

In Search of Piety: Why Muslim Iranian Angelinos Convert to Christianity?

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Abstract

Purpose: The world's largest community of Iranian diaspora, which constitutes a Muslim majority, lives in the greater Los Angeles (Graham and Khosravi 2002: 223). Based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in the Iranian Angelino community, which included participant observation and more than ten in-depth interviews, this paper attempts to understand why there is a trend of conversions to Christianity among first-generation Muslims born Iranian Angelinos.

Method of Data Collection: As my primary method of data collection, I conducted participant observation in two Iranian American Churches in Los Angeles. I participated in the services of these churches for five months, took part in the congregants' social events such as family dinners, and conducted seven in-depth interviews with members of these churches. I took field-notes, created memos after my interactions, and recorded some of the interviews. The question of the appeal of Christianity was addressed in all interviews, as well as many discussions in events inside and outside the churches. My method of data collection is qualitative and limited to two churches. As I did not survey a large number of churches, my results are suggestive and not definitive. This study engages in an in-depth presentation and analysis of congregants' experiences in two churches but does not have conclusive claims about the conversion experiences of all Iranian converts. Instead, I offer possibilities that can be true for other churches and converts.

Method of Analysis: To analyze my ethnographic data, I employ the “qualitative” method of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995: 1) (Wodak 1995: 204). I look for discursive signs related to my research question in the interviews, discussions of Bible study sessions and services, and informal talks in social events. By juxtaposing all signs, I come up with a dominant discursive trend that addresses the issue of Christianity’s appeal for my interlocutors.

Results: Unlike the previous scholarship on the Iranian conversations to Christianity that explain tendencies to Christianity as a "strategy" to get asylum status and eventually immigrate to the global north, my research claims that many of the conversations are genuine and with the aim of achieving piety. My interlocutors critiqued Islam as an "easy religion" and repeatedly stated that "Christianity is hard." They believed Islam was not strict enough and could not make them pious. The congregants expressed Christianity appeals to them because it is a "rigorous" way of life that "guarantees" piety for its followers. They explained that Christianity "works on your heart" and pays attention to all details of life while Islam only cares about external actions. As one of my interlocutors put it, "in Islam you are allowed to think about being with women other than your wife; but in Christianity Jesus has said 'if you think of the neighbor's wife you have already committed adultery.'" Aligned with Islamic laws, both churches forbid corporeal pleasures such as consumption of alcohol or extramarital relationships. However, they believed these laws were "not enough," and piety should be achieved by a constant attempt to "plant the love of Jesus Christ in [their] hearts," perpetual introspection, and scrupulous self-examination.

“We Are All Dead; We Need Jesus to Bring US Back to Life”

I began my ethnographic fieldwork in Iranian American communities of Los Angeles and Orange County, CA, in August 2017. A few months after the launch of the project—in early January 2018—I saw a post on the public Farsi Facebook page “Iranian Residents of California and the Whole US¹”. The post asked all members of the page to go out for dinner. Many responded to the call, but only four members of the page—including me—actually agreed to go out for dinner and meet new people. We planned to meet in Los Angeles, but one of the respondents—Mahvash—was living in Irvine and could not drive about fifty miles to Los Angeles. We finally decided to meet in Irvine to accommodate her.

During the process of organizing the event, I found out that Mahvash was my townswoman. We were both excited to find a fellow-citizen in a foreign country; we exchanged phone numbers, and she called me. Mahvash, her husband, and their daughter had immigrated to the US three years ago and lived together. A few minutes after her call, the conversation became very emotional as her voice cracked, and she told me in tears about the anguish they had suffered through the process of migrating to the US. They had come to the US through the asylum-seeking process. They had converted to Christianity and, after three years of evangelizing, got arrested by the IRI agents. They were interrogated and intimidated and released after a few weeks. Upon getting released, they decided to leave the country. The family moves to Turkey and seeks asylum. After two years, the UN sends them to the US.

¹ In Farsi: ایرانیان مقیم کالیفرنیا و کل آمریکا

Although being an upper-class family, who had lived in one of the best neighborhoods of Mashhad, Iran, they came to the US with almost no money as they had spent their funds in Turkey. Mahvash wanted me to meet his husband but also had some apprehensions. She said that her husband is "very religious," that "he does not take the risk of meeting new people." She said she wanted to meet me and others and gradually convince her husband —Ahmad— to meet all of us.

We —four members of the Facebook page— met in a restaurant in Irvine. I went with my partner, Mahvash brought a girlfriend, and for the first time, I met Roya —who had made the invitation— and Robert, a young Iranian Armenian or Armani. Although Iranian Armanis are Christians, they are not called Christians in the Iranian immigrant communities of Los Angeles, unlike converts who are called Christians. In other words, there are two vernacular terms to refer to Armenis and Christians. When someone calls themselves Armani, that means they are Armenian and, of course, Christian by birth. They usually have an Armenian name too, like Robert, Yurik, Varoozh, and so like, names that are ostensibly not Farsi. However, if someone calls themselves Christian² that means they have converted to Christianity and they usually have Persian or common Arabic names like Hamid, Golnaaz, or Ehsan. In this small group that gathered in a restaurant on the outskirts of Los Angeles, there was an Armani and a Christian. My relationship with all who came to the dinner was developed further. I went to their houses and met them in coffee shops. They were always incredibly kind to me, answered all my questions, and helped me in every way possible.

² In Farsi: مسیحی

One of the people with whom I developed a friendship during my fieldwork was Mahvash and her husband. For the first time, I met Mahvash's husband —Ahmad— in the *Sadeh* celebration at the California Zoroastrian Center (CZC). He had been a goldsmith and jeweler for a long time and was trying to make a small goldsmith workshop in their garage. He was eagerly taking several pictures of the Farvahar sign on the stage of the CZC, so he could replicate it in making Farvahar necklaces. He passionately told me about his workshop and how, in the absence of enough funds, he had created tools to make jewels and sell them online or to Iranian jewelry stores in Los Angeles. It was interesting to me that Mahvash and Ahmad —as devout Christians— participated in the event in the CZC, so I asked them whether it was religiously OK to participate in the Zoroastrian ceremonies. They told me that for them the celebration was rather Iranian than religious. They had come to the CZC out of curiosity. My question opened a short conversation about Zoroastrianism and how God is understood in Zoroastrianism. But Ahmad changed the conversation by saying, "one of the advantages of the Islamic Republic has been that they have turned people to believers." I was a bit confused as I already knew that Ahmad and his family had to leave a privileged life behind in Iran and flee the country due to the Islamic Republic's prosecution of Christian converts. I did not expect Ahmad to express positive thoughts on the Islamic Republic. He explained that the Islamic Republic has gone in the wrong direction; that is, they have introduced a wrong perception of God, but at least they have promoted spirituality in society.

Ahmad's immense and obvious devotion to Christianity was not just a facade. A few months after our initial meeting, Ahmad and Mahvash had my partner and me for lunch, and when Ahmad was evangelizing us, I noticed his Bible was heavily annotated. The lunch gathering did

not start in their house; they asked us to meet them in a church; it was a Sunday, and we participated in the service. The congregation seemed ethnically diverse, and not all of them knew English. To remove the language barrier, a few interpreters live-translated the sermon in an adjunct room, and translations were transmitted to participants who listened to the sermon with headphones connected to receivers. After the service, food was distributed in the yard of the church. We sat under patio umbrellas, ate, and talked. Mahvash and Ahmad had developed many relationships. A few of their friends came and greeted us, including another Iranian couple and their toddler, who joined us. After a few minutes, Ahmad asked us and the other couple to go to one of the church's rooms. He opened his annotated Bible and gave us some general information about Christianity and the Bible.

He told us that the Quran is perhaps the result of conversations that Mohammad had with Jews, and that is why there are "good things" in the Quran, too, but in fact, the Quran is a "distortion of Abrahamic traditions." In the very first ten minutes of presenting Christianity to us, Ahmad told us elaborate Biblical stories about how circumcision had become a covenant between God, Abraham, and his followers. However, as he said, none of those stories are mentioned in the Quran. That was the evidence for Ahmad that Mohammad had heard "some general things from Jews," but lack of details in the Quran shows Mohammad did not have the whole story. At this point, the woman who was trying to keep their two years old quite said, "yes; they were all Jewish in the time of Mohammad. Mohammad learned all of this from Jews." to which Ahmad responded,

not everything but yes, perhaps 70 to 80 percent of Islam is inspired by Judaism. Because Mohammad had Jewish friends, and he had learned many things from them. Then this idea popped in his mind to create a new religion based on stories he had heard; because

he was an isolated man. He was in the desert for forty years. He was an isolated person and found out bringing a new religion is a way to catch eyes and show off himself. That is why the Quran is very general and not specific.

Then, Ahmad explained a Christian theological notion according to which "we are all sinners, and as soon as one sins, they spiritually die; since the punishment for sin is death." He criticized other religions that perpetuate the idea that good deeds are means of redemption and emphasized that as soon as a person sins, they spiritually die and deserve to go to hell. However, since Jesus has sacrificed himself for us, "our sins all are forgiven" by God. The only thing humans need to do is believe in Jesus Christ and plant his love in their hearts. He elaborated that good deeds are not going to save human beings, particularly because God has proven that point by testing Jews; even though God thought Jews religious rituals and they practiced jurisprudence for 1000 years, they were still beguiled by Satan. God did this specifically to teach us that jurisprudence and law cannot save the human being. No matter how strict the law is, still the human being sins, and that is why we need someone to sacrifice themselves for us as we sin and kill ourselves.

“We Don't Do Good Deeds to be Saved; We Do So, Out of the Love of Jesus Christ”

Similar ideas were preached in another Iranian Church —BB— in which I attended regularly. Although the BB Church was in Orange County —fairly close to where Mahvash and Ahmad lived, they were not familiar with the church. Like many Iranians, Mahvash had told me that one should avoid Iranians because "they pry into your private life." Although I had seen her in many Iranian events when I told her about the church she expressed a lack of interest in going to "an Iranian gathering." I found the church by a few minutes of online research on Iranian Churches

in Los Angeles and Orange County. BB in Orange County was one of the closest churches to where I was living; so, I drove to BB church and participated in their Bible Studies sessions held on Friday nights and their Sunday afternoon services.

Bible study events were intimate and friendly gatherings, which included praying, singing, eating Iranian homemade foods and sweets, and reading and discussing the Bible. The most collegial moments I ever had with congregants of BB were the first thirty minutes before I was asked if I was a Christian. Thirty minutes into my first participation in the Bible Study, Pastor Parviz—a man in his late 50s—asked me about my faith, and I told him that I was not a Christian (which meant I was not a convert to Christianity). I told them that I was a cultural anthropologist that went to many spaces of religiosity as my research was about Iranians of Los Angeles. The dynamic changed after my response. Although I was able to win back most of the congregants, some participants always looked at me with suspicion and did not engage with me. I felt that they considered me an outsider who was there to gather information, not a person invested in Jesus; they were not completely wrong.

However, time and again, pastors and other congregants spotlighted the importance of love of Jesus over religious rituals and good or bad deeds. One of these congregants was Hamid, a younger man in his mid-thirties with whom I became friends. He loved photography, and I knew a little about photography; so once we went to Balboa Beach, Orange County, to take some pictures and discuss photography. His photos were amazing. Although he did not know much about photography techniques and theories, he was taking fabulous abstract pictures mostly from nature. As we discussed photography and his pictures, we also talked about the church and his

faith. Pretty much like Mahvash and Ahmad, Hamid had converted to Christianity in Iran. He also had evangelized for a few years after which he had received warning letters for Iranian authorities. As Ahmad had ignored the letters and continued speaking about his faith, he had gotten arrested and beaten. He told me he was still experiencing chronic back pain that as a result of tortures he had endured in prison. After a few hours of walking and taking pictures, we decided to sit in a Starbucks and chat. He complained about the community in general, Iranian Christians, and their church. Hamid advised me to keep a distance from Iranians because they are "hypocrites." I told him that I had met many nice, tolerant and honest Iranians in Los Angeles; as an example, I mentioned Bigdeli, who teaches in some of the quranic classes of Los Angeles and Orange County. I told him that Bigdeli was a devout Muslim but believed Christians and Jews do not need to convert to be saved. I said, "Mr. Bigdeli believes whomever who commits to social justice is saved; whomever who does good deeds will go to heaven." He responded,

I respect him, but he is wrong. The Quran denies that Jesus was tortured and crucified. He sacrificed himself for us; he paid for our sins. The difference [between the Quran and the Bible] is black and white. You cannot say they are all fine. There is only one path to salvation, and that is Jesus Christ.

I asked, "but what if someone is a good person and does good things?"

They —like this person that you talk about— can be good people for themselves, for this physical world, but not for the other world. Salvation in the other world needs Christ and only Christ. We don't do good deeds to be saved; we do good things out of the love of Jesus Christ. His love saves us because he already has paid for the sin of all [...]. In Christianity, you don't have to do this and that; otherwise, it would have been like the old religion. What Jesus has done freed us from a jurisprudential religion. Not that we don't have jurisprudence. We cannot say 'we don't have jurisprudence, so it is OK to lie.' No! But we don't say 'do this for the reward, don't do this for the punishment.' There is a big difference. The difference between Christianity and Moses' religion is that Moses says,

'you should do good deeds, so you become just. We [—Christians—] are already just as Jesus has paid for our sins. Now we can do justice because we are just.

Hamid echoed Ahmad's idea that was also reiterated several times in the Bible study sessions and sermons in the church; the idea that Christianity is not a conventional religion with a conventional discipline. The ultimate goal in Christianity is not doing good deeds; the purpose is to plant the love of Jesus because, as one does so, whatever they do is right. Once Hamid made fun of Abu Sa'id Abul-Khayr's³ quote that reads, "there are as many paths to God as there are people." From his and his fellow converts' perspective, there was only one path to God. As Pastor Parviz once said in a Sunday sermon,

we are all sinners. We are all dead. How can we help each other? How can the dead help each other? We are all drowning. How can a sinking man help other sinking men? We are all sinking, and there is only one bridge that connects the realm of sinking people to salvation. The bridge is the cross of Jesus Christ.

“Christianity is Hard”

Even though all Iranian Christians that I met in Los Angeles and Orange County underscored that Christianity is not a jurisprudential religion, they were extremely concerned with the ways they can remain pious. In one of the Bible studies sessions, Pastor Parviz put the Persian translation of the Romans Chapter, verses 13 and 14 on the screen that read, "do not participate in events of bacchanalian and avoid adultery, fights, jealousy, and becoming drunk. Give your all being to Jesus and do not follow terrestrial urges." After the pastor's presentation, I commented that these verses are interesting because they look like Quranic verses or at least like what

³ A well know 10-11th century Iranian Sufi

Muslims preach, while I had thought church might be more "relaxed" than Islam in terms of restriction on earthly behaviors. One of the regular participants —Dr. Hossein— responded,

sometimes, we become disappointed because we set unrealistic expectations, but those expectations are not met in reality. Jesus the Messiah has said if you think of a woman sexually, you have already committed adultery. But in Islam, they say if you commit adultery, you should be punished. In Christianity, if we have foul thoughts, we will be counted as sinners. So, Christianity is not easy.

Others agreed. Hamid picked up the conversation from there: "we converted because Islam was so relaxed. It did not make us pious. Everything was superficial, not deep. Christianity is harder than Islam." As I told the congregants several times, I was surprised when I found out they converted to Christianity not because they had deemed it as more relaxed but because they had sought piety that they could not get through the Islamic jurisprudence. They found out that Christianity was harder, more restrictive, and puritanical, and these have motivated them to become Christians.

They also reacted to my implication that some Biblical verses resonate with those of the Quran. They expressed three reasons for these similarities. First, one of the congregants said that similarities are due to the fact that Islam had come after Christianity, so it had "copied" the teachings of the Bible and Jesus. Another theory was that because Mohammad was an illiterate man —Salman Farsi— who was "an Iranian wise man" taught him some ideas that were a combination of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. Hamid said that Salman had issues with the Sassanid Empire. He fled the Sasanid monarchy and promised to topple the empire. When living in exile in Saudi Arabia, he met Mohammad while he had yet to claim

prophecy. Salman encouraged Mohammad "to bring a new religion which was a combination of other religions." Through creating a new religion, Salman took his revenge from the Sassanid court as followers of this new religion, Muslims, invaded Iran and annihilated the Sassanid empire.

There was a third theory proposed by Pastor Parviz. He said,

similarities! That has been one of the oldest Satan's deceptions that he has been using God's word to deceit people. If you look at the first pages of Genesis, what does he use to delude Adam and Eve? He uses God's words. He whispered God's words in their ears but interpreted it insincerely. Satan started from God's words but twisted his words. That is the case almost in all of Satan's schemes. Moses threw his staff, and it became a snake, magicians threw their staffs and created something similar to Moses's miracle. There is a rivalry between the real and the fake. Of course, the fake is similar to the authentic. At the end of his life, Jesus said, 'there are many false *religions*.' They are religions, too. They believe in God, too. They believe in Jesus, too. But they twist Jesus's teachings. Like Mormons. They have created a fiction: 'we will become Gods. God has a body. Jesus was a human who became God.' All fictions! And what a wealthy people they are.

Others confirmed that Mormons are very wealthy and named a few rich Mormons. Then Pastor J continued,

similarities exist to deceive. Some people muddy the water and say, "there are too many paths to arrive at God [Everyone laughs]. Jesus did not say, 'I am a way,' he said 'I am the way.' God would not confuse people by [too many ways]. But you're right! There are too many similar ways, but there is only one truth. The reason that we have similarities is deceiving! There is a competition here. It is like a business. There are too many cults. Like Scientologists and others, but one should judge them by their products; by what they have to offer.

Another participant cut him off: "Obama was a Scientologist. Is it possible to leave these cults? Hearing about them upsets me." Dr. Hossein chimed in, "No, Obama is a freemason, not a

Scientologist." Pastor Parviz ramped it up, "Yes; we should talk about these cults in a different meeting."

For Pastor Parviz, the analogy of the capitalistic market description explains why there are similarities between Islam, Mormonism, and his version of Christianity. He perceives these spiritual paths as rivals who want to sell their products. What all but the Christianity offer in the market are fake products; however, fake products need to look like authentic ones, so other religions emulate and pirate Christianity as they want their teachings to appeal to the people or—to use Pastor Parviz's terminology—"sell" their fake products. Similar teachings are means of offering products that look like authentic ones, but they are un-authentic. Products that do not resemble authentic ones are easy to recognize, but fake products that resemble authentic goods can pass off as authentic. That is why Islam, as a fake religion, has a lot in common with Christianity. Those who have created Islam attempted to peddle their ideas and present them as viable and authentic teachings, so their products should have resembled Christianity.

Pastor Parviz and Hamid complained a few times about the Iranian community in general and Iranian Christians. From their view, the fake products of Islam have ingrained in the mind of Iranians, and it is almost impossible for many Iranians to leave Islam behind. As once Hamid told me in the parking of the church, the only way to become a "real Christian" is to engage with the "words of God" and read the New Testament "every day." Pastor Parviz and Hamid also emphasized being "conscious" and "re-evaluate" all daily behaviors as "we have grown up in a Muslims society, and Islamic ideas are in our minds and behaviors." Pastor Parviz and Hamid gave an example: "sometimes they [Iranians] come, and as soon as they see the cross, they hug

the cross; they cling to the cross; as if this [cross] is an Imam tomb." Pastor Parviz and Hamid were bothered by the fact that many Iranian converts bring their Shia Islamic practices —such as touching Shia saint tombs— to Christianity, and touch or kiss crosses. They believed it was hard for Iranians to wash their "minds" off these practices, and that is why Iranians had to put extra energy into becoming conscious Christians and pay extra attention to their daily behaviors, staying continuously vigilant and watchful to maintain their healthy relationship with Jesus Christ.

Piety Through Love of Jesus and Constant Self-examinations

The common public assumption and previous academic research frame the conversions to Christianity as a strategy for Muslim Iranians to liberate themselves from restrictive Islamic jurisprudence and to seek asylum in European and North American countries (Sebnem Koser 2006). Although my research does not dispute the existence of those strategies, I present cases of Muslim Iranians who convert to Christianity not in the hope of finding a more lenient spiritual path but a more conservative, fundamentalist, and puritanical one. Additionally, they do not do so to gain permanent residency in the US by claiming membership in a religious minority group. My interlocutors were intensely preoccupied with the idea of piety and viewed Christianity as the sole religious path capable of making human beings pious.

Piety is what Mahvash, Ahmad, Hamid, Dr. Hossein, Pastor Parviz, and most Iranian converts to Christianity that I met in Los Angeles and Orange County were extremely concerned with. They chose to become Christian as they felt Islam was not disciplinary enough to make them pious. For them, Christianity “was not an easy” spiritual direction; on the contrary, the path of Jesus

Christ and his love required serious engagement with the Bible, and constant attending to thoughts and behaviors and purifying them from terrestrial matters or non-Christian practices and traditions.

They critiqued Islam as an “easy religion” and repeatedly stated that “Christianity is hard.” They believed Islam was not strict enough and could not make them pious. The congregants expressed Christianity appeals to them because it is a “rigorous” way of life that “guarantees” piety for its followers. They explained that Christianity “works on your heart” and pays attention to all details of life while Islam only cares about external actions. As one of my interlocutors put it, “in Islam you are allowed to think about being with women other than your wife; but in Christianity Jesus has said ‘if you think of the neighbor’s wife you have already committed adultery.’”

Aligned with Islamic laws, both churches forbid corporeal pleasures such as consumption of alcohol or extramarital relationships. However, they believed these laws were “not enough,” and piety should be achieved by a constant attempt to “plant the love of Jesus Christ in [their] hearts,” perpetual introspection, and scrupulous self-examination.

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