

Religion in Iran

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ABSTRACT : Religious beliefs and doctrines in Iran have passed under many names and appeared in many different and sometimes violently opposed forms. But throughout the whole periods of Iranian history there has been both continuity and consistency of ideas, and a steady progress and evolution. Shi'ism became the most formidable belief throughout the Iranian history. After the Iranian Revolution, Zoroastrianism, Christianity (Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans) and Judaism were recognized religious minorities and were treated as the Ahl Kitab (people of the Book) or ahl al Dhimma (the protected people under the Islamic rule). However, the Baha'i faith never achieved recognized recognition and faced severe persecution since its emergence. So far as the relevance of the present study is concerned, its pros and cons need to be analyzed and evaluated objectively. Study of religion usually influences common people in so far as the legitimate force that operates behind the principles and ideals of religion are concerned. The objective of this article is to give the reader a sense of religious faiths emerged and also their religious freedom in Iran. It is in this context the present paper has been analyzed.

Keywords: Iran, Religion, Shi'ism, Ahl Kitab, Ahl al Dhimma,

I. INTRODUCTION

Few countries can rival Iran in the length and the variety of her history. One has only to look at a map of the Middle East to see why history has been so eventful. The country is situated for the most part between the depressions of the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and its territory has, therefore, often served in the past as a bridge for peoples and tribes migrating westwards from the vast areas of Central Asia and beyond, and sometimes in the reverse directions. [1]

II. RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN IRAN

While Muslims constitute 98.8% of Iran's population (including 91% Shi'a and 7.8% Sunnis), the Christians command a population of 0.7%, the Jews, 0.3%, the Zoroastrians, 0.1% and the remaining 0.1% are the followers of other religions. The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran recognizes Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism as official religions. Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution, recognizes them as people of the Book and they are granted the right to exercise religious freedom in Iran. [2] The constitution of the Islamic Republic recognized and confirmed the protection of the cultural, social and political liberties of the religious minorities within a legal framework: "Zoroastrians, Jewish and Christians Iranians shall be the only recognized religious minorities who shall be free within the limits of the law to perform their religious rights and ceremonies and shall act according to their canons as far as their personal status and religious teachings are concerned". (Article 13)

After the revolution of 1979, the constitution of Iran provides reserved parliamentary seats to the recognized religious minority. There are 2 seats for Armenians and one for each other minority: Assyrians, Jews and Zoroastrians. Given that the Baha'i Faith is not recognized, they do not have seats in the parliament. Sunni Muslims are mainly in the Kurdistan and Seistan, Baluchistan provinces and are proportionately represented in the Islamic consultative Assembly. [3]

Shi'a Islam

Shi'ism, which today appears closely mingled with the Iranian sense of national identity, came to Iran in the very early days of Islam. From the very beginning, history mentions the names of outstanding Ulama in Iran who were faithful Companions of the twelve Imams at various stages of history. In particular mention the names of the sixth Imam, Ja'far ibn Muhammad (A.S) and the 8th Imam, 'Ali ibn Musa Al Reza (A.S) who had migrated to the province of Khurasan from Medina. Islam is the religion of 98% of Iranians of which approximately 89% are Shi'a almost all of whom are Ithna 'Ashari. In 1501, Safavid dynasty established the Twelver Shi'a Islam as the official state religion. After that, there were successive dynasties who adopted the Shi'a Islam as the official religion in Iran. According to the constitution of Iran: "The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari school (in Usul al-Din and fiqh), and this principle will remain eternally

immutable. Other Islamic schools, including the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Zaydi, are to be accorded full respect, and their followers are free to act in accordance with their own jurisprudence in performing their religion rites. These schools enjoy official status (marriage, divorce, inheritance, and wills) and related litigation in courts of law. In regions of the country where Muslims following any one of these school of thought constitute the majority, local regulations, within the bounds of the jurisdiction of local councils, are to be in accordance with the respective school of thought without infringing upon the rights of the followers of other schools."

Today with a population of more than 150,000,000 scattered the world over, mostly in places like Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, the *Shi'a* represent a reckoning force and with the rapid advance of the Islamic revolution of Iran. The predominant school of theology and jurisprudence (Madh'hab) among *Shi'as* in Iran is Ja'fari established by Abu Ja'far. [4]

Sunni Islam

Sunni Muslims are the second largest religious group in Iran. Specifically, Sunni Islam came to rule in Iran after the period Sunni were distinguished from *Shi'a* through the Ghaznavids from 975 AD, followed by the Great Saljuq Empire and the Khwarizm Shah dynasty until the Mongol invasion of Iran. Islam returned to rule when Ghazan converted but he soon converted specifically to *Shi'a*. In Iran, the Sunni community which constitutes 7.8% of the population lives peacefully alongside their *Shi'a* brothers and are given total freedom to perform their religious rites and Friday prayers. They are mainly in the Kurdistan and Seistan-Baluchistan provinces and are proportionately represented in the Islamic consultative Assembly. In the contemporary period, one witness a global conspiracy contain the revolutionary tide and prevent it from reaching the Sunni populated regions. As Imam Khomeini has said: "*The filthy hands which aggravate the differences between the Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, belong neither to the Shi'a nor the Sunnis. They are the hands of the colonialists who hatch plots for creating division under the pretext of Shi'ism or Sunnism.* But no matter what, the global conspirators are watching with apprehensions the growing unity between these two communities. The predominant school of theology and jurisprudence (Madh'hab) among Sunnis in Iran is Hanafi, established by Abu Hanifa. [5]

III. BAHAI FAITH

The founder of Baha'ism, Mirza Ali Mohammed, who afterwards assume the title of Bab (i.e Gate), was born at Shiraz in the south of Persia, on the 20th October, 1819 A.D. He was a Sayyid, that is, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). His father, a well known merchant died soon after his birth, and He was then placed under the care of maternal uncle, a merchant of Shiraz, who brought Him up. [6] Shaykhi school became the precursor of the Babi movement that later developed into a truly autonomous religion. This school was founded by Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa (1753-1826), a pious *Shi'a* theologian from Al-Ahsa (Arabia), the name of the movement coming from his title of Shaykh). The Shaykhis believed that a Bab or gate must always be present as an intermediary between the people and the Imam. To some Shaykhis Bab is an abstract concept and to some it is referred to a real person. He educated in Bahrain and the theological centers in Najf and Karbala in Iraq. He spends his last twenty years of life in Iran. [7]

Mirza Hussain Ali Nuri (B.1817) who later became Baha'u'llah, was born in Tehran. In his youth he became a Babi and after the execution of Bab he became a prominent figure among Babis. [8] Most of the Babis were exiled by the Qajar government to the Sunni Ottoman area in Iraq. It was in Iraq that Baha'u'llah proclaimed himself the manifestation or 'Prophet Promised' by Bab. Majority of the Babis believed him and those Babis entered the new faith and became Baha'is. This happened in 1863 after a decade of Bab's execution. Afterwards Baha'u'llah was exiled by Ottoman Empire to Akka, a prison city in Palestine (now Israel) at that time. Baha'u'llah abrogated many laws given by Bab because of their rigidity. He stated his own dispensation and wrote letters to many kings instigating them to establish peace. He tried a lot to make his laws compatible with the modern globalized world. To him "*World is but one country and humankind its citizens*" [9]

After Baha'u'llah, Abbas Effendi, better known as 'Abdul Baha became the pivotal source of Baha'is. When Turkey Sultanate was abolished by young Turks, he was released from the prison city of Akka. It was 'Abdul Baha who propagated Baha'i religion through his intensive travels in Europe, America and Egypt. [10] American converts to Baha'i faith established their center in Chicago and a Baha'i house of worship was established there. After 'Abdul Baha's death in 1927, Shoghi Effendi, his grandson, became his Guardian of Baha'i faith. He appointed many as 'Hands of the Cause' to look after the socio-religious issues of this faith. The main reason for the establishment of the Babi-Baha'i religion is embedded in the theories of Shaykhi school which interpreted many Quranic verses and the sayings of the *Shi'a* Imams in a way which predict the advent of Imam Mahdi and Messiah. Shaykhis interpreted Qiyamah or the Day of Judgment in two ways according to which the esoteric or hidden meaning of the Qiyamah was the advent of the Qiam al-Muhammad which is another name of Imam Mahdi according to *Shi'a* terminology. Another meaning of the Qiyamah given by them was closed to mainstream understanding as the reward and punishment for good and bad deeds respectively.

Similarly they collected a lot of sayings of *Shi'a* Imams which depicted the appearances and personality of Imam Mahdi differently from the mainstream *Shi'a* Ithna Ashari School. Hence after the death of Sayid Kazim Rashti, majority of the Shaykhis found these attributes in the person of Sayyid Ali Muhammad Bab. All such attributes were collected by Abul Fazl Gilpaigani in his book 'Al-Faraid'. He was among the famous companions of Baha'u'llah who contributed in the spread and expansion of the Baha'i faith.

In so far as the Baha'i principles and doctrines are concerned they say that God is transcendental and unknowable entity. "*All the ways to Him are barred.*" Baha'is believe that God sends His Messengers to guide humankind according to different times and conditions. They believe in the continuation of Prophet Hood and Islam. Religion is one but different Prophets come with different dispensations. Bahaullah has given stress on the great infallibility of God's Messengers. They do not believe that Prophets are incarnations of God but they propound that every Prophet is a manifestation of God who manifest God's will on earth.

Baha'is does not accept re-incarnation but believe in the reward and punishment for soul according to deeds. 'Abdul Baha summarized and listed twelve points as the only characteristics of the movement. The twelve principles are the following: - Unity of mankind, Need to attain the truth through unprejudiced and independent research, Need to attain the truth through unprejudiced and independent research, Essential unity of all religions, Need for religion to be the cause of unity. If this is not so atheism is better, Need for harmony between religion and science, Equality of rights and duties between the sexes, Fight against every kind of prejudice (the struggle against nationalism, religious fanaticism, class consciousness and racism are particularly stressed), Realization of world peace, Universal education to be made available to all (in the Baha'i communities the children of poor families are educated at the community's expense), Religious solution of the social problem through the abolition of poverty and wealth and the sharing of business profit, Encouraging the adoption of an international auxiliary language, English, Establishment of an international court of Justice. [11]

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Iran never proved a hostile atmosphere for the Baha'is from the emergence until the present day. The Bab's declaration of his mission constituted, therefore, a challenge to the central pillar of this theological system. Throughout Persia, the followers of the new faith were denounced by the clergy as enemies of God. During the Qajar period, the Baha'is were persecuted because of their un-Islamic practices and activities. When the resulting mob attacks failed to halt the rapid spread of the Bab's message, the government moved with armed force against the principle centre's of Babi influence. [12] The Bab was executed in 1890 after a trial by an ecclesiastical court. This action participated an attack on the Qajar ruler, Nasiri'd-Din Shah, in retaliation for the execution of their Prophet, but failed, in response, the Shah ordered a nation wide witch hunt for Babis hundreds of whom were tortured and put to death.

During the Pahlavi period (1925-1979), the secularization of the Reza Shah government in the late 1920s at first helped the Baha'is, who built a Baha'i centre (Hazirat al-Qudus) in Tehran. Reza Shah also appointed a number of Baha'is to important positions in the civil administration, particularly those branches of government related to finance. Although, as a salve to the Mullahs, laws were passed restricting the general employment of Baha'is in the civil service, minor improvements in the position of the Baha'is began to appear. Baha'is could count on a limited degree of protection from persecution and were eventually permitted to open schools. As these schools rapidly gained a reputation for excellence, the monarch was moved to enroll his own children. It seemed possible that, given time, the restrictive laws might be lifted and the miasma of prejudice and hostility eventually dissipate. At the same time, Reza shah himself adept at the 'divide and rule' philosophy which was to play an important part in the perpetuation of the Pahlavi regime. [13] But later on, he formalizes a policy of discrimination which was to characterize the treatment of the Baha'i community for the next five decades. In 1933, the publication of Baha'i literature was banned; Baha'i marriage was deemed concubinage, and prison sentences were set for those who admitted to marrying to Baha'i law' a number of Baha'i cemeteries were expropriated; Baha'is in the public service were demoted or fired; attacks in the press were freely permitted; and eventually the Baha'i schools were closed. Once again the community sank to its former status as a proscribed and hated minority.

Since the Revolution of 1979, a new chapter in the persecution of the Baha'is of Iran was introduced. When the Republic's constitution was drawn up in April 1979, the rights of the Christians, Jewish and Zoroastrians minorities in Iran were specifically mentioned and protected. The rights of the Baha'i community, the largest religious minority, however, were not mentioned. In an Interview given by the Ayatollah Khomeini to Professor James Cockroft of Rutgers University in December 1978, the Ayatollah had this to say about the Baha'is:

“Will there be either religious or political freedom for the Baha’is under an Islamic government?”

Khomeini: “They are a political faction; they are harmful. They will not be accepted.

“How about their freedom of religion-religious practice?”

Khomeini: “No”

In March 1979, the house of the Bab the holiest Baha’i shrine in Iran was turned over by the Government to a Muslim cleric known for his anti-Baha’i activities. Then, in September, the house was destroyed by a mob led by mullahs and officials of the Department of Religious Affairs. In November 1979, Baha’i teachers were not only dismissed but held them responsible for the repaying of all salaries they had previously received. In the early 1980s, the trading licenses of most Baha’i businessmen were revoked, the assets of businessmen run by Baha’is were confiscated, and bank accounts of most Baha’i businessmen were frozen. In addition, the authorities intimidated private employers into dismissing many Baha’i employees. In Tehran and other cities throughout Iran, Baha’i buildings were looted and burned. In rural areas, the authorities encouraged the plunder and destruction of the livestock and crop of Baha’i farmers. In 1981, an official decree was issued barring Baha’i students and Professors from admission to or employment at any university in Iran. Universities published new prospectuses in 1981 requiring that applicants belong to one of the four religions recognized in the constitution, namely the Muslim, Jewish, Christian or Zoroastrian religion. Admission to primary and secondary schools was refused to those who identified themselves as Baha’is, and hundreds of students were expelled.

Despite the overwhelming proof that the Baha’i community in Iran is being persecuted solely because of its religious beliefs, the Iranian Government continues to justify this persecution by charging the Baha’i community with a variety of offenses. The principle charges advanced by the Government are:- “That Baha’is are supporters of the Pahlavi regime and the late shah of Iran; that they collaborated with SAVAK, the secret police; and that the Baha’i faith is a political organization opposed to the present Iranian Government”. “That Baha’is are agents of Zionism”. “That Baha’is are involved with prostitution, adultery and immorality”. [14]

The international community has responded to the persecution of Baha’i community in Iran with overwhelming sympathy and concern for the Baha’is and condemnation of the Iranian Government. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has passed eleven resolutions expressing serious concern about reports of human rights violation in Iran. Each resolution has made specific mention of the situation of the Baha’i community there. Since 1985, United Nations General Assembly itself has approved seven resolutions which specifically mention the situation of the Baha’is in Iran and express concern over reports of human rights violations there. [15] However, in early 1980s and early 1990s the Government has undertaken a reconsideration of its policies towards Baha’is. In 1988, most of those Baha’is being held in prison were released and the number of executions dropped sharply after 1985. During this period, Baha’i children were allowed to re-enroll in primary and secondary schools in most of the country. But the restrictions were not lifted to institutions of higher learning. Baha’is were not allowed to freely circulate their books. Some Baha’is were allowed to obtain new business licenses and restrictions to other forms of economic activity appeared to lessen.

Islamic Republic of Iran has been accused of never producing convincing evidence with regard to its characterization of the Baha’i community. However, the Islamic Republic of Iran has offered them freedom “if they recant their belief and convert to Islam”. Further, it is to be noted that the more aggressively the Iranian Government pursues its campaign against Baha’i the stronger Baha’i community seems to become. Baha’is remain officially ‘unprotected infidels’ and their rights are often ignored. Without them, the very existence of the Baha’is as a viable religious community is seriously endangered.

IV. CHRISTIANITY

Christianity in Iran is the very oldest religion and had a long history. During the 1980’s and 1990’s their numbers were estimated to be around 200,000. [16] Most of the population belongs to Apostolic Church, which has archdioceses in the cities of Tehran, Tabriz and Isfahan. There are some very old churches in Iran - perhaps the oldest and largest is Tatavous Vank (St. Tatavous Cathedral), which is also called the Ghara Kelissa (the black monastery) south of Makou. [17] Christianity has always been a minority religion, overshadowed by the majority state religions –Zoroastrianism in the past, and *Shi’a* Islam today. In Iran Christianity have played a significant part in the history of Christian mission. In Iran, the Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans constitute the Christian community in Iran. Armenians follows the Gregorian rite, one of the sects of Christianity, has always had friendly relations with the Iranian nation and enjoy the protection of Islamic Republic. While always a minority the Armenian Christians have had autonomy of educational institutions where a good level of education is maintained. Their journal *Alik* in the Armenian language and deals with issues regarding with the Armenian community and socio-political problems of the country. There are more than twenty Gregorian churches in Iran besides Catholic Church and other Centers for Armenian churches. Every year on the occasion of the birth of Christ, special programmes were arranged by the Islamic Republic of Iran. They were also active in taking part in political and social organization like *khilafat council* and *Armenian National Assembly*, which

organizations are officially recognized. They also participate in elections and referendum and two deputies in parliament are represented by Armenians. They enjoy same rights as any other citizen in Iran. [18] Between 1894 and 1920, the Armenians living under the Ottoman Empire experienced the destruction of more than two-thirds of their population in a series of massacres, culminating in the genocide of 1915. On May 28 for the first time in centuries, an independent state was established. Unfortunately, it lasted for only two years and several factors are responsible for its collapse including: Catastrophic economic conditions, starving refugees from Turkish Armenian, reliance on unfulfilled promises of the Allied powers, Kamal Atatürk's successful military ventures against the Allied powers, ideological and personal friction combined with political immaturity within the Armenian leadership; and advance of Bolsheviks into the Caucasus. While a Turkish took a large portion of western Armenia, the Bolshevik Red Army occupied eastern section and established the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic at the end of 1920. [19]

From times immemorial there were cultural links between Armenian and Persia and also under direct or indirect rule of the Persians. Armenia retained its unique position and much influenced by Persian culture and religion. [20] However, the presence of Armenian in Persia predates the Safavid era (1501-1722), [21] the bulk of population was transported from their ancestral lands during the early seventeenth century by Shah Abbas. They lived peacefully during the reign of Shah Abbas. In Isfahan Armenians have been credited for a number of inventions such as the Safavid artillery; they were also successful merchants of different commodities, especially silk.

During the twentieth century, Armenians in Persia excelled as small artisans and actively involved in international trade. However, their political role remained limited. During Qajar rule, Armenian ambassadors were dispatched to Europe, [22] and were actively involved in the constitutional movement in the twentieth century. [23] With the rise of Pahlavi's, Reza Shah was more difficult than Muhammad Reza Shah for Armenians, they were given cultural and religious autonomy in communal affairs, but were threatened their internal autonomy and allowed one additional deputy in *majlis* also Reza Shah closed down their schools in 1928-39. They were denied government jobs and employment. The British saw it a pro-Nazi tendency designed to arouse the fanatical religious segments of population and many saw it a personal admiration with Kemal Atatürk of Turkey. [24] During the rule Mohammad Reza Shah, Armenian internal autonomy was fully restored. [25] The policy of economic development, modernization and westernization furthered the communal life and the socio-economic condition of religious minorities. Besides freedom of religion, Armenians preserved themselves by paying homage to the top leaders of Persia in the hope of receiving a safe livelihood and protection. They enjoy cultural autonomy and had no need to rebel against the Persia.

The majority of the Christians in Mesopotamia and Persia belonged to the East Syrian Church (known as the Nestorian Church), which later evolved into two dominant groups Assyrians and Chaldeans (Catholics). Chaldeans are referred to as Assyrian Roman Catholics; Assyrians are also referred to as Nestorians as opposed to Chaldeans. One writer asserts that the Assyrians are followers of Nestorianism, [26] who include Protestants and Catholics. [27] These groups received a hostile and peaceful atmosphere in Persia, especially in the Pahlavi regime whose numbers had already dwindled considered comparable to the early 1900's. By the mid-1970 at least half of the 30,000 Assyrian populations lived in Tehran, and some 40 percent still resided in Urmieh and its surroundings. During the 1990's, the Assyrian and Chaldean population got shrunk at all time low from 16,000 to 18,000 in Iran, the majority being Assyrian and majority of the population lives in Kuzistan and Ahwaz. Besides Assyrians and Chaldeans also shared a common destiny with the Iranian nation and lived with perfect peace and amity with the Muslim citizens. Assyrians showed a great inclination towards language, history, art and writings. They also have their own association which takes care of the affairs of the Assyrian community. They also participate in elections and have one deputy in the Islamic parliament. Like other minority groups, they also enjoy protection from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Beside there were other sects of Christianity like Protestants, Roman Catholics, Adventists and these have their own centers of worship. [28]

V. ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroastrianism also called Mazdeism [29] and Magianism, is one of the oldest religions in Iran and its existence came before the advent of Islam who follows the rites of Zoroaster, who mostly lived in what is today eastern-northeastern Iran between 1700 and 1500 B.C. [30] The Holy Quran calls the Zoroastrians *Majus*, Muslim authorities, going back to the Caliph 'Umar, accept Zoroastrians as a "people of the scripture", with a revealed religion. Zoroastrians had the status of *Dhimmi*s, who could not be compelled to enter into the fold of Islam. [31] Zoroastrians mainly are ethnic Persians and are concentrated in the cities of Tehran, Kerman, and Yazd. The Zoroastrian religion was the state cult of Iran at the time of Arab conquest. It was 1200 years old then; dating from its founder Zoroaster (Zarathustra), a man who lived about 600 B.C. [32] In the tradition of Indo-European religions Zoroastrianism was dualistic in ethics and monotheistic in belief. [33] The Muslim conquest of Persia in the seventh century led to the reduction of Zoroastrian population. At first they tried to

maintain their exclusivity, but their conversions to Islam and intermarriages with Muslim, the community lost its economic and social domination. [34]

Zoroastrians believe that there is one universal and transcendent God, Ahura Mazda. It is built around a system of sun and fire cults; Ahura Mazda is the fire of heavens, his son Atar is the fire of earth. The fire worship was the part of social and political organization of ancient Iranians. There was a worship of the family hearth and fire; worship of the clan or village fire; worship of the province fire; and worship of the fire of the king and empire. They believe in the immortality of the soul, in reward for good by attainment of paradise in life hereafter and punishment for evil men and non-believers. Animal sacrifice is forbidden and the bodies of dead man were kept secured from contact with earth, fire and water. Therefore the dead were exposed to some mountain or towers, and later the bones placed in tombs. [35]

Zoroastrians were actively involved in the affairs of the state, like other non-Muslim minorities took active role in constitutional movement of Iran whether by financially, or lobbied by Muslim merchants, 'Ulama, preachers, and the press for the passage of provisions on equal rights of all citizens. [36]

No doubt, Zoroastrianism remained a national or state religion of the major portion of the people for many centuries. [37] During the Sassanid period, the Sassanid monarchs set themselves to the task of re-organizing the Zoroastrian faith and codifying its doctrines. Temples were erected and Avesta and other religious books were translated and recorded in their finally accepted form. Nevertheless, in spite of the virtual elimination of Zoroastrianism under the potent influence of Islam, it has survived to the present day, mainly in Yazd and in the *Parsi* community in Mumbai.

During the Pahlavi period, on one hand restriction were put on their schools and worships centers similar to those on other religious minorities. On the other hand they became unique nationalist ideology of the new monarch. The most obvious was the 1934 declaration by Reza Shah that foreigners call the country "Iran" rather than the "Persia". "Iran" derived from an expression in the Zoroastrian Holy book "Avesta". Naturally, many Zoroastrians welcomed the new system and became ardent supporters of Reza Shah. Arbab Keikhosrow Shahrokh, a Zoroastrian who was deputy in Majlis, worked tirelessly for the welfare of the Zoroastrian community. [38]

This community also possesses its own schools and enjoys total protection in practicing its religion as other religious minorities in Iran. In Iran, there is a particular place called *Talar* where religious ceremonies were take place. Also one Deputy represented in the parliament of Islamic Republic. They also take active part in social and political activities of the country. [39]

VI. JUDAISM

From times immemorial the presence of Jews was in Persia. Judaism is one of the oldest religions practiced in Iran and dates back to the late biblical times. The biblical books of Isaiah, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles and Esther contain references to the life and experiences of Jews in Persia. They possess around 30 synagogues all over the country and freely promote their culture, language, writings, history etc. [40] Since the conquest of Babylonian Empire by Cyrus the Great in 539 B.C, Jews with the distinctive identity lived within the Persian boundaries. [41] Jewish sectarian movements have also existed in Iran, and one scholar suggests a "Jewish development parallel to the appearance of numerous proto-shi'ite with messianic overtones during the final years of the Umayyad Caliphate. [42]

After the Muslim conquests of Persia, religious minorities along with the Jews were assigned the status *Dhimmi* in which they have to pay *Jizya* towards the Arab conquerors and in return they enjoy religious freedom. [43] They were also required to do some additional social and legal disabilities; they were prohibited from bearing arms, riding horses, testifying in cases involving a Muslim, and also required to wear a dress that is distinguished from Muslim.

In 1255, Halgu Khan a Mongol Ruler, made some changes and considered all religions equal, abolished the *Dhimmi* classes. Mongol rulers preferred Christians and Jews in official posts and one Sa'd al-Daula a Jew, was appointed as his Vizier. The appointment faced serious opposition from Muslim Clergy and finally al-Daula was murdered and Persian Jews received a serious persecution. [44] But the conversion of Ghazan Khan, Jews again gained the status of *Dhimmi*s. His successor pressured many Jews to convert to Islam, among such convert was Rashid al-Din Hamadani, a physician, historian and statesman who adopted Islam in order to advance his career. He was later executed for poisoning the Mongol ruler Oljeitu and his head was carried in the native city of Tabriz.

During the reign of the Safavids, *Shi'a* Islam became the official state religion. *Shi'ism* assigns great importance to the issues of ritual purity, and non-Muslims, including Jews, are deemed to be ritually unclean so that physical contact with them would require *Shi'as* to undertake ritual purification before doing regular prayers.

The reign of Shah Abbas I (1588–1629) was initially benign. Jews prospered throughout Persia and were even encouraged to settle in Isfahan which was made a new capital. However, toward the end of his rule,

the treatment of Jews became harsher; upon advice from a Jewish convert and *Shi'a* clergy, the Shah forced Jews to wear a distinctive badge on clothing and headgear. In 1656, all Jews were expelled from Isfahan because of the common belief of their impurity and forced to convert to Islam.

During the rule of Nadir Shah (1736–1747), Jews experienced a period of relative tolerance when they were allowed to settle in the *Shi'a*s Holy city of Mashhad. Yet, the advent of a *Shi'a* Qajar Dynasty in 1794 brought back the earlier persecutions. [45] Another European traveler reported a degrading ritual to which Jews were subjected for public amusement. [46]

During the Pahlavi dynasty, the atmosphere towards Jews of Iran was hostile and benign. The influence of the *Shi'a* clergy was weakened, and the restrictions on Jews and other religious minorities were abolished. [47] Reza Shah prohibited mass conversion of Jews and eliminated the *Shi'a* concept of ritual uncleanness of non-Muslims. Modern Hebrew was incorporated into the curriculum of Jewish schools and Jewish newspapers were published. Jews were also allowed to hold government jobs. [48] However, Jewish schools were closed in the 1920s. Eliz Sanasarian estimates that in 1948–1953, about one-third of Iranian Jews, most of them poor, immigrated to Israel. [49] David Littman puts the total figure of emigrants to Israel in 1948–1978 at 70,000. [50] The reign of Muhammad Reza Shah was the most prosperous era for the Jews of Iran. In 1970s, only 10 percent of Iranian Jews were classified as impoverished; 80 percent were middle class and 10 percent wealthy. Although Jews accounted for only a small percentage of Iran's population, in 1979 two of the 18 members of the Iranian Academy of Sciences, 80 of the 4,000 university lecturers, and 600 of the 10,000 physicians in Iran were Jews. [51] According to The world Jewish Library, most Jews in Iran live in Tehran, Isfahan (3,000), and Shiraz. BBC reported Yazd is home to ten Jewish families, six of them related by marriage; however some estimate the number is much higher. Historically, Jews maintained a presence in many more Iranian cities.

Today, the largest groups of Jews from Iran are found in the United States which is home to approximately 100,000 Iranian Jews, who have settled especially in the Los Angeles area and New York area. [52] Jews also enjoy the same rights that other citizens of Islamic Republic do. Also one deputy represented in the Islamic Assembly (Majlis) and they have their own association under the banner of *Anjomane Kalimian*, journal by the name of *Tamouz*, private schools social committees. They also take active part in social and political activities of the country. [53]

VII. CONCLUSION

Iran saw many dark days under the continuous regimes, but the Islamic revolution of Iran mark an end to the despotic regimes. Licentiousness, female exhibition, prostitution, extravagant living, sexual exploitation, pornographic magazines, cheap and dirty theatrical plays and films, rampant bribery, drugs, corruption, thefts were the order of the day. Moral values were decaying and western culture was encouraged. But there emerged the Islamic Revolution and the establishment of Islamic rule to end at all.

Revolution changed the whole scenario of Iran, women were held in high esteem, and she was no more a play thing, a sex symbol. Now, she is a human being who commands respect. Now, she wears *Hijab* and walks the streets and goes to the University for sane Education. The media which previously concentrate on lewd and debauchee aspects of things were radically changed to give the healthy public news and writings, educational films and radio programmes. Thus, Iranian have established a proper set of values based on religion upon which he breathes feels and lives.

Today, Iranian society has come out unique in the world by following the Islamic principles. Those corrupt aspects which have eroded the very foundation of the society have disappeared. Continuing this path of God and His religion (Islam) the road to perfection is no doubt very near.

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