



Armenians' interaction and confrontation with Christians and Muslims

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Abstract

The main question addressed in this article is: How Gregorian Armenians have interacted with Muslims and Catholic Christians since their immigration to Iran? Have they coexisted peacefully with each other, or have they been in conflict? In the event of conflict, have they had more conflicts with Muslims or with Catholic Christians?

According to the findings of this article, since their immigration to Iran, Gregorian Armenians have often lived peacefully with Muslims and Catholic Christians, although they sometimes had conflicts with the followers of the two other religions due to religious differences. One of the instances of Armenian confrontation with Catholic Christians is the opposition to the propagation of Catholicism and the construction of the church. The confrontation between Muslims and Armenians can be traceable to ideological debates and opposition to the presence of Muslim girls and boys in mixed schools.

One of the most important findings of this study is that although ideological differences of the Gregorian Armenians with Muslims and Catholic Christians sometimes led to conflict and struggle, the Armenians conflict with the Muslims was far less intense than their conflict with the Catholics.



Introduction

As human beings have been created with some differences in faces and organs, such differences can also be seen in other areas. One of the most important aspects of such differences is the ideological differences. Each of the religions in the human world claims to be the right religion and that human happiness can be attained through teachings of that religion. One of these religions is the Christian religion. Shortly after the advent of Jesus Christ (AS), various sects arose and all of them saw themselves as followers of Jesus (AS). These sects included Armenians (Gregorian), Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians.

On the other hand, a few centuries after the advent of Jesus Christ, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) arose and started his mission. Muslims are followers of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

During the reign of Shah Abbas Safavi, a large number of Gregorian Armenians migrated to Iran, and so far they have lived as a religious minority along with the majority of Muslims in Iran. In addition to the Gregorian Armenians, smaller minorities of Catholics live in their vicinity.

Gregorian Armenians, despite their ideological differences, have often lived peacefully with Muslims and Catholic Christians. However, they sometimes had some conflicts with the followers of the two other religions due to religious differences. The study aims to address the way Gregorian Armenians interacted and confronted with Catholic Christians and Muslims. Of course, it should be noted that religious differences mentioned in this article especially among the Christian denominations in Iran, as is the case with other religions and sects, are not rational and unacceptable, and all of them have caused serious damages to the followers of the heavenly religions and have undermined them.

Catholics' Position in Jolfa

After the advent of Jesus Christ and the spread of Christianity, various sects, all of which followed Jesus Christ, arose but they were in conflict in terms of beliefs and customs. One of these sects was Catholics. It is worth mentioning that four Christian denominations have always lived in Iran, including Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Christians and Gregorians. The Gregorians or Armenians have the greatest number of followers in Iran. From a chronological point of view, the Carmelite Catholics and then the Gregorians have been very active in some areas of southern Iran (Raein, 1970: 70).

Carmelite is a branch of the Catholic cult that entered Iran during the reign of Shah Abbas Safavi and started propagating and promoting their religion with the permission of the Shah of Iran throughout the country. According to the published reports, followers of this cult constructed some churches for themselves in Bushehr and Kharg Island (Chronicle of Carmelites in Persia, 1939, 1090). Gregorian Christians are different from Catholics in terms of their beliefs and ideological principles and follow the Syriac Church instead of the Roman



Catholic Church and they do not confer human features for Jesus (AS) as they believe that his truth is purely divine and the human element has been depreciated and faded in his deity.

Among the Armenian who migrated to Iran in 1605, there were some Armenians from the Roman Church who settled in Isfahan and since then they have opposed the Gregorian Armenians. Gregorian Armenians tried to stop them from building a church, and complained to Shah Abbas and received a decree from him that banned the construction of a church by Francs. The decree of Shah Abbas II was issued in the second of Rabi'a al-Thani 1064 AH (1649 AD), which is summarized as follows:

“Based on the requests of the emissaries of the European countries, we had ordered a church be constructed in Jolfa of Isfahan, but in accordance with the Armenian request that it would result in division, we ordered to stop its construction” (Archives of Vank Cathedral Library, Decree No. 47).

However, Latin Armenian managed to build seven churches as mentioned below with the help of the French ambassador and their frequent requests:

1. Aedik Church constructed by the Shahrimanian
2. Sourp Luqa Church, which is commonly referred to as Carmelite
3. Sorp Housep Church, which is called Josette because it was built by the monks of Josette.
4. Dominican Monastery
5. Augustus Monastery in Husseinieh Neighborhood (Shahshan)
6. Carmelite Monastery in Goodmir
7. Capuchin Monastery in Doqale' Tabarak

The last three churches have been constructed in the mentioned neighborhoods in Isfahan and the four first churches are located in Jolfa. Catholics have always tried to attract the Gregorians, and they did it in two ways: First, they used to fascinate the poor people with material aid and their promising words, and secondly, they welcomed people who blamed and upset the Armenian elders through sympathy and flattering¹.

Jolfa religious leaders always opposed them and prevented their progress. Sometimes they reduced the power of their propaganda through the state decrees and sometimes threatened those who converted to Catholicism, and this opposition continues from the beginning to the present. The Catholics were struggling to crush the Armenian Church, and the Gregorian rulers were trying to protect their people from foreign invaders. Hence, the opposition between the Gregorian Armenians and the Catholics in Jolfa was heightened during the reign of Shah Soleiman. Josette clergymen came to Isfahan and founded a church called Josette, and

¹ An excerpt of the Treaty dated 1170 of the Armenian calendar against the Armenians in Jolfa who joined the Catholics says: “But now, during 1708-1691, some knowledgeable people created divisions in the holy church, and they have fascinated some of the ignorant women and men with flattery and sweet talks”.



founded a school in Jolfa and started to teach school children and promoted Josette style and attracted Armenian people. At that time, the religious leader of the Vank Cathedral was the bishop of Stepanos, who had an irreconcilable anti-Catholics stance, thus defending the church and severely hurt Josette missionaries. He complained to Shah Soleiman stating that: Foreigners from Europe have come to Iran and disturbed the Armenian people, and they have been establishing schools, deceiving naïve children, and provoking people against each other. Of course, this is what they are apparently doing, but their intent is to spy and report all the secrets of the country to the kings of Europe.

With this convenient and secure method, they made Josette clerics disfavored by the Iranian government (Derhouhanian, 2000: 597), but the Shahrmanian helped the Josette, and they paid a great deal of money to the ministers at the court, and they received decrees in order to prevent the closure of the Josette school and do not ban them from promoting their ideologies² (. The elders of Jolfa continued to oppose the Shahrmanian, and therefore, many financial resources of the two parties were wasted. Eventually, the Gregorian won and they received a decree from Shah Soleiman in 1689 and destroyed the Carmelite Church and expelled some of the Josette missionaries, one of whom was Khalifa Hakub. At that time, a book was published by the printing office of Vank Cathedral, denying the belief in the duality of Christ, and they used this book as a pretext and informed the government that they were publishing books against the Qur'an, and the Caliph spent five hundred Tomans to thwart this slander. Accordingly, the religious leader, along with all the clerics, while holding the black candles, cursed the Shahrmanian in the Jolfa Square, resulting in severe hostility and huge losses.

Catholics Alexander was in the Vank Cathedral at the time of the opposition of the people of Jolfa and served as a succession of a religious leader. He noticed the divisive hostility of that people and thus when was appointed at Catholicos position on February 25, 1709, wrote a letter to Pope Clement XI and complained about the clerics who had sent to Iran, and informed him that they cause the disengagement and disputes among people, and so they spoil the name of Christianity among foreigners. He asked Pope to issue a conduct for missionaries to avoid doing these divisive acts (Derhouhanian, 2000: 598).

The Pope replied that conduct as follows:

If you correct your religious beliefs and seal a declaration with other bishops and send us it, then we will order all the missionaries of the Roman Church in that area to obey your orders (Ibid).

After receiving such a response from the Pope, Catholics Alexander complained to Shah Sultan Hussein in 1711 and introduced the missionaries of the Roman Church to the Iranian government as undesirable agents, spies, and traitors; as a result, he received a decree from

² The copy of the requests made by the Shahrmanian and the orders issued in their response are kept at the Vank Cathedral



the Shah, and expelled the missionaries of the Roman Church and imposed great losses on Catholics³.

But the Catholics were reinforced by spending huge sums of money, and in 1723 they decided to open a school for Armenian children, but the Armenians again complained to Shah Sultan Hussein and they were ordered to take their complaint to Sheikh al-Islam in Isfahan. They received a decree from Sheikh al-Islam stating that the missionaries of the Church of Rome were not allowed teach their Armenian children at their schools and not to marry the Armenian people⁴.

At that time Mooses Caliph, the religious leader, along with other caliphs and priests convened a meeting and wrote a letter to those who converted to Catholicism stating that:

It should be mentioned that we are doing our best to make the situation better. From now on, if any cleric appointed by the bishop of the Gregorian Armenians leaves the orthodox cult and becomes Catholic, he will be dismissed from his position and priesthood⁵

This letter was undersigned and undertaken by the following persons:

- **Caliphs:** David, Asdavazdor, Barsokh, Stepanous, Petrosson, and Zakaria.
- **Monks:** Haruton, Hovanes, Qokas, Simon, Stepanos, Giokas the Junior, Gerog, Nicoghayus, Barasam, Aharon, Bargham, Simon, and fifty-eight priests who lived in Jolfa at that time.

This conflict between Catholics and Gregorians continued to until the time of the Shah Ashraf, and then declined since 1730. In 1741, a major conflict broke out resulting in significant losses to the Vank Cathedral. The religious leader of Jolafa at that time was Khachadourou Agharshapati, and he was not a wise and tactful person and thus was easily provoked and got angry, but in the Catholic monastery, there was a wise caliph called Hovans Derderian who was a very experienced and courteous person and had a lot of skills to win people's hearts.

Hakopus, the successor to the religious leader of Vank Cathedral, was tired of his single life and was willing to live comfortably at his own home. As the religious leader (Khachador) could not persuade him, tried to make him obey his orders by appealing to his clerical position. But, Hakopus joined the Catholic Monastery in July 1841. Following him, Amir Khan Hovans Amirian Derastopanos Heratun, and Derhuhanian joined the monastery too, and five other priests were rumored to have been united and wanted to join the monastery.

In 1840, Monsieur Bergeret, a Frenchman, came to Jolfa and built a school where Armenian children gathered and learned Armenian, French and Persian. Bergeret used to help those who

³ excerpted from the notebook of Khalifa Hakub Josette

⁴ This treaty is kept at the Vank Cathedral. The names of the Catholic Fathers who signed that treaty are: Paramagon Father, Josette Malcolm Father, and Criton Father

⁵ The date of this treaty is unknown and is kept at the Vank Cathedral



have just joined the Catholic cult; therefore, conflicts broke out and became so severe that they complained to the government and the king. His Majesty Mohammed Shah wanted to resolve the controversy through compromise. Hence, on June 7, 1842, he issued a decree summarized as follows:

“According to our order, from this time if either Armenians or Catholics take any action to convert the other party to their religion, they will be deprived of their profession and punished” (Archives of the Vank Cathedral Library, Decree No. 145).

The religious leader, Chachodor, called on the two clerics who joined the Catholic cult, dismissed them from their position, strip them of clerical outfits and expel them from their monastery and, according to the government's decree; the followers of both Gregorian and Catholic sects undertook that no one would join the other cult.

Monsieur Bergeret was forced to migrate and the religious leader, Chachodor, was summoned by Surp Achmiadzin in 1842. A slight chaos arose, and then there was no significant change through. But the influence of Catholics at the time of the religious leader, Bishop Tatavous, was insignificant.

The clergies of the Golegei Association were well-known for their hostility and hatred towards the Armenians. As a case in point, consider the following incident:

From 1825 to 1830, Caliph Hussep of the Catholic Sect maintained his friendly relationship with the Gregorian Armenians as the circumstances required, and upon his death he was buried in the courtyard of the Dominican Monastery in the stonemasons' neighborhood.

In 1843, two Golegei Caliphs came to Jolfa, and after they learned about the death of Caliph Hussep, who had good relations with Gregorians, they exhumed his body with his savagery and barbarism and burned his bones and smashed his grave so that no trace of him was left in the monastery. In 1855, there were two caliphs, one young and the other elderly, both were named Petros. The young Petros, he did not hold a bishop position but was called bishop, ordered that the Gregorians who converted to Catholicism change their names taken in the baptism of the Armenian Church with Latin names (Derhouhanian, 2000, 602).

As it was mentioned before, what has been stated in this article about Christian religious strife and disagreements is similar to the controversies found in sects and religions of other religions, but all of these are sad and disturbing issues that have caused serious blows to followers of divine religions. Therefore, it is necessary for the religious people to understand these disagreements and prevent their reoccurrence.

Armenian Interaction and Confrontation with Muslims in Bushehr Province

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are marked as the culmination of the Armenian presence in the province of Bushehr. The great and well-known Armenian businessmen were increasing the scope of their economic activities and expanding their presence in various social fields in Bushehr. Several churches were the venue for Armenians' religious rites, and some Armenians were in charge of key customs duties.



In order to get to know more about how Armenians interacted with Muslims in Bushehr Province, it is necessary to give a brief account of the political and social conditions of Iran in general and Bushehr Province in particular.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, along with the rule of the Qajar dynasty over Iran, the country underwent some changes due to the Tobacco Movement and then the Constitutional Movement.

The presence and influence of foreigners, especially Russia and Britain, on the country's affairs gave rise to dissatisfaction motives in the people and this paved the way for the Constitutional Revolution.

Although with the advent of the Constitutional Revolution great achievements were made for the Iranian nation, colonial domination and influence still survived in a new way in the political and economic centers of Iran.

When a dictators and autocrat king, Mohammad Ali Shah, came to power and the occurrence of the Minor Tyranny and the collapse of the parliament, the conditions became more difficult and tighter for ethnic and religious libertarians in all parts of the country, including Bushehr Province.

The establishment of the Minor Tyranny and the dismantling of the congressional and constitutional achievements on the one hand, and the interference of foreigners in various affairs on the other hand, paved the way for the uprising and popular movements in order to prevent the foreigners' interference in the Bushehr province.

For many years, the embassies and consulates of foreign countries were established in Bushehr, each of which in some way interfered in the economic, social and political affairs of the south of the country, with the British playing the more prominent role.

The southern customs, which provided large annual revenues to the Treasury, was mortgaged by the British agencies based on an agreement with Mozafar al-Din Shah Qajar, and a major part of its income was paid to the British officials as loan installments (Yahosseini, 1997, 66). Ayatollah Seyyed Morteza Alam al-Hoda was one of the pioneers who raised the banner of uprising and opposition against the foreigners and in particular the plunder of the British⁶. At the time of the minor tyranny and after receiving the fatwa from Mullah Mohammad Kazem Khorasani, this prominent Islamic clergyman decided to release Bushehr from the captivity of the tyrants and to expel the supporters of Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar from that port and eventually, on the night of April 23, 1909, in a quick action he seized Bushehr without bloodshed, and after a few days, his supporters seized state offices. One of the centers that were seized by the national forces supporting Seyyed Morteza was the Bushehr Customs,

⁶ Seyyed Morteza Alam al-Hoda was a student of religious sciences and a resident of Tangestan in Bushehr Province. After his initial education in his hometown, he traveled to Najaf and started his religious studies at higher levels under the guidance and supervision of great scholars and authorities, and was instructed by prominent Islamic professors and scholars such as Mullah Mohammad Kazem Khorasani and achieved the status of ijtihad. Seyyed Morteza was a combatant person and captured the attention of the nationalists due to his extreme liberalism thinking



which, after its seizure, Belgian staffs were dismissed and an Armenian, Mooses, was appointed as the Director General of Bushehr Customs (Farshbandi, 1986, 41).

Mooses was a young man who loved Iran and made many efforts in developing the culture of Bushehr, especially among the Armenians living in the city. For instance, he established a school boy for boys and girls in Bushehr. In addition, Mooses established a nursery care center for the orphans and Christian poor people. He was also one of the prominent lawyers of the Saadat Mozafari School in Bushehr who made many relentless efforts maintaining the school and surviving its activities, and therefore, he enjoyed great popularity among the people of Bushehr. (Mozafari Newspaper, multiple issues in 1328 and 1329 AH).

The appointment of Armenian Mooses as Director General of Bushehr Customs shows the level of trust and positive interaction of the Bushehr residents with their Armenian compatriots.

There is another document about Mooses, which again shows how he was respected and appreciated by officials and residents of Bushehr. The contents of this document show that Mooses lived many years in Bushehr and after his death, Mr. Seyed Mohammad Farzan, the head of the Department of Education and the Endowment of the Southern Ports, wrote to a letter to the vice-principal of Saadat School and asked him and his colleagues to attend Priest Wartan's house and participate in Mooses' memorial ceremony and express condolences to the deceased's family members⁷

In addition to his efforts in customs and cultural affairs, Mooses, was also regarded by the public as a respected and trustable social figure and always tried to resolve people's problems and disagreements. According to a report by Mozafari Newspaper, two persons, Hossein Khan Kalantar Roodhelleh and Hayat Davood, caused my troubles for people and afflicted them with their evil actions, wreaking havoc on the lives and property of the people. On this occasion, Mooses headed to the port of Deylam and Rig by a ship to resolve this problem (Mozafari Newspaper, 1328 AH, 15-16).

Another example of the interaction between the people of Bushehr and the Armenians is the relationship between Mirza Yanse Khan and the Bushehr authorities and people and the role played by this prominent figure in the economic, social and cultural affairs of the province. At the time the Belgian agents managed the Customs Office, Mirza Yanse was serving as the deputy of the Customs of the Southern Ports. And since he is an educated and benevolent person, when he learned that Saadat School was to be closed due to outstanding debts and the non-payment of its teacher's salary, he himself attended school, and after being aware of the school situation and lack of funds, he provided aids to it. Mirza Yanse invited a number of elders and businessmen and held a meeting with them and gave them an effective speech about their need for advancement and education of their children. Finally, upon his proposal it was

⁷ The original copy of this document is kept in the archive of Saadat Mozafari School in Bushehr



decided that a penny⁸ and a half-penny to be levied on each bale⁹ of imported and exported goods, respectively, to be paid as the regular grant to the school (Cultural Annals of Southern Ports, 1958, 21).

At that meeting, Mirza Yanse was elected as one of the seven members of the school board, and as stated in the Mozaffari newspaper published in Bushehr, he granted a donation of 25 Tomans personally to the school.

After residing in Bushehr for a while, Mirza Yanse changed his mission, and after some time he joined the Constitutional Movement and was elected to the Armenian representative in the second round of the National Consultative Assembly.

Another example of the interaction and opposition between the Armenians and the people of Bushehr is related installing the church bell, which has been described in Sir Persikacse's reports (the British Head Consul, 1907) as follows:

Recently, the Armenians living in Bushehr have installed a bell for their small church. The unusual sound of the church bell has caused discomfort to the inhabitants of Bushehr. So, people in the bazaar are talking about retaliation against these brazen actions. Mr. Miller, the General of the Russian Consulate, who at times prays in this church, appealed to the ruler and urged him to take preventive measures in order to prevent the occurrence of any possible disorder and people's breaking into the church on the day of the Armenian Easter (Constitutionality of the South of Iran, 2007, 67)

In addition, as is evident from the contents of the British Balius reports, the installation of the church bell was resulted in dissatisfaction of many people and the clergymen in Bushehr. Therefore, the ruler of Bushehr supervised 50 soldiers who were patrolling at nights in the streets to prevent any incident.

On the other hand, the Armenian elders also decided to end the issue in favor of the Armenians. Therefore, Tigran Malkam (a famous businessman) as the US representative in Bushehr complained to the US minister about the opposition of the clerics against the installation of the bell of the Armenian church (Ibid, 76) and the Armenian Bishop of Isfahan sent a telegram through the ruler to the Bushehr Society and requested them to allow the bell of the Church of Bushehr chime like other cities in Iran, and stated: Now that the constitution has been conferred on the people and they have political freedom, the people of Bushehr must also refrain from their previous protest to chime of the church bell (Ibid, 90).

Thus, and with these followings, the ruler of Bushehr received a telegram from the Ministry of the Interior indicating with the mediation of the US minister, the Armenians of Bushehr would be allowed to install and chime a bell in their church, so this the bell was installed in the church on June 14, 1907 (Ibid, 76)

⁸ An old Iranian monetary unit

⁹ A scale for measuring weight



As another case of controversies of the people of Bushehr with the Armenians, sometimes some religious scholars in Bushehr had ideological debates with Armenians and other Christians, or they used to write books to defend the ideological principles of Islam against Christianity. One of such scholars was the late Ayatollah Beladi Bushehri, one of the prominent scholars of Bushehr in the late Qajar period and one of the descendants of Ayatollah Seyyed Abdollah Behbahani, a prominent figure in the Constitutional Revolution in Iran. He studied in Najaf Ashraf for many years as a student of Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Khorasani who was the owner of al-Kefaya and one of the leaders of the Constitutional Revolution in Atabat¹⁰

Considering the presence of Armenians and other Christians in Bushehr, Ayatollah Baladi wrote several books in order to ideologically confront their ideas and defend the dignity of Islam. One of his books was "Iqaz al-Habib fi Mazalim al-Saliib" [Awakening of friends of the oppression of the crucifixion]

Mirza Muhammad Hussein Nazim al-Hokama is another distinguished scholar who has defended the principles of Islamic beliefs and confronted Christians. His family member were all of knowledgeable people and his father, Ali Mohammad Kazeruni, was a wise and competent physician, and Nazim al-Hokama learned her primary educations under his supervision and he then traveled to Najaf Ashraf and continued to study there. Upon his return from Najaf, Ashraf Nazim al-Hokama decided to start an ideological confrontation with Christians. At that time (late Qajar period), a significant minority of Bushehr residents consisted of the Christian Armenians, Catholics, and Jews. He wrote a series of books and treatises on critique of the principles of Christianity, which unfortunately, apart from the name of some of his books, there is no information about the titles and contents of his other treaties (Yahosseini, 1991, 6)

One of his most famous works on confrontation with the Christian thinkers is a book entitled "Malakut al-Sama fi Rad al-Nesari" [Heavenly Kingdom to reject Christianity].

Another case of the conflict between the people of Bushehr and the Armenians is that, in 1905, the Mooses, who was serving the Deputy of Bushehr Customs Office and who was interested in cultural activities, founded a school in Bushehr for Armenians. While he was absorbing Armenians, he intended to enroll a group of Muslim girls and boys at this school to study, but this action, the mixing of girls and boys that was contrary to Islamic teachings, was opposed with the reaction of the religious scholars of Bushehr. Even the late Ayatullah Seyyed Morteza Ahmadi prevented it by issuing a fatwa (Mashayekhi, 2003, 157).

Conclusion

There have been different views and perspectives in all ages and in all societies. In the meantime, ideological and religious differences have become more and more distinct among

¹⁰ For more information, see Yahosseini, Alook at the struggles and thoughts of Ayatollah Beladi Bushehri



followers of religions. Divine prophets have had the same doctrines and principles in the presentation of their mission and religion, and the disagreements divisions that are seen are related to the details of those principles and different perceptions of such principles by their followers.

Over the years, the followers of the Christianity came up with different interpretations and readings of the teachings of their religion. Such disagreements, which have been accompanied by intense prejudice, have made each sect or cult to see itself more deserved and superior to others and consider them deviant and mislead and this paved the way for challenge and conflict.

The Armenians living in Iran are followers of Gregorian religion and have long been living with Catholics and Muslims. This proximity, however, sometimes has resulted in conflict between them, and each of them has used various tools to maintain its supremacy and legitimacy. The results of this study indicate that except in rare cases the Armenians and Muslims in Iran have had peaceful coexistence and intimate relationships with each other, and the majority of controversies have occurred between the Armenians and the Catholics.

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