the book of Isaiah addresses quite a different question: "Who can save?"

Chapter 45 of Isaiah reminds us that God can always call on any of us, even if we have not been in the practice of calling on God, or have a mistaken conception of who God is. God can call on us, whether we are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Bahá'í,

Buddhist, or non-theist. God can empower us; God can rouse us to accomplish great saving deeds, even if we are ignorant of God, even if we do not belong to the synagogue (or to one of the later-arising institutions, such as church or mosque). God can rouse us, just as God roused the Persian king Cyrus 2,500 years ago.

“People of the Book” and of Light

I took along my English translation of the Qur’an on this trip, and for the first time in my life I succeeded in reading all of it. In talking to Muslims and in reading the Qur’an, the Muslims’ holy scriptures, I found much that is familiar to Quakers and other Christians. The Qur’an discloses a continuous divine revelation, one that started with the ancient Jews and continued, through Jesus and the early Christian movement, up to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia in the 17th century. Take for example, this passage from the 57th surah of the Qur’an:

We sent forth Noah and Abraham, and bestowed on their offspring prophethood and the Scriptures. Some were rightly guided, but many were evil-doers. After them, we sent other apostles, and after those Jesus, the son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel, and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of his followers.... Let the People of the Book know that they have no control over the grace of God; that grace is in His hands alone, and that he vouchsafes it to whom He will. God’s grace is infinite.

Mystics of many traditions, like the Muslim mystics, or Sufis, have thrilled to the Qur’an’s description of divine light:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. His light may be compared to a niche that enshrines a lamp, the lamp within a crystal of star-like brilliance. It is lit from a blessed olive tree neither eastern nor western. Its very oil

would almost shine forth, though no fire touched it. Light upon light; God guides to His light whom he will. [24th surah]

How often do we encounter the image of “light” in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures? “Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.” “The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.” That, from Isaiah, chapter 60. “The light that enlightens every human being was then coming into the world.” That, from the prologue of the Gospel of John.

Muslims do not solely emphasize the transcendence of God. They also talk about God’s nearness, even God’s immanence, that God is inside of us. How else should one interpret the assertion in the 50th surah? “We [i.e., God] know the promptings of the human soul, and we are closer to you than your own jugular vein.”

Yes, reading the Qur’an we find much that is familiar. God is inside us, and guiding us to God’s light.

As we visited Iranian mosques, we found much use of light and color to bring our spiritual focus to God. In Shiraz, there is a breathtaking mosque composed almost entirely of mirrored surfaces; our group did not visit that mosque, but we did visit the shrine to the fourth imam of Shi’ite Islam, Zayd, which was decorated in the same way. Beautiful blues and yellows were a frequent color scheme in Iranian mosques and there was an exceptional mosque in Shiraz that had rose as its predominant coloring. Neither human beings nor animals are displayed in Islamic sacred artwork, but much use is made of the plant kingdom and of stylized calligraphy of Quranic verses.

Most mosques have a minaret where a muezzin used to give the call to prayer three times a day (three, rather than five times a day as is common elsewhere in the Islamic world). Modern-day Iran dispenses with a live muezzin, and in the rare instances where the call to prayer is broadcast, it is done so in a recorded version. One mosque, however, that never had a call to prayer is the extraordinarily

beautiful Sheikh Lotfallah Mosque in Esfahan's grand Imam Square, constructed in the seventeenth century by another Persian monarch designated as "the great," Shah Abbas the First, primarily as a place in which the shah's harem could worship. One story as to why this Mosque had no minaret stresses the importance of Sufis in the design of the mosque. Sufis believed in and practiced prayers through contemplation, or through dancing (think of the whirling dervishes), but not primarily in spoken prayer. Thus, for their worship, the minaret would have been largely redundant.

Nearby, in fact on the same square, is the Imam Mosque, constructed nearly simultaneously with the Sheikh Lotfallah Mosque. In that mosque, both interior and exterior sound plays a very important role in worship. In fact, there is one floor stone in the mosque where, if one stands and sings or even whispers, the acoustics will echo the sound through the whole mosque. Our group's visit to the Imam Mosque corresponded with a visit by a group of male education students from a local teacher's college. They stood on the special stone and sang beautiful religious songs that rang impressively through the mosque. We Americans stood and listened; we too could have stood on that stone and sung, but none of us did. (I had a bad cold and could not have sung clearly.) But afterwards we found an opportunity to talk to our new acquaintances. They had many questions for us about our views of Iran and of Islam. Like countless times elsewhere in Iran, we left with new friends.

Light, color, sound, silence: my visit to Iran reinforced my intuitive sense that all of these can be moving, even stunning, pathways to God. The play of light in worship space is a familiar sign of God for me; most Quaker meeting houses testify to that sign of the presence of God. Dazzling color, while not entirely new to me in the context of worship – I've visited European cathedrals, for example – was, in its Iranian form, an extraordinarily wonderful revelation.

Iran, the United States, and Peace

I was about to step onto the tour bus in Tehran when an older gentleman, with a deeply lined face and long white whiskers, stopped me for a moment. “French?” he asked. Given the paucity of visas handed out to Americans, his guess of my national identity was understandable. “No, American,” I replied. His face broke into a broad smile. “American? I am happy.” Those few eloquent words spoke for everybody that I met in Iran.

I am old enough to remember distinctly the takeover of the American embassy in Iran thirty years ago, and the Iranian chants of “Death to America” that pervaded ABC’s *Nightline* and other news programs of that era. On this trip, I never felt a trace of that hostility. I saw one small sign on the wall outside of the former American embassy that exhorted, “Down with the USA,” but that was the only such sign that I saw in my extensive travels through Iran.

Attitudes toward America are not especially a partisan issue in Iran. There are indeed two vigorous political parties, the conservatives and the reformists, and the reformists in general are slightly more open to a broader range of Western influences. But everybody I met, reformist or conservative, went out of their way to display interest in and friendship toward Americans and America. And everyone, conservative, reformist, or other, was eager to practice their English with Americans.

Their interest in Americans was not, however, an uncritical one. Indeed, we Americans have much to be self-critical for when it comes to our relationship with Iran. A 1953 coup sponsored by our Central Intelligence Agency overthrew a popular left-wing elected prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, and replaced him by an oppressive dictator, Shah Mohammed Pahlavi, who ruled for 26 years and could only in the end be displaced by a popular revolution. Americans are not the only foreign power to have meddled extensively in Iran’s internal affairs. Great Britain, Russia, and the United States have taken turns doing that for much of the

late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Foreigners have much to be repentant about.

But many people, including me, wonder why, after 30 years, the great nation of the United States of America can't be friends with the great nation of Iran. I can report that it is what the people of Iran want. Is it not also what God wants? As the Psalmist writes, "Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it." (Psalm 34:14) What can we do to seek peace with Iran?

There are many knotty issues in U.S.-Iranian relations, and this is not the appropriate format to sort out the details. What does seem worth emphasizing here is the uniformly good feeling that existed as we visited the Iranians, as we befriended each other. Many times, as we reflected during our conversations, we were sure, not only that the American and Iranian peoples could be friends, but also that we are friends. We wished and prayed for this discernment to trickle up to our leaders.

On my flight out of Tehran, I sat next to an Iranian man, who, for most of his life, had earned his living as a truck driver in Europe. He pleaded with me to carry the message to the United States that we should not bomb Iran. That would simply unite Iranians behind their current, hard-line regime, he observed. Iranians would have to become suicide bombers such as those Americans have experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan. While the United States should use whatever diplomatic means that we can, he asked that Iranians be given time to clean up their own house, to replace their current intransigent and corrupt rulers with a truly decent government. In the months since I left Iran, we have witnessed the great sincerity of millions of Iranians who have the same yearning for freedom that my seatmate on the plane had. We have also seen the power of the entrenched conservative establishment, which in elections that were not free and fair may well have obstructed the majority of the Iranian people. May it be that Americans have learned the lesson that our bombs and our covert military forces should stay out of this dispute, which is for Iranians to resolve.

How many of us Americans and Iranians are being used by God

and can be used by God may seem considerably more uncertain to us in our time than it was to the prophet who celebrated the just governance of Cyrus 2,500 years ago. We may feel, and we ought to feel, the anguish of the Iranians and anyone who suffers. Dear Jehovah, Allah, Ahura Mazda, eternal Christ spirit, the great God who holds the whole world in your hands, may your peace, truth, righteousness and love prevail.

Zoroastrianism

I frequently found myself while in Iran puzzling over the role of Zoroastrianism. There are no more than 150,000 Zoroastrians in the world, of whom 28,000 live in Iran, the religion's country of origin, and about 20,000 in the United States. Thus, numerically, Zoroastrians are few, fewer in number worldwide than even Quakers. Yet, in Iran, their presence bulked large.

Reference sources commonly available in the United States paint the picture of an elaborate religion with an enigmatic founder. The founding prophet Zarathustra's dates vary widely, with one set of sources, probably Babylonian, presenting Zarathustra as having lived only a few generations before Cyrus, with a putative death date of 588 B.C.E., while another set of sources, mostly Greek, presents Zarathustra as having lived in the seventh millennium B.C.E. Scholars now think that a date between the eighteenth and fifteenth centuries B.C.E. is more probable. A variety of stories about Zarathustra are presented, with little confidence that any are more than legendary. An elaborate religious structure is described, with extensive scriptures, an intricate theology, and involved ritual.

None of this was the Zoroastrianism that I encountered in Iran. Zoroastrianism was not a live religion, such that I would encounter living adherents of it. Quite the contrary, while I heard of Zoroastrians (mostly in the central Iranian city of Yazd), I encountered none. Yet Zoroastrian religion, or more accurately, Zoroastrian influence, was everywhere. And it was presented very

simply. Zoroastrian religion involved nurturing “good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.” (In that sense, I suppose, nearly everyone in the world may be Zoroastrian!) I was pleased to read a news story about Zoroastrians in the United States soon after my return that used this same mantra – good thoughts, good words, good deeds – to express the essence of Zoroastrianism in this country, too.⁵

It was also presented as an indigenous nature-based religion, celebrating the four elements known to the ancients: earth, air, water, and fire. Motifs that embodied squares, rectangles, and other quadrilaterals, very common in Iranian architecture, were often explained as alluding to these four sacred elements. Zoroastrianism underlies Iranian Shi’ite Islam, in the same way that Celtic and Druid spirituality underlies European and European-derived religious systems, and in the same way that Native American and African American spiritualities underlie much of the current American cultural synthesis.

One place where this was evident was at a small village, Abyaneh, a good day’s bus drive south of Tehran. Our tour group spent two nights there. Abyaneh is 2,200 meters (about 7,283 feet) above sea level. It is surrounded by mountains. No one knows exactly how old the village is, but it is likely thousands of years old. The village held onto its Zoroastrian religion until the time of the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century, at which time the villagers either converted to Shi’ite Islam or migrated to the remaining Zoroastrian stronghold of Yazd.

Abyaneh is in the middle of a very arid landscape, but it is built on springs that have made habitation possible. There are many willows along the bottom land; the fertile area, where there are numerous garden plots, is located below the houses, which are built farther up the hillside. Many fruit trees are included in the garden plots, and elderly women, dressed in very colorful floral print scarves, gain some sustenance by selling dried fruits, including dried apples, to the tourists who stream through the village. Other fruits and nuts cultivated in Abyaneh include walnuts, apricots, almonds, pears, and plums. There are three functioning mosques in Abyaneh, as well as a Zoroastrian fire temple that has not functioned for some time.

My friend Roger and I hiked out into the countryside to find an old shrine, helped by gestures from a donkey-riding shepherd who, even though he spoke no English and we spoke no Farsi, guessed accurately what we wanted to see and pointed in its direction. Next to a trickling stream, we found a two story, open air, abandoned structure. Roger and I walked into a dark chamber off the ground floor corridor, and Roger remarked about how earthy the shrine was. But then I beckoned Roger to come up to the top story, which was surrounded by air. Earth, air, water: the only one of the elements lacking was fire, and I was sure that fire, too, had been present in the shrine when it had been active.

The shrine was said to have been dedicated to a Shi'ite woman saint, who, however, had the recognizably Zoroastrian name of Mitra. Later, it was explained to us that many of the Shi'ite shrines in Iran did, in fact, date back to the pre-Muslim era, and thus had transitioned from a Zoroastrian past. One of the differences between Shi'ite and Sunni Islam is that Shi'ites allow a place in their faith for shrines to saints, whereas Sunnis tend to frown upon such shrines. So, many of the Zoroastrian shrines were hurriedly converted to a Muslim saint after the Muslim armies invaded Iran. With their re-dedication to Islam, there was some hope that the beloved shrines of Iran would escape defacing or destruction.

Later, when visiting the magnificent ruins of Persepolis, we saw there, too, the numerous quadrilateral designs celebrating earth, water, fire, and air. Let us recall that, in the aftermath of the 1979, some zealous clerics wished to destroy these pagan, pre-Christian ruins, but other, wiser heads counseled against such plans, and the preservationists prevailed. Iran did not destroy its cultural treasures as did the Taliban in pre-2001 Afghanistan. The Shi'ite respect, even reverence, for shrines prevailed.

Visit to Qom

Qom is the religious capital of Iran, and, inasmuch as for all of the most important functions of government there is a clerical arm

that oversees the regular government, that means that real power is vested in Qom. The dominant personality of the Iranian Revolution, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, enshrined in the new Iranian Constitution the principle of *velayat e faqih*, or guardianship by the Supreme Jurisprudent. In the more than three decades since the 1979 revolution, there have been only two Supreme Jurisprudents – Khomeini himself, until his death in 1989 at age 88, and his immediate successor, Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader from 1989 to the present. Their visages stare down on all from billboards all around the country. (President Ahmadinejad, whose face is often portrayed as the face of Iran in this country, is never portrayed in this fashion in Iran.)

After our bus parked, we walked to the major shrine that dominates the city of Qom, the shrine (with its gold-plated dome) dedicated to Fatima al-Masumeh (790-816 CE), the famously pious and saintly sister of Shia Islam's eighth imam. We passed many clerics busily walking through downtown Qom, some with black turbans (signifying that they are *sayids*, descendants of the prophet Muhammad) and some with white turbans (signifying no relationship to Muhammad).

The shrine itself is open only to Muslims, so we knew that we would not be admitted. What we hoped for was a chance to talk to a high-ranking Shi'ite cleric, and our dream was to be realized. After the fifteen women in our party donned further coverings in order to make sure that no part of their necks, throats, or hair was exposed, we were ushered into a small guestroom adjacent to the shrine and cordially greeted there by Hojatoleslam Muhammad Nazari. He is the Director of International Affairs at the shrine (formally known as the Holy Shrine of Hadrat Fatimah Masumeh). The word "hojatoleslam" means "authority on Islam;" for Shi'ite clergy, it is the rank immediately below "ayatollah." Notable Iranian clerics who have achieved the rank of hojatoleslam include Muhammad Khatami and Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, both past presidents of Iran.

Hojatoleslam Nazari did not speak English, so our guide, Mana, translated for us. The hojatoleslam was very cordial, and he spoke

in an accessible and comprehensible way. He was just as likely to refer to Jesus (at least when talking to us) as he was to Muhammad. He confessed a liking for Americans. He expressed a wish that there might soon be an ayatollah in the United States. He noted that, during most afternoons, he put aside his duties as an interpreter of Islam to visitors to Qom in order to provide counseling on a one-to-one basis. He confided to us that one of his favorite authorities in the area of counseling was Californian Barbara De Angelis, a popular lecturer and author in the area of self help and personal growth. He was so happy to be conversing with Americans that he was clearly reluctant to wind up his discussion after the short time that he had allotted for us on his schedule. As a group of German tourists waited impatiently at the door, his assistant went about busily and officiously opening all of the drapes as a sign that our time was up. Only after several minutes of this did the hojatoleslam reluctantly conclude our interview.

The topics of our discussions with him were far-ranging. The restrictive policies of women's dress came up. (Afterwards, I found out that several of our women, with so many extra layers of cloth surrounding them, had found the still air of the interview room to be stifling and oppressive.) Hojatoleslam Nazari responded affably, but did not give any ground on the Islamic Republic's policies.⁶ Two women members of our group, Kathy from Kalispell, Montana, and Gayle from Atlanta, Georgia, were ordained ministers, and naturally the issue of whether women could be clerics in Shi'ite Islam. Nazari expressed a surprising amount of agreement with this proposition. He introduced us to his daughter, who, at the start of our visit, had been counseling some women in a room partitioned off from ours by a non-soundproof barrier, but who was now free. She came into the room, and we learned that she was engaged in theological studies. She was more than ready to ask questions about us and the religions that we espoused (some of us were Christians, some Jews), but time unfortunately did not permit that kind of discussion. Afterwards, some members of our groups parsed this portion of the discussion with a strong degree of skepticism, noting that Nazari had said that

a woman could become an ayatollah as long as she did not have followers. Did he mean she could have no followers at all, or only no male followers? Anyway, we did not see how a female ayatollah could possibly be taken seriously with this kind of restriction on who could follow her teachings. In practice, Shi'ite Islam has no female ayatollahs.

Perhaps the most pointed answer that Nazari gave to one of our questions came early in the discussion. One member of our group, taking note of our location, asked for information about shrines in Islam – what are they, and what happens there? Nazari gave a long and thoughtful answer, but then ended the answer unexpectedly with a political reference. Noting that Sunni Muslims did not have shrines, whereas Shi'ite Muslims do, he stated that this was an important reason that the Islamic Republic of Iran was unalterably opposed to both al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Both of these extreme groups, with their Sunni Muslim membership, had no respect for shrines, and engaged in fatal, brutal bombings of pilgrims visiting these shrines. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were terrorists, and Iran was as opposed to them as was the United States.

Nazari was underlining what is common knowledge for most Muslims, but often overlooked in a United States ill-informed about Islam; namely, that actions of al-Qaeda targeting civilians, such as the 9/11 attacks, violate Islamic law. Aggressive warfare is forbidden under Islam law (as is stated in the Quran 8:61, “if the enemies incline to peace, do you also incline to peace”), and it is also forbidden to kill innocent non-combatants.⁷

Nazari, like many other Iranians we encountered, believed – with considerable justification – that the Iranian position on terrorism is misunderstood in the United States. Over and over again, we were asked about this during our visit. We should understand, we were told, that Iran is not terrorist, and that it does not support terrorism. What was left implicit – but was nonetheless clear – is that Iranians do not accept the notion that the United States State Department should be the agency that has the responsibility of defining for the rest of the world who is and is not a terrorist. If the

issue in question is the struggle against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Iran stands strongly, side by side, with anyone who opposes these two groups, and Iranians generally see them as terrorists. If the issue, however, is Hezbollah or Hamas, Iranian perspectives often shift to see these latter groups not as terrorists, as defined by our State Department, but as freedom fighters.⁸ It put me in recollection of the civil war in Nicaragua in the 1980s. The anti-Communist contras were seen by President Ronald Reagan as freedom fighters, but much of the rest of the world saw them as terrorists. We Americans need a more reasoned, even-handed, and dispassionate national discussion of foreign policy, especially Middle East policy, than we often get in the United States.

Jews and Christians in Esfahan

Jews and Christians have an ancient presence in Iran. Several books in the Tanakh (Old Testament) refer to the presence of Jews in Persia, most notably the book of Esther, which portrays its Jewish heroine as a wife of the Persian emperor Ahasuerus (Xerxes). The Persian empire, like the Roman empire, persecuted Christians in their first few centuries of existence and then provided them with increasing degrees of toleration. One Persian emperor, Khosrau I (reigned 531-579), even married a Christian wife. With the advent of Islam, both Jews and Christians became part of a *dhimmi*, or protected minority. Still, there were sporadic persecutions of both groups over the centuries, sometimes severe.

In recent years, a large number of Iranian Jews migrated to Israel or the United States; about 15,000 Jews remain citizens of Iran. Many Christians migrated, too, especially after the 1979 revolution.; the largest Christian Church in Iran, the Armenian Apostolic Church, has about 200,000 adherents, and there are other Christian churches, too, but none with more than 11,000 members. Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians are each guaranteed a single seat in the *Majlis*, the Iranian parliament. Jews who remain in Iran are restricted in

employment possibilities. They are generally not allowed to take a civil service position, for which it is required that one be a Shi'ite Muslim. (Iranian Jews did take part in the military during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980 to 1988, and some 15 Jews died as soldiers during that deadly war.) Certain professions, such as medicine, are open to them, and they may also engage in business.

The present Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has made headlines in the West on account of his remarks about Israel and the Holocaust. He is commonly quoted as saying that the “Zionist entity” should be “wiped off the map,” although many Persian scholars argue that this is a mistaken translation of Ahmadinejad’s statement in Farsi. What Ahmadinejad said is probably better translated as Israel “should vanish from the page of time,” an intransitive construction that was intended to express a spiritual desire, not a military threat; it is also pointed out that Ahmadinejad was quoting the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ruhollah Khomeini, (“our dear Imam”) when he made this statement.⁹ It is commonly stated in Iran that the Iranian argument is with Zionism, not with the Jewish people; in fact, Iranian government officials, including Iranian State Department officials sitting next to me on my flight into Iran, speak highly of the Jewish people. Ahmadinejad is also a Holocaust denier: “The pretext (of the Holocaust) for the creation of the Zionist regime is false.... It is a lie based on an unprovable and mythical claim.”¹⁰

The contents of the previous paragraph were thoroughly known both by all 24 Americans who were part of our group and by most of the Iranians with whom we talked. Iranians did not think highly of their president for these kinds of remarks, even if his comments do not pose the kind of military threat that some Americans think that they do. The Iranians with whom we met thought of Ahmadinejad’s remarks as stupid. They offered no defense of his Holocaust denial. They often resent the fact that he makes Iran look foolish on the world stage. The fact that Ahmadinejad’s views on the Holocaust are not shared by many Iranians has not been widely reported outside of Iran.¹¹

Our request to visit a synagogue in the beautiful city of Esfahan was granted, so this controversy served as a backdrop to our visit. We were instructed not to raise politics during our visit to the synagogue, and it was emphasized specifically that we were not to ask questions about Israel: this was neither a safe nor an approved topic for dialogue between Americans and Iranian Jews.

We waited on an Esfahan street corner outside a compound with very high walls. Then the gates opened. An elderly man with long white whiskers and a flowing robe – we afterwards learned that he was the gatekeeper – welcomed us. “Shalom! Shalom!” he said over and over again, most emphatically and welcomingly, in a soft, musical tone. I was perhaps the first man through the gates, and I stood at the front of our group of twenty-four. He came over to embrace me, as if I were his long-lost brother, kissing me on both cheeks several times. I definitely and intensely felt at home, and I was delighted with this greeting! But, for whatever reason, whether it was the look of surprise on my face or the time that it would take to greet all in our group in the same fashion, he did not repeat this greeting with the other members of the group, but rather shook hands with them!

Quickly we were ushered inside the synagogue itself. It was a beautiful and very large two-story open space that we were invited to take a seat in. A balcony stretched around three sides of the room. There we were met by a sixty-year-old man in regular business attire. He had both a Jewish name, Reuben, and a Persian name that I did not record, and he was the synagogue’s historian. From Reuben, we learned that Jews had been in Iran for more than 2,700 years. A stone found in a local cemetery had Hebrew writing that was 2,300 years old. The city we were then in, Esfahan, had been called the “City of the Jews” at the time of the Muslim invasions during the seventh century CE. He told us lovingly about all the Biblical personages who had lived in Iran. One noteworthy person he mentioned was the prophet Daniel, whose tomb, he told us, is located at Susa, modern-day Shush. Jews and Muslims, he said, went to Shush to visit this tomb; Shush is “a good substitute for Mecca” if one is looking for

a pilgrimage site! Esther and Mordecai are buried in Hamadan.¹² Three Hebrew brothers, Shadrach, Mishach, and Abednego, the escapees from the fiery furnace, are also buried in Iran, he stated, as well as the last ruler of Judah, who is buried in Esfahan – “even the Muslims go there.”

His attention turned to more current concerns. In the middle of the twentieth century, there were 150,000 Jews in Iran, but in 2009 there are only about 15,000 Jews left. About 6,000 of these live in Esfahan and 8,000 in Tehran. Of the nine-tenths of the 1950 Iranian Jewish population no longer in Iran, most had emigrated to Israel.

“Why did they emigrate?” asked one of our group members, clearly ignoring the instructions we had received.

“You’d have to ask them,” Reuben parried smoothly. He was clearly ready for any challenge that our group could pose to him!

The questions turned to Jewish practice in Iran. The congregation is Orthodox, thus it has no woman rabbis. Esfahan Jews had everything they need in order to be a functioning community. They have bar mitzvah ceremonies for 13-year-old males. They hold Hebrew classes in the synagogue, and even seven-year-old children can read Hebrew. They have a local slaughterhouse that provides kosher food. The oldest of their Torah scrolls, about 250 years old, originally came from Baghdad. They have up to sixteen Torah scrolls, many from defunct synagogues elsewhere in Esfahan.

Our group moved up front, and one of our group members who knew Hebrew read from a Torah scroll. Then Reuben gently turned the conversation to Iran and Israel. Both he and his wife loved Iran, he stated. Still, not everything about living in Iran was easy. A hard part was that all of his children had moved to Israel, where it was much more difficult to have family visits. The last time that he had seen his son was in 2003, on a trip he and his wife had made to Israel. A feeling of great poignancy and sadness enveloped our group in a few full moments of silence. Reuben had managed indirectly to answer our earlier impolitic and ill-advised question.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Reuben added, it was easier in some ways to be a Jew, but harder in other ways. We Jews are safe

here in Iran, he concluded, as long as the government wants us to be safe.

There are twelve Armenian Christian churches that are open in Esfahan, but our group was not invited to visit a functioning Christian church. The church that we visited was a museum. We were ushered into a very large sanctuary, in which all of the ceilings and all of the walls were covered by icons, large sacred paintings. This seemed instantly familiar; inasmuch as the beautiful Islamic art does not depict persons or even, for the most part, animals, this space that depicted Biblical characters from the Creation through the early Christian period seemed a place of at-home-ness, of instant familiarity. Then, as I examined the paintings more closely, I was jarred out of my sense of at-home-ness somewhat. Unlike most icons I had seen in the United States, many depicted the prophets and apostles being subjected to great acts of violence. Outside of depictions of the crucifixion, my experience of Christian sacred art in the United States and Europe was of far more peaceful scenes being depicted.

What was being depicted was a version of the Christian story in which martyrdom is placed front and center. The exact same thing could be said of the Shi'ite Muslims in Iran; for them, too, martyrdom, as experienced by their imams such as Ali (martyred in 661) and his son and Muhammad's grandson Husayn (martyred in 680), is constantly kept before one's eyes either in sacred stories or in the central acts of worship in their faith. So martyrdom is a central element in Iranian religion, whether Christian or Muslim. As I moved on through the complex, this insight was strengthened and deepened. There was a beautiful, abstract monument to the victims of the Armenian genocide of 1915 in the courtyard of this church complex. Another building in the complex held important records documenting that genocide at the hands of the Turks.

As I left the Jewish and the former Christian places of worship, my heart was full. It was hard to sort out where I was happy and where I was sad, the feelings mingling together so acutely. Geographically, I was further from home than ever before, but participation in a

familiar sacred story brought me to a place where those thousands of miles mattered not at all. In one minute, I found myself easily drawn into Iranian Jewish and Christian stories, feeling at home, but in the next minute, I might easily find myself thrown back into an observer's position. It was all incredibly poignant.

Baha'i

One export from Iran in the past two centuries was the new religion of Baha'i. The major figure for this religion is Tehran native Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri (1871-1892), better known as Baha' Allah, who in 1863 claimed to be a new prophet of God, "the one whom God shall manifest." This was a direct challenge to Islam, for whom Muhammad is the last and greatest prophet. Most of the early Baha'is had been Muslims, so in many respects it can be seen as a Muslim heresy. After Baha' Allah's death, his son and successor, Abd al-Baha, inaugurated a successful world mission, in large part by emphasizing the universalist themes in Baha'i. He increased references to Christianity. Abd al-Baha emphasized that his father had been the prophet for this age (or, to use the phrase Muslims use for Muhammad, Baha' Allah is the "seal of prophecy" for this age), but there would be other, greater prophets in future ages whose message would supersede that of Baha' Allah. In other words, Baha'is, like liberal Quakers, argue for a progressive and continuing revelation.

Baha'is also emphasized the oneness of humanity, and they came to champion such causes as interracial marriage, global peace, equal education for women and men, and a world language. By 2000, there were six million Baha'is in the world, and the most substantial growth was occurring in the developing world. In the United States, there were 142,000 Baha'is at the dawn of the twenty-first century. In Iran, there had been 300,000 Baha'is in 1979, at the time of the Islamic Revolution, but they have been severely persecuted in the three decades since.

One authority notes that Baha'is received "the most repressive treatment" meted out to any religious minority by the authorities in the new government. They cannot practice their religion openly in any manner. "Since the revolution, a total of about 300 have been killed, which equates to one in a thousand. There being no civil marriage in Iran, religious marriages contracted according to their faith were not recognized by the state, leaving their children in a legal limbo. Their cemeteries were bulldozed and they were given no land to bury their dead."¹³

Of course, our group was not given the option to meet with Iranian Baha'is. But the subject did come up once in discussion, when I was flying into Iran seated next to officials who work for the Iranian State Department. They quickly ascertained that I was a professor of religion, and they worked to make sure that I knew of Iran's enlightened policies towards Jews and Christians. I had done some homework, and thus I did recognize a considerable degree of truth in the information that they were giving to me. But there was also an omission that I perceived in their talking points.

"What about Baha'is?" I asked. "Do Baha'is also have freedom of worship in Iran?"

With this question, the tenor of the conversation changed. At one subsequent point, they challenged me to justify the anti-immigration actions of many, including many in authority, in the United States. I conceded the point and repudiated these actions by U.S. officials, actions that I don't support, although I confess that I did so with more irritation and far less grace than I wish that I had been able to muster.

But they did address my question about the Iranian Baha'is. Their response boiled down to two points. First, they accused the Iranian Baha'is of being agents of the imperialist powers, especially the United States. Second, they pointed out that Baha'is are different than Christians and Jews, in that the latter are the result of divine revelations that pre-existed the unfolding of Islam, whereas the former, more recent religion in some sense seeks to supersede Islam. The ancient spiritual traditions of Christianity and Judaism could therefore be tolerated, but not so the upstart Baha'is.

We were about to descend into Tehran, so that discussion got left there. But if I had had a chance to respond to them, here is what I would have said. I find their first response not compelling at all. They should give more credit to the Baha'i religion as a homegrown tradition. But, in response to their second point especially, I do not believe that freedom of religion should be only for the range of religious traditions of which one personally approves. Under the principles of religious liberty, Americans don't get a prerogative to disallow the building of a Muslim mosque on a site where a Christian church would be welcome. Similarly, if Iranians support freedom of religion, as these officials affirmed, they should not have the prerogative of tolerating only the traditions that they find acceptable. In any society, these principles will be tested and tried, sometimes severely. Americans certainly have given in at times to hysteria against unpopular religions and sects. But we need to stand firm that religious freedom is a universal principle, a principle to be honored by actions and not just by our rhetoric; only then does it really become religious freedom.

Religion and Secularity in Iran¹⁴

Before I disembarked from the plane into Iran, the Iranian state department officials, respectful of my knowledge of Islam as a professor of religion, tried to prepare me for differences in the Islam I had read about in books and the Islam I would experience in Iran. "You probably know that Muslims pray five times a day," one told me, "but in Shi'ite Iran, Muslims only pray three times a day." With that, they left me to solve the puzzle of religion in Iran myself.

It is quite true that I observed far less public practice of religion in Iran than I would have expected. At our hotel (Hotel Engelhab) in Tehran, there was a playing of a recorded call to prayer three times a day. But that was the only place in Iran that I heard the call to prayer, either live or recorded. Where had the disappearing prayer life gone? From five daily prayers to three – to none?

From time to time, Iran struck me as a wayward piece of Western Europe that unaccountably got stuck between two American war zones. In part, that was because the many educated Iranians we talked to often seemed more attuned to the ideals of Western Europe and Canada (places to which they would emigrate in droves, if work permits were forthcoming) than to the ideals of their own Islamic regime. But their religiosity was less, probably far less, than I would have expected from the citizens of an Islamic regime.

Before arriving in Iran, I had read of complaints by Iranian clergy that 70% of the Iranian people did not pray daily, and of the astounding estimate that less than 2% of the Iranian people attend services at the mosque on Friday, the Sabbath day. We were taken far away from mosques on the Fridays that we were there, so I cannot vouch for that figure. But if it is true, far fewer Iranians attend religious services on their Sabbath day than Americans do on theirs; the most conservative estimates are that 20% of Americans attend religious services on their Sabbath day. The reason advanced by Bahman Bakhtiari for the low attendance of Iranians at Friday services strikes me as true: “The regime’s draconian policies of imposing Islamic restrictions on everything, ranging from the country’s penal code to university admission policies, have backfired.”¹⁵ Human beings seem to have to learn over and over again that there can be no compulsion in religion.¹⁶

Both religion and secularity have an important place in Iran. In the religious arena, a very conservative, fundamentalist form predominates, and it has far more political power than do fundamentalists in the United States (although in my more pessimistic moments it sometimes seems to me that the United States is striving to catch up with Iran in this lamentable respect).

Our guide, Mana, was a face of Iranian secularity for us. “There are more Iranians like me every day,” she announced brightly, early in our travels with her. I have already written about the scant interest that she had in Islam. Perhaps the most important religious holiday in Iran, Ashura, commemorating the 680 C.E. martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, Husayn, was for her a secular

holiday, to be celebrated by a trip to the Caspian Sea (where, however, she disdained swimming, because neck to ankle covering is required of women who swim in the Sea).

One interest of Mana, one shared by very many Iranians, was in the poetry of the fourteenth-century Persian Hafez. Perhaps this interest showed an engagement with Islam, but if so, it is a very different engagement than that preferred by Iran's ruling clerics. (The poet's name "hafez" signifies someone who has memorized the entire Quran.) Hafez was someone who thoroughly enjoyed life, even as he recognized the limits of happiness:

Strive always after ready bliss; for Adam, when by Fortune left,
Abandoned the Abode of Peace, and of the Garden's joy was reft.
Drink one full cup or two, and then from Life's bright banquet turn
aside
Check thou, to wit, too eager hope that happiness will ever bide.¹⁷

The hometown of Hafez, Shiraz, features his tomb and the gardens in which he strolled, gardens that have been maintained through the centuries. "Shiraz" is also the name for a red wine with a spicy flavor, wine that can no longer be produced in Iran because of the Islamic regime's prohibition of alcohol.

A few days into our stay in Iran, a counterpoint to Mana showed up. Elham was a friend of one of us 24 Americans on this expedition. Elham was very traditionally Muslim, in a typically Iranian way. She wore the chador, which exposed her face but covered the rest of her body in a swath of black. On festive occasions, a colorful cloth peeked out from her chador and covered her throat. When Elham first saw Mana, she told her, "You are not dressed right." Mana ignored her. Elham accompanied us on some of our bus expeditions. When I asked Elham about Shi'ite Muslim holidays, she answered, but she was much more interested in asking me about English usage. My dog's name was "Sojourner," I admitted at one point. "So what does the word 'sojourner' mean?" she asked.

We encountered other religious Iranians as well. Bob Phelps, a United Church of Christ minister from Montana, and I worshiped

in Tehran in the Shrine to Zayd, Husayn's son, among a modest crowd of male worshipers in a late afternoon in May. In Isfahan, I conversed with Azar, who was surprised to find a Westerner who taught in a Christian seminary (or, as I said, struggling for English words that would translate across cultures, "I help to train clerics.") "So you believe in God?" she asked, perhaps used to Westerners who embraced non-theism. I gladly affirmed my belief in God.

What does account for the remarkable diminution of religion in Iran's public spaces? Is it the desire to keep one's prayer life private? Or is it a profound questioning, even possibly a repudiation, of the state-approved religion? From my perspective, clearly the answer is some of both. Part of that very well may have been because some, presumably like Elham, kept their devotional life very private. But we also met Iranians, like Mana, who were scornful of religion altogether and made it very clear that they were resentful of the numerous impositions made on their lives by the religious police.

Mana, Elham, and many, many other Iranians were very hospitable to us Americans. There seemed to be little difference between religious conservatives and more secular-minded persons in that respect. But it was also obvious that they found it a challenge to encounter each other. Religious diversity *within* the population of Shi'ite Iranians is an important part of Iranian life, just as religious diversity between conservatives or fundamentalists, on the one hand, and liberals, on the other hand, is an important part of Protestant and Catholic Christianity within the United States. There exist unrest and severe questioning of the Islam of the Iranian regime at a number of different levels, although of course the authoritarian, repressive nature of the regime makes it very difficult to ascertain how extensive the questioning and unrest are. How far that unrest extends to Islam as a whole is something that also is difficult to ascertain.

Conclusion

After my visit to Iran, I have come to see with even greater clarity the importance of genuine peacemaking, especially in the Middle East. I fervently hope that there is some way that sustained peacemaking can bring peace and justice to Palestinians and Israelis, and move us away, once and for all, from this horrendous cycle of violence. Equally as important, I hope for diplomacy and dialogue directly between the United States and Iran, and for diplomacy and interchange between Iran and all of the other nations of the world. We need to find the way to forgive each other of wrongs from the past, and we urgently need to find ways to prevent the violence that is so easily, even casually, threatened toward Iran – especially, I am sad to say, from numerous highly placed individuals in the United States. Americans need to learn much more about Iran, and that may require unlearning some things that we think we already know about it.

It is a tremendous pity that so few Americans get an opportunity to travel in Iran. Its mosques and its ancient monuments are incalculable treasures, but the opportunity to visit with Iranian peoples is a treasure even more to be cherished. There is a grandeur in the ideals and aspirations of both Iranians and Americans; there is also human fallibility, easily perceptible in our respective sets of leaders and, indeed, in ourselves. But we are all children of God. There is much that we can learn from each other, and much love and laughter to be shared. Reader, if the opportunity arises for you to visit Iran, I hope that you will seize it.

Endnotes

- 1 See their website at www.neighborseastandwest.org.
- 2 *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., s.v.. “Cyrus II,” by Edward Greenstein.
- 3 Actually William Penn made a similar point in *No Cross, No Crown*: “Cyrus . . . is more famous for his Virtue, than his Power.” Penn, *No Cross, No Crown* (York, England: William Sessions Trust, 1982), Chapter XIX, Section 1, p. 293.
- 4 Isaiah 45:1,4-5; *Interpreters’ Dictionary of the Bible*, “anointed.”
- 5 Laurie Goodstein, “Zoroastrians Keep the Faith and Keep Dwindling,” *New York Times*, Sept. 6, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/06/us/06faith.html>.
- 6 A Chinese journalist quotes Nazari as saying, “according to Shi’ite ideology, women are completely free to study, work and choose their husbands . . . Iranian women are actually in a ‘very good situation,’ but their veils might give foreigners the wrong idea.” This was very similar to what he said to our group. Yan Wei, “Vitality Under Veils: Iranian women enjoy the freedom to study, work and marry, but not what to wear,” *Beijing Review.com.cn*, Dec. 2, 2008, http://www.bjreview.com.cn/exclusive/txt/2008-12/02/content_167684.htm (accessed Sept. 12, 2010).
- 7 Juan Cole, “Top Ways 9/11 Broke Islamic Law,” posted Sept. 11, 2010, <http://www.juancole.com/> (accessed Sept. 13, 2010). Cole quotes the first Muslim caliph, Abu Bakr, as giving these instructions to his armies: “Do not kill women, children, the old, or the infirm.”
- 8 In 2005, when Nazari was a university professor at Tabriz, Radio Free Europe reported that he gave a talk at a conference honoring Palestinian female suicide bombers. According to their report, he stated that “the ‘tactic of sacrifice’ is the only way to confront Israel. He also criticized al-Qaeda’s suicide bombings as religiously improper. Afterward, volunteers signed up.” While

I confess that I find this terse report of the Tabriz conference to be disturbing, I recognize that I am reacting less to the words Nazari is said to have spoken than to the context in which those words were spoken. His condemnation of al-Qaeda was similar in the Tabriz conference to what I and my friends had heard from him about al-Qaeda. His praise of martyrdom is a standard, indeed central, element of Shi'ite Islam theology. Christians and Jews highly honor martyrs as well, so it is a feature of all of the Abrahamic religions. In this speech, he did make explicit his support for the Palestinian cause, something left implicit when talking to our group. "RFE/RL Iran Report: A Weekly Review of Developments In and Pertaining to Iran," 15 August 2005, Vol. 8, No. 32, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2005/32-150805.htm> (accessed Sept. 12, 2010).

- 9 Juan Cole, "Top Things you think you know about Iran that are not true," Oct. 1, 2009, <http://www.juancole.com/2009/10/top-things-you-think-you-know-about.html>.
- 10 Parisa Hafezi and Firouz Sedarat, "Ahmadinejad says Holocaust a Lie, Israel has no Future," <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE58H17S20090918>.
- 11 See <http://www.juancole.com/2009/10/top-things-you-think-you-know-about.html>.
- 12 The first written account that survives of these traditions held by Persian Jews comes from a twelfth century C.E. travelogue by Benjamin of Tudela. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, (2nd ed.) s.v. "Shushtar," by Amnon Netzer; "Hamadan," by Amnon Netzer: see also Richard Gottheil and Eduard Konig, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1906, cited in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomb_of_Daniel (accessed Sept. 14, 2010).
- 13 H. E. Chelabi, "Religious Apartheid in Iran," in *The Middle East Institute Viewpoints: The Iranian Revolution at 30* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2009), 120, www.mideasti.org.
- 14 Parts of this section are adapted from my article, "Whither Islam in Iran?" published in *ESR Reports* 11:2 (Spring 2010): 4-5.
- 15 Bahman Baktiari, "Iranian Society: A Surprising Picture," *The Middle*

East Institute Viewpoints: The Iranian Revolution at 30 (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2009), 80-81, www.mideasti.org; Bob Smietani, "New study confirms that we go to church much less than we say," *Christianity Today*, April 1, 2006, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/april/32.85.html?start=1> (accessed Sept. 13, 2010).

- 16 *Quran* 2:256 states that "There shall be no compulsion in religion." William Penn says much that is similar; e.g., persecutors "subvert all true religion; for where men believe not because it is True, but because they are required to do so, there they will unbelieve, not because 'tis False, but because [they are] so commanded by the Superiors, whose authority their Interest and Security oblige them to obey, then dispute." "Great Case of Liberty of Conscience," *Collection of the Works of William Penn*, ed. Joseph Besse (London, 1726), I, 451 (available on-line in the Digital Quaker Collection).
- 17 Hafez, *Divan*, 15, trans. Herman Bickwell. From Ismail Salami, ed., *The Divan of Hafiz* (Tehran: Gooya Art House, 2007).



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