

BMB DISCIPLESHIP: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE FACTORS LEADING TO DISHARMONY WITHIN THE IRANIAN CHURCHES IN THE DIASPORA

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1 Introduction

Iranians may well be the largest ethnic group coming out of an Islamic background that has responded to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the last thirty years. Spellman's research indicates that there are at least "forty-five (above ground) Iranian churches that have developed around the world since the 1979 revolution" (Spellman 2004, 169). Iranian Christians International (ICI) reports that "by 2002, ICI estimated the number of Iranian Christians worldwide to be over 60,000, half being Muslim converts and the other half from various religious minorities".² Operation World indicates,

From only 500 Muslim-background believers in 1979, conservative estimates now suggest over 100,000 MBBs in Iran, a number rapidly increasing. Some, more optimistic, place this number as high as a million. Never since the 7th Century has the Church in Persia grown so fast as post-1979, and the most recent years are the most fruitful (Mandryk 2010, 465).

Mohabat News³, an Iranian Christian News Agency reported,

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² <http://www.iranchristians.org/whoarethey2.shtml> (accessed April 6, 2012 112:45 AM) Iranian Christians International, Inc.

³ Mohabat New Agency, the news agency of Iranian Christians, is not affiliated with any Christian or non-Christian organizations. Mohabat News acts as a cultural and social bridge between the world community and the peoples of Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan and to better inform the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ and Christian ministries around the world about the life and the welfare of Christian minorities in these Farsi-speaking countries.

The rapid growth of the Christian faith in Iran seems to have caused significant concern and even fear in the hearts of the leadership of the Islamic regime which has sparked increased suppression of Christians especially in the last year. After the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's speech regarding the need to oppose and silence the home-based churches, a brutal and inhumane crackdown along with numerous arrests of Christians inside Iran has been witnessed.⁴

Iranian believers from a Muslim background (BMBs) carry with them their cultural heritage, patterns of behavior, and values that are uniquely shaped by their religion, culture and family. As is common with most first generation churches, the Iranian church is very active in evangelism and the worship experience is passionate and enthusiastic. The church exhibits the deep Iranian cultural traits of loyalty, pride and cohesiveness towards family, along with altruistic, friendly, generous, caring and kindness to others expressed in their commitment to hospitality (Dastmalchain, Javidan, Alam 2001, 540-541). Fellowship reflects the deep core value of family and friendship found within traditional Iranian culture. BMBs often interact with each other more than just once a week, as members are intensely involved in the lives of each other throughout the week.

Iranian Christians have developed a Worldwide Directory of Iranian/Persian Christian Churches at www.farsinet.com/icc/⁵. At the time of this writing, the three areas of California, United Kingdom and Canada have a total of 45 churches indicated at farsinet.com. Christian Freedom International estimates between 1-2 million Christians in Iran⁶. More conservative estimates call into

⁴http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3102:iranian-religious-authorities-acknowledge-the-spread-of-gospels-in-iran&catid=36:iranian-christians (accessed April 6, 2012 12:00 PM)

⁵ For the month of 2/11 this website served 4,407,290 requests, with 990,137 pages viewed, and had 403,075 unique visits to the site.

⁶ <http://www.christianfreedom.org/iran/> Since 1998, Christian Freedom International has been on the forefront in the battle for the rights of persecuted Christians around the world. Over the years, CFI has consistently remained active

question the commonly assumed numbers of approximately 300,000 Christians in 1979, and place that number somewhere between 80,000 and 200,000 Christians.

Elam Ministries (n.d.c), however, claims on its website that the number of clandestine house congregations has increased strongly, but that the exact number of secret Christians remains unknown, even though at least ten networks are in operation. It is further reported that most of these house congregations grow because the Gospel is spread through extended families, and that there is evidence of secret followers all over Iran. The website describes how a house church is established in Iran, by speaking of Jesus to family and friends, by gathering new believers to weekly studies of the Bible and Christian community, and encouraging them to share their faith with friends and family members (Elam Ministries n.d.d) (Landinfo 2011, 12).

Hiebert indicates that values are not immediately transformed upon conversion. Cultural beliefs shape the understanding of each individual's Christian faith.

Leading individuals to faith in Jesus Christ is the evangelistic dimension of mission. People come as they are, with their histories and cultures. We cannot expect an instant transformation of their behavior, beliefs, and worldviews. It is important, therefore, to disciple them into Christian maturity. This includes a transformation not only in the way people think and behave but also in their worldviews. (Hiebert 2008, 12)

My work among Iranians in the diaspora, along with personal interaction with Iranian Christian leaders, has raised concerns that emerging Iranian fellowships struggle with internal conflicts which often end in church splits. Concern over disharmony within the Iranian BMB community was raised as a research topic with the end result of desiring to sustain healthy long-term relationships and ministry. Plueddemann wrote, "From my experience, the greatest difficulties in multicultural leadership arise from tensions growing out of internal values". (Plueddemann 2009, 71) Recent research

as a "voice for the voiceless" in Washington, DC, providing political advocacy for the millions of Christians who routinely suffer for their faith.

has focused on conversion theory,⁷ but little, if any research has been committed to understand the dynamics and tensions expressed in the nascent Christian community as Iranians seek to live out the Christian life. Could it be that discipleship of the traditional Western churches does not address the core issues that contribute to the conflicts found within Iranian BMB churches?

The purpose of this paper is to initially investigate, describe and explore the nature of these conflicts and examine the factors that lead to tensions within the nascent Iranian Christian churches. The research question which will be investigated is: What promotes disharmony in Iranian churches or fellowships living in the Diaspora? Cultural characteristics and values found in Iran and Islamic societies make up part of the context into which the new faith is birthed. Power structures, interpersonal communication, trust, and conflict resolution will be areas of cultural context that will be examined. But first, a summary of my methodology will be presented, and then some historical and political background without which Iranian Christianity cannot be understood.

2 Research Methodology

This research paper is qualitative field research based upon up to fifty-one interviews of primarily second wave BMB Iranians. It uses open-ended questions in guided conversations based on key areas that explore the relationships that led up to disharmony and the results of that disharmony. I have applied honor and shame theory, conflict and resolution theory, based cross-cultural research. The purpose for using these theories is based on two factors. First, Iran is not high on the individualism-collectivism scale as Middle Eastern countries (Hofstede 1980). Second, there is little if any knowledge of fieldwork done on post-conversion life in community (Miller 2012). Therefore, I sought to let the BMBs determine the

⁷ For books dealing with conversion see Gaudeul, (1999); Greenlee (2005); Greenlee and Love (2006); Miller (1969); Woodberry (1998), (2005), (2008).

fields and categories they understood as important in explaining the post-conversion experience of life in Christian community.

Thirty-one of the respondents were male and twenty of the respondents were female. The age range was a) 15-25 (4); b) 25-35 (7); c) 35-45 (10); d) 45-65 (29; e) 65+ (1). Forty-two or eighty-two percent came from a Muslim background, while seven or fourteen percent came from a Christian background. The range of those who left Iran is as follows: 1960s (1); 1970s (9); 1980s (17); 1990s (31); 2000s (10). These numbers do not reflect the actual number of people attending Farsi-speaking churches. Since my research was limited to those whose language proficiency was adequate to understand and respond in English, my interviews reflect those who have left Iran and have had enough time to learn English. The years that they have been Christians also reflect this variable.

The purpose of the research is to consider BMB Iranian fellowships and special note was taken when considering Christian Iranian churches that have a majority of Westerners, Armenians, or other Christian background believers. Two Iranian churches that have achieved stability were also considered in the interview process. Interviews were conducted in English. However, several of the interviewees were not comfortable with their competency to adequately understand or respond to the interview in English, so a helper was present in these cases.

Years of being a Christian

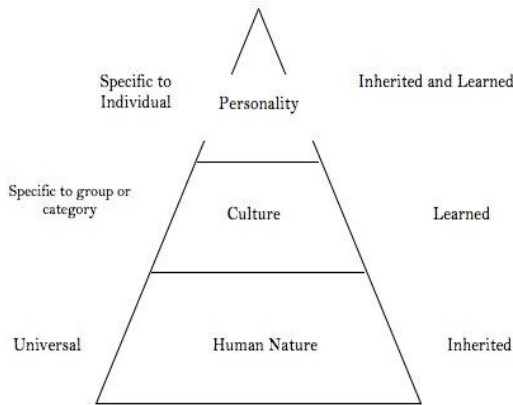


3 Foundations Shaping BMBs

Different cultures have different leadership styles. BMB's have their own cultural heritage, patterns of behavior, and values that are uniquely shaped by their religion, culture, history, language and family. These patterns of behavior, values and cultural way of expressing leadership will often be different from what is found in the

Western church. As BMBs are mentored by Western leaders, they may try to emulate Western cultural patterns of leadership, thinking them to be uniquely Biblical and thus superior. This paper shall clarify cultural patterns to better understand BMBs.

Each individual is a combination of personality, culture and human nature. The person's gifting is based on their personality. Their personality is both inherited and learned. Human nature is



inherited and from a Christian perspective this human nature is fallen or sinful. Culture is specific to a group of people and is learned. The main concern of this paper is the third topic—culture—and how Iranian culture may introduce harmful leadership habits into the lives of Iranian Christian churches.

(Hofstede 1991, 6).

Harris and Morgan define culture as

...a distinctly human capacity for adapting to circumstances and transmitting this coping skill and knowledge to subsequent generations. Culture gives people a sense of who they are, of belonging, of how they should behave, and of what they should be doing. Culture impacts behavior, morale, and productivity at work and includes values and patterns that influence company attitudes and actions (Harris and Moran 1979, 10).

Cultural values influence our options and behavior and how we react to challenges in life. These cultural values are developed early in life and are very resistant to change. Even throughout the pro-

cess of religious conversion the cultural values of the BMB may not change. Religion, education and culture are variables which will help us better understand where the Iranian BMB is coming from and how certain aspects of Iranian culture can influence leadership practices, both positively and negatively, in different diaspora Iranian churches.

4 Human Nature Shaping the BMBs

Human nature is something that is innate and not learned. The Bible has much to say about the state of human nature and what God has done to address man's basic need in transforming that nature and so make a people of God. According to the Biblical worldview, mankind became sinful in his core being, though he was not so created. This is not learned behavior (as much behavioral science proposes) or a lack of knowledge of God's laws (the Islamic perception) but is a stain inherited from the first human, Adam. Societies are made up of individuals who are sinful and therefore cultural values will be shaped by sinful human nature. Roland Muller proposes that sin has three basic influences upon man. The three emotional responses to sin are guilt, shame and fear. Different cultures tend to emphasize one of these responses more than the other two. This shapes their cultural worldviews: guilt-based, shame-based, and fear-based cultures.⁸ The cultural responses that shape a person's worldview are powerful factors that affect all aspects of Christian life, including leadership.

The context in which the individual lives is not neutral. There are three influences that shape the individual: Satan (the enemy of all mankind who is a liar and deceiver John 8:44), self (old sinful nature that plagues all mankind until death - Romans 7), and society (sinful world which seeks to conform everyone to its image - Romans 12). The Christian leader in each culture needs to understand that the Kingdom of God, sooner or later, confronts sins and unjust structures in every human society and culture. In response to Satan

⁸ Roland Muller in chapter one in his book Honor & Shame introduces these three great worldviews. They are further developed in the ensuing chapters.

who is a liar and deceiver God has given his truth in the Holy Scriptures. The more the BMB is shaped by the Bible the better he is to recognize Satan's deceptive schemes (II Timothy 3:16-17). To counter our old sinful nature, God has given us a new self, the Holy Spirit. He enlivens and revives our consciences, which were made unreliable and damaged by Adam's sin; he is the very presence of God who leads and guides us in all truth (John 14:27). God has given us a new community, the Church, to offset the sinful world or community we live in. The Church is a group of people who live out God's truth as examples to follow, a new peer group or an in-group made up of transformed individuals (II Peter 2:1-12); it is the visible manifestation of the invisible Kingdom of God. Should the BMB fail to give proper attention to each of these three areas—the Word of God, listening to the Holy Spirit and submitting to the church—it is doubtful that he will continue in the Christian faith, much less become a mature, fruitful disciple of Messiah.

Discipleship from an evangelical Christian perspective centers on Islamic doctrines that affect the BMB's worldview.⁹ They are: Theology (God); Christology (Christ); Anthropology (man); Soteriology (salvation); Hamartiology (sin); Pneumatology (Holy Spirit); Eschatology (end times); and Bibliology (Biblical revelation). In discipling BMBs, not only do we have to consider the theological issues, we need to consider the deep cultural, social, and religious roots that shape their values.

5 Historical Overview of Religion in Iran

Religion plays an important part in the identity of Iran. Prior to the Islamic invasion in the seventh century A.D., Zoroastrianism was the religion of Persia which has shaped part of the Iranian cultural identity. Historically, the ancient myth of the fifty kings is encapsulated in the Epic of the Kings (*Shahnama*). The site of Persepolis (*Pârsâ*), constructed under Darius, has acquired a sacred character.

⁹ A foundational book on discipleship is Schlorff's *Discipleship in Islamic society*. In it he lays out the key Christian doctrines with which Islam disagrees and then suggests possible ways of discipling.

This site is called Throne of Jamshid (*Takht-e Jamshid*). The fourth king, Jamshid, improved civilization. Forbis quotes from Ferdowsi's *Shahnama*:

With the aid of the royal Farr, he fashioned a marvelous throne, which at his bidding was lifted by demons into the air. He sat upon that throne like the sun in the firmament. To celebrate, that day was called a new day—the festival of Now-Ruz—the first day of the new year (Forbis 1981, 23).

Forbis suggests that the tales of these mythical kings with their heroic deeds and tragic failings, along with the Zoroastrian history of Persepolis, melded in the creative consciousness of the Persian people. An often repeated theme of Iran's heroic tales is vengeance for the unjust death of an Iranian king or warrior.

In attempting to understand the revolution of 1978-79, it helps, I think, to know something of the heritage of heroic mythology that may have been, subconsciously or not, on the minds of those rioters in the streets (Forbis 1981, 22).

The Zoroastrian understanding of vengeance for the unjust death of the Iranian king is one element that shapes the Iranian perception and reaction to injustice.

The newly formed religion of Muhammad exploded into the Persian Empire under the expansionist rightly guided caliph, Umar. Persia and Byzantium were conquered by 652 A.D. At first the Arabs did not press the Persians to become Muslims, but under the heavy hand of the poll tax (*jizyah*) used to subjugate non-Muslims, based upon Qur'anic Surah 9:29, Iranian Persians adopted Islam to escape the poll tax levied on infidels (Forbis 1981, 31). Persian culture and its centers of learning influenced the Islamic Empire into its golden age (750-1258 AD) (Mackey 1996, 41).

Iranians eventually converted to Shi'ism as an integral part of Iranian identity because it spoke to Persian culture and the Iranian experience. Shi'ism, like Sunni Islam, shares common beliefs in the Oneness of God, the prophethood of Muhammad, and the belief in the resurrection. To this Shi'ite belief were added two others during the lifetime of Imam Jaafar Ibn Muhammad (702-765 AD):

1. *Adalah* (justice) meaning that men should strive to fulfill God's will in this world rather than wait for divine justice in the hereafter.
2. *Imamah* (imamate) meaning that the world needs the presence of an infallible guide who represents divine power. (Taheri 2008, 24).

The long standing quarrel between the two major sects of Islam stems from the very beginning of Islam. The familial line of Muhammad felt that the pious and simple life embodied the teaching of Muhammad. They felt that Hussein, the second son of Ali and grandson of Muhammad, stood in opposition to the growing wealth and power of the Islamic elites. Hussein called for social justice and standing against the darkness of evil, represented in the Umayyad dynasty (661-750 A.D.). In 680 Hussein, along with 70 men, stood against the Umayyads at Karbala, south of Baghdad, saying that, "Death is preferable to compromise between right and wrong" (Mackey 1998, 55). The Umayyad army which numbered in the thousands butchered Hussein along with the rest of his companions, severing the heads in a battle known as the "Plain of Sorrow and Misfortune" (Mackey 1998, 55). Shi'ism claims that Muhammad's three immediate caliph successors were usurpers who had come to Islam with hidden agendas to destroy it from within.

From the first century of Islam, the martyrdom of Ali and Hussein held particular meaning for Iranians. With the recesses of their minds and souls, Iranians saw in the Shia martyrs shadows of themselves. For they too were a defeated and humiliated people whose rights and deepest convictions had been trampled (Mackey 1996, 85).

But it was not until 1490 that the young thirteen year old Safavid Shah Ismail converted everyone in Iran to Shi'ah Islam "on pain of death" (Forbis 1981, 34).

In particular, the life and death of Ali, the cousin of Muhammad, profoundly mold Iranian morality, values, and character (Mackey 1998, 53). Karbala stands as a tragic moment when piety sacrificed itself for justice. Every year Shi'ites commemorate the slaughter of Hussein on Ashura, the tenth of Muharram. Iranians and Shi'ites

re-enact the death with knives, barbed chains, and swords, while onlookers participate vicariously by pounding their chests rhythmically. This theme of martyrdom replays itself from one year to the next as professionals (*rowzeh-khans*) give recitals recounting the sufferings of sacred figures in Shi'ism. The Shi'a passion play (*tazieh*) is preformed regularly across Iran, much like the Christmas pageants in the Christian West (Mackey 1998, 106). The life and death of Ali and the slaughter of Hussein on Ashura are part of the metanarrative that has shaped the morality, values, and character of Iranians.

In modern times, religion was relegated to a lesser position during the Pahlavi dynasty (1924-1979), in which Reza Shah implemented modernization along with secularization, which "required religion to be practiced at home" (Spellman 2004, 18). What ensued was an adjustment to a double life of public secularism and private religiosity. The religious scholars (*ulama*) have held an important position in Iranian society since the establishment of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722). The modernization and secularization of the Pahlavi government took much of the power and authority away from the *ulama*, thus severing the alliance between the *ulama* and the rich merchants and traders (*bâzâri*) in the market (*bazaar*) (Spellman 2004, 20). This dismantling of the religious power base led to two important Shia thinkers stepping onto the political stage in the 1960s and 1979. They were a layman, Ali Shariati, and a cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Shariati popularized the idea of returning to Islam as a way of life and establishing an Islamic government. Later, Khomeini developed the doctrine of rule of the jurisprudent (*Velâyat-e Faqih*), which advocates that in the absence of the 'Hidden Imam' (from 'Twelver Shia' belief) it is important to appoint a supreme ruler who has complete knowledge of Islamic law and total justice (Spellman 2004, 21). Religious symbols and ideas, whether martyrdom and sacrifice or referring back to the utopian Golden years of Islam, were used to draw strong communal boundaries and create social insulation. *Velâyat-e faqih* was defended by Ayatollah Beheshti, "In the present system leadership and legislation cannot be left to the majority at any given moment. This

would contradict the ideological character of the Islamic Republic.” (Afshari 2001, 16) The result is, “The regime has codified the primordial societal prejudices into the state’s legal system.” (Afshari 2001, 290) The Islamic regime of Iran has tapped into long-standing prejudice found within Islam that categorizes Self/Other through identifications like *najes*, which define others as emitting ritual and physical impurity. Both the secularization of Iranian society and the manipulation of religious symbols are key factors influencing the worldview of the modern Iranian.

6 History of Post Khomeini Iran

The history of post-Khomeini Iran is an important part of Iranian history. This history is the context which shapes the background of Iranians who make up the church in the diaspora. Understanding this context will inform this research as I seek to uncover sources that further entrench survival behavior into the general populace in Iran. On January 16, 1979, the Shah fled Iran. On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini landed on the tarmac of Mehrabad Airport in Tehran. The twenty-second of Bahman on the Iranian calendar (February 12, 1979) is celebrated as the day the revolution was “victorious”. It is deeply marked in the psyche of Iranians. Ebadi describes that day,

That day, a feeling of pride washed over me that in hindsight makes me laugh. I felt that I too had won, alongside this victorious revolution. It took scarcely a month for me to realize that, in fact, I had willingly and enthusiastically participated in my own demise. I was a woman, and this revolution’s victory demanded my defeat (Ebadi 2007, 38).

The French Islamic scholar Maxime Rodinson was the first to describe the Khomeinist regime as fascist. The acclaimed Iranian journalist Taheri describes twelve characteristics of generic fascism and applies them to the Khomeini regime:

1. Total control. The Khomeini totalitarian form of government seeks to control all aspects of individual and community life. He considers this control to extend to the past as well as the present and the future, accusing the government

of stopping history at points it deems suitable to its own designs.

2. Anti-religious. Though Iranians have an exterior of deep religiosity, Taheri believes in practice Iran is deeply anti-religious. For proof, he sites that more than three hundred mullahs and students of theology have been executed and thousands are in prison, while many others have fled into exile.
3. Superstition. Taheri believes a cult of tradition and old superstitions were introduced, resulting in all sorts of fortunetellers, charm-makers, soothsayers, magicians, and astrologers selling their wares in the market.
4. Rejection of modernity. Concepts of the intrinsic worth of the individual, freedom of conscience, and the rule of law are spurned as “Western” or “Colonial” and are to be resisted on all levels.
5. Personality cult. This is seen in what he describes as “a cult of the chief” in which Khomeini became an iconic figure. This was exemplified with his image being carved into giant rocks. His fatwas remain valid forever, and slogans such as “*Khoda, Koran, Khomeini*” (“God, Koran, Khomeini”) remain war cries of the Hezbollah.
6. Exploitation. There was an exploitation of social and economic grievances. Hatred, envy, jealousy, and suspicion are major themes in the discourse. The dispossessed are told that while they are suffering, others live fantastic lives of luxury. In contrast, Iranians are told that they must not flaunt their wealth.
7. Xenophobia. The “other” is blamed for all the shortcomings and failure. The focus of those to blame in the new regime are women, the United States of America, and Jews.
8. A cult of death. This is seen in a passion for martyrdom. Muslims believe that martyrs instantly go to paradise. Khomeini’s most favored dictum was, “To kill and be killed are the supreme duties of Muslims.” (Taheri 2008, 88) In 1981, a fatwa ordered children to spy on their parents and

report their anti-Islamic activities, while parents were told that their religious duty required them to denounce their offspring if they engaged in anti-regime schemes.

Ashura, which commemorates the slaughter of Imam Hussein, is an important day in the life of Shi'ites everywhere. In Iran, this cult of death is not limited to Ashura. The ninth day of the month of Rabi al-Awwal on the Arab lunar calendar is considered by Shi'ites the "Sweetest Day" for Omar (Umar), the second rightly guided caliph according to Sunni Muslims (634-644 A.D.). He was murdered by an Iranian war prisoner near the central Iranian city of Kashan (Taheri 2008, 28). An article in The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees states,

It is important to note that while the Islamic Republic's propaganda is rooted in death rather than life, it is death itself that is idealised, not the act of killing.

Key dates on the Iranian calendar commemorate the deaths of religious figures centuries ago, and also of people who have died since the 1979 revolution. Reminders of those killed in the eight-year war with Iraq are everywhere.

The general impression all this creates is that death, not life, is the main event – so you'd better make it count.¹⁰

Ebadi's testimony is,

How to begin describing the gradual infusion of martyrdom into our lives? How to convey the slow process by which everything—public space, rituals, resumes, newspapers, television—became dominated by death, mourning, and grief? At the time, it didn't feel alien or excessive, this engorged enthusiasm for martyrdom and the aesthetic of death (Ebadi 2006, 62).

9. Fear and hatred of freedom. Taheri quotes Tabatabai saying that Islam relies on "nothing but monotheism, prophecy, and resurrection. If there is freedom, it is within that circle.

¹⁰ <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4d4a5285c.html> accessed 2 May 2012

If we accept freedom outside that circle we have undermined the foundations of our faith.” (Taheri 2008, 90) The argument advanced by Mernissi is that the real issue is not that democracy is foreign to Islam, rather that it “does not seem to agree with their interests” for there are many foreign things in Muslim societies that are fully accepted (Mernissi 2007, 52). The charge modernists such as Mernissi level against some Muslim regimes is that they

find their interests better protected if they base their legitimacy on cultural and symbolic grounds other than on democratic principles. The sacred, the past, ancestor worship seem to be the chosen grounds in most cases. This category groups together regimes as different as the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Iranian regime of Iman Khomeini or his caliph (successor), the military regime of Zia al-Haq in Pakistan, and the Sudanese regime that terrorizes its people in the name of the shari’a. (Mernissi 2007, 54)

10. A love of uniforms. Uniforms came in many ways, depending on the group. For the mullahs, it is their turbans. *Ansar Hezbollah* (Friends of the Party of Allah) wore battle fatigues, and the Palestinian checkered *kufiyah* around their necks terrorized their opponents. Women were made to wear the *hijab*. Men were to wear beards.
11. A cult of war. The war is against “World Ignorance” and its aim is to defeat the Americans, liberate Palestine, and wipe Israel off the map. The result was that over one million people, the vast majority of them Iranians, have been killed. Since 1979, there has been a low-intensity war against Baluch and Kurdish rebels. In the 1990s, intellectuals, along with spiritual leaders of Sunni Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Baha’is, were murdered by official death squads and thrown by the roadside. Taheri goes so far as to suggest that terrorism is in the DNA of the country and the Khomeini experiment has exploited this terrorism (Taheri 2008, 96).

12. Rejection of the normal language of society. An attempt was made to make the Persian language closer to Arabic. The largest Iranian government department is the Ministry of Islamic Guidance and Culture in charge of censorship. Every imaginable writer and poet of importance in any language is either totally banned or heavily censored in the Islamic Republic. Even classics of Persian literature are “edited” to remove ideas that might undermine the regime (TaHERi 2008, 79-105).

The fascist regime instituted by Khomeini and its legacy have shaped the version of Islam found within Iran and also has resonated with the Shi'ite traditions. These factors give us the immediate background shaping the culture values of Iranians found in the diaspora.

7 History of the Iranian Diaspora in the West

A review of the history of Iranian emigration to the West places the Iranians in their historical setting; it informs us of the circumstances of the emigration and the creation of the Iranian Diaspora. Research to date recognizes two waves of Iranians migrating to the United States. The first phase of Iranian migration was from 1950-1977, consisting of mostly students and visitors. Behjati-Sabet and Chambers indicate that before 1979 only a small number of Iranians, mostly professionals and business people, who migrated to the West for higher education remained in these countries (Behjati-Sabet and Chambers 2005, 130). The second phase was from 1978-1995, and is largely made up of refugees or exiles of the post-Iranian revolution (Bozorgmehr 1998, 6-8). The major exodus from Iran took place after the Islamic fundamentalist government took over after 1979.

By the 1990s about 5,000 immigrants from Iran were arriving in Canada annually. In addition, by 2000 about 1,500 Iranian refugees a year were also coming making Iran the fourth - or fifth - largest source of refugees to Canada. Today most adult Iranians in Canada are first-generation immigrants who share many of the beliefs, values, and char-

acteristics of their compatriots in Iran (Behjati-Sabet and Chambers 2005, 128).

The new refugees at the time of the writing were not numerous enough to constitute a third wave (Bozorgmehr 1998, 6). However, the economic and human rights situation in Iran continues to deteriorate, fueling a steady exodus of Iranians. A significant date within recent Iranian history is post- Khatami 1999. Muhammad Khatami was Iran's first reformist president, from 1997-2005, who brought high expectations to Iran for political change. July 1999 marked a change in policy with the student riots. It became apparent that the greatly anticipated reforms were not to be, for a significant increase of "human rights violations took place after Khatami became president." (Afshari, 2001, 31)

Taheri notes that Khomeinism "has driven more than five million Iranians into exile and has turned a further four million into displaced persons inside the country. Khomeinism has provoked what the World Bank calls 'the biggest brain drain in history.'" (Taheri 2008, 293)

The countries of destination are: the U.S.A., Canada, West Germany, Sweden, Great Britain, France, Norway, Australia, Israel, and Japan (Bozorgmehr 1998, 5). The largest Iranian community is found in the United States, with 285,000 in the 1990 U.S. census - 45 percent of the ten countries of destination. The vast majority of U.S. Iranians are located in California, with the highest concentration found in the greater Los Angeles area. McIntosh reports that the actual number of Iranian-Americans may top 691,000¹¹, more than twice as many as indicated in the 2000 U.S. census. Other estimates list the top ten countries of the Iranian diaspora as: 1) United States (1,560,000); 2) Turkey (800,000); 3) United Arab Emirates

¹¹ Based on Ali Mostashari's work at the Iranian Studies Group, an independent academic organization at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) see <http://isgmit.org/>. The ISG arrived at its population estimate by conducting a computer analysis of U.S. white page telephone directories, then multiplying that total by 2.83, the average number of individuals per Iranian-American household as reported in the 2000 census.

& Bahrain (560,000); 4) Iraq (250,000); 5) Germany (110,000); 6) Central & South America & Other Parts of the World (100,000); 7) United Kingdom (80,000); 8) Canada (75,000); 9) France (62,000); 10) Australia (60,000).¹²

Behjati-Sabet and Chambers further explain that Iranians, who migrated in the 1980s, did so under unbearable living conditions, religious and political persecution, against their will, and under tremendous pressure. These conditions typically make the process of adjustment and integration slow. However, the majority of Iranians residing in Canada came from large urban areas and belong to upper and middle-class families who are relatively familiar with Western education and values (Behjati-Sabet and Chambers 2005, 128). Many Iranians in the United States came for social, political or religious reasons; therefore, they are unlike many immigrants in search of economic opportunities. These Iranians did not isolate themselves and have excelled in business and education.

Contrary to theory of exiles, which identifies exiles from lower educational and occupational backgrounds, “Iranian exiles are among the elite compared to other recent refugees” (Bozorgmehr 1998, 17). Iranians tend to be relatively economically well-adjusted and preoccupied with their homeland, as exemplified with their media production that is beamed into Iran, as opposed to ethnic groups that import media programming from the country of origin. This same preoccupation is also found within the churches that produce programming destined for Iran.

The ethnic diversity of Iranians has caused sociological researchers to coin a new term, “*internal ethnicity*” (Bozorgmehr 1998, 17), which is the diversity of Iranians which includes Muslims, Armenians, Assyrians, Bahais, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Research has noted that “Armenian, Bahai, Jewish, and Muslim Iranians in Los Angeles associate with their Iranian co-religionists more than they do with other Iranians” (Bozorgmehr 1998, 18).

¹² The Persian Diaspora of Worldwide Persian Outreach found at <http://www.farsinet.com/pwo/diaspora.html>.

Bozorgmehr's research reveals that business characteristics of Iranians do not conform to the norm in immigration literature. In contrast to other new refugees or exiles, such as the Koreans who are mostly immigrant entrepreneurs, Iranians consist mostly of entrepreneurs and professionals (Bozorgmehr 1998, 19). They are more likely to hire Iranian co-religionist partners/co-owners or relatives. Their preferences for hiring are: "reliance on family members, previous business ties (often forged in Iran), trust of each other, and conversely mistrust of outsiders" (Bozorgmehr 1998, 20). In other words, Iranian entrepreneurs are not dependent upon their ethnic community for success.

Assimilation does not seem to be a major area of concern. Iranians are less segregated from native whites than the Koreans, though at the same time Iranians do not readily assimilate (Bozorgmehr 1998, 23). However, organizationally there is a significant difference. The Korean community has more than 150 active alumni associations in Los Angeles, whereas Iranians have few alumni associations, which are mostly dormant. A significant note for voluntary church organizations is, "that Iranians had very little, if any, experience of participation in voluntary organizations in Iran, which could be carried over to the United States" (Min and Bozorgmehr 2000, 720).

The 1.5 generation of Iranians has raised concern in the area of assimilation.

The problem mostly concerned around these students' lack of respect for rules and regulations of the school. Iranians resisted the implicit educational mission of the school, i.e., to inculcate a commitment to American culture, and maintained steadfastly their affiliation with Iran. They devised various modes of resistance to overcome what they perceived as the school's preoccupation with rules and regulations. The teachers, in turn, perceived these actions as bypassing the rules. (Bozorgmehr 1998, 25)

More than one in four Iranian-Americans holds a master's or doctoral degree, the highest rate among 67 ethnic groups studied (McIntosh, 2004). Iranians are a very class-conscious people, so socioeconomic class distinctions are important in the identity of

Iranians, both in Iran and in the diaspora. In Canada, for instance, “The majority of Iranians [...] belong to the more modern, educated, and affluent urban classes. A smaller group who arrived later, mainly in the 1990s, are from working-class, sometimes rural, backgrounds” (Behjati-Sabet and Chambers 2005, 133). The differences found between the modern and educated Iranians and the working-class rural Iranians in the diaspora is substantial. My interviews have revealed that later arrivals who have not known pre-Khomeini Iran but survived in the continuing deterioration of post-Khomeini Iran are significantly different. Interactions between the two groups are strained.

8 Characteristics of Iranians in the Western Diaspora

There is a growing body of literature on the Iranian community in the diaspora. This literature informs this research topic by documenting characteristics found in the medical and mental health field which is foundational to understanding sources of disharmony within the Iranian Christian community. Iranian exiles or refugees suffer from drastic downward occupational mobility, but they were less likely to be dissatisfied with their current jobs and incomes than immigrants (Bozorgmehr 1998, 17). Besides the trying social and economic adjustments immigrants face, exiles face cultural and psychological problems. Good, Good, and Moradi in their study of depression make the following statement: “Dysphoria—sadness, grief, despair—is central to the Iranian ethos, an emotion charged with symbolic meaning” (1985, 384). They see this in poetry, preaching and secular literature; both classical poetry and modern novels are filled with melancholy and despair.

Iran has suffered for centuries at the hands of unjust and venal rulers they have no power to resist. This pain and grief are part of the Iranian identity rooted in a sense of communal pain.

Perhaps this is why Iranian culture bears a palpable if not quite definable burden of grief. It is as if the precarious social-political milieu in which Iranians have so often lived has preconditioned them to always perceive the negative, the sad, and the tragic. This weariness of misfortune is clearly voiced as a common theme in Persian poetry, which of-

ten speaks of the futility of all human desires in the face of inevitable death...Together Ashura, the *rowzeh-khans*, and the *tazieh* draw forth emotions never far below the surface. These feelings of pain and suffering Iranians hold within themselves are collective as well as personal. For as the individual has suffered, so has the nation (Mackey 1998, 105-106).

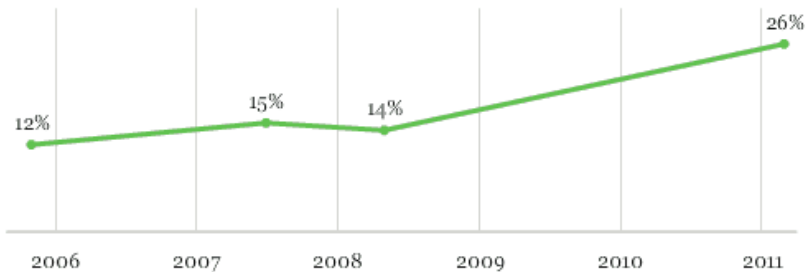
Nearly all Iranians share in the emotions of despair and the tragic, as represented in secular literature, poetry and the arts.

These secular literary works treat cultural themes prominent in the discourse of Iranian patients—pathological grief, feelings of entrapment in repressive social relations, the desire to maintain self-integrity unsullied by demeaning social conditions, and despair at the awareness of the disjunction of the idealized inner self and outward social actions. These issues have special poignance for Iranian immigrants (Good, Good, and Moradi 1985, 390).

Their study reveals that sadness, sensitivity and mistrust are a distinctively Iranian depressive syndrome (ibid, 420). This propensity to suffering may help explain the results of the study done by Kousha and Mohseni on the happiness of Iranians. “This study showed that at the macro level, Iranians (who live in a large city such as Tehran) are not a very happy people” (Kousha and Mohseni 2000, 286). The study further indicates that attitudinal variables,

Percentage "Suffering" in Iran

Among those aged 15 and older



"Suffering" means respondents rate their current and future lives 4 or lower on a scale from 0 to 10.

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such as satisfaction with marriage, give only a partial picture. “For Iranians, this measurement is even lower. Demographic variables (such as gender, age, and even class over which individuals have no control) do not have much effect on one’s happiness” (Kousha and Mohseni 2000, 287). A Gallup poll indicates that “Suffering in Iran has nearly doubled, up from 14% in 2008 to 26% in 2011” (Clifton 2/24/2012).¹³

A sense of the tragic in life is associated with depth of the inner self, as opposed to shallowness of the outer self. One who expresses happiness too readily is often considered to be a simple (*sâdeh*) or socially incompetent person. Indeed, the ability to express sadness appropriately and in a culturally proscribed manner is a mark of social competence as well as personal depth (Good, Good, and Moradi 1985, 385).

The Khomeinist regime expects Iranians to wear black on no fewer than sixty days each year. Fereidun Tonkaboni describes the Iranian culture as, “an inhuman culture, a culture of sadness and mourning, a culture of death and nihilism. This is a culture that forbids happiness and joy...The only thing not forbidden in the Islamic Republic is death and shedding tears at funerals for the dead” (Taheri 2008, 89).

This evidence supports the conclusion that mental health plays an important role in how Iranians interact within the Christian community. The negative and depressed state will shape how a person interacts with others.¹⁴ Interviewees have shared that what attracted them to Christianity was the happiness of Christian worship, the love they saw among each other and the positive messages of the church.

¹³ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/149756/suffering-iran-nearly-doubles.aspx>

¹⁴ Indeed, the sadness, grief, and despair which are prevalent among Iranians may be an indication that a ministry of inner healing needs to be part of the discipleship process.

9 The Emotional Component¹⁵

The emotional component includes variables in shame/honor, the exploration of normative responses of denial, cover-ups, and shifting blame which may help to explain the dynamics of conflict found within the Iranian Church in the diaspora. Other components will probe trust and fear, which includes boundaries, view of “others,” and failure.

9.1 High Power Distance

Iranians come from a society that is highly relational. They come from a tight social framework in which people distinguish between in-groups and out-groups. Hofstede defines collectivism as “societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede 1991, 51). The greatest insult is to go against the lifelong loyalty to the in-group. The extended family secures protection against hardships in life and a practical and psychological dependency develops that is hard to break. Large power distance countries¹⁶ tend to be more collectivist.

Iran scores high on this dimension (score of 58) which means that people accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. Hierarchy in an organization is seen as reflecting inherent inequalities, centralization is popular, subordinates expect to be told what to do and the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat.¹⁷

¹⁵ This paper is based on an ongoing research for my PhD. I deal only in part with the emotional component in this article but will deal more extensively with interpersonal, family, power and religious/theological components in the dissertation.

¹⁶ Power distance is a dimension that relates to the degree of equality/inequality between people in a particular society.

¹⁷ <http://geert-hofstede.com/iran.html> (accessed 1:15 May 2, 2012)

Hofstede states,

In cultures in which people are dependent on ingroups these people are usually also dependent on power figures. Most extended families have patriarchal structures with the head of the family exercising strong moral authority. In cultures in which people are relatively independent from ingroups these people are usually also less dependent on powerful others (Hofstede, 1991, 55).

Hierarchy of a high power distant culture shapes the perceived roles within the organization of the Persian church. Iranian power structures tend to be authoritarian; however Iranians are most interested in reducing the power distance and increasing the future orientation aspects of the societal culture (Dastmalchian, Javidan, and Alam 2001, 548). Though the church may take the structure of the dominant low power distant Western church with a board of elders with equal authority, old patterns may often surface. My interviews with pastors and lay leaders of the Farsi-speaking church indicate that form and functionality often did not match. Pastors who desire to share power with the elders often found that the elders didn't understand fully the role they were to play. The elders took a passive role on the elder board consenting to anything the pastor proposed. On the other side, elders wanting to share in the decision-making process of the church often found that the pastor was the sole authority, never sharing power with the elders. This misunderstanding of power sharing may be explained in that there is no collective memory of how an egalitarian rule functions. This misunderstanding on both sides concerning the decision process of the church is another element leading to disharmony within the Iranian church in the diaspora.¹⁸

9.2 Shame and Morality

Shame is a cultural value that deeply shapes Iranians: it may give insight into some of the common reactions indicated in interviews concerning personal interaction of Iranians in the Farsi-speaking

¹⁸ Discipleship from pastors and church leaders of the host culture may need to take a proactive role when partnering with an Iranian church plant.

church in the diaspora. Benedict points out that, “there are two broadly different kinds of cultures throughout the world, shame cultures and guilt cultures” (Pattison 2000, 54). Shame cultures are structured around shame, honor and esteem. They promote social conformity by external sanctions for good behavior. “The emphasis is upon appearance and conformity in response to an external social view” (Pattison 2000, 54). Offenses are perceived as against social mores and punishable through public shame, ostracization and rejection by their social reference group. Pattison contrasts guilt cultures as those where the individual has an internalized sense of wrongdoing and a sense of conscience. Punishment is forensic and not dependent upon the loss of honor or of global stigmatization of the person.

Pattison makes a distinction between acute, reactive shame which is temporary and limited in its effects which are by no means all negative, and chronic shame that is extended in time and influence. Chronic shame, “can cast a permanent shadow over a person’s life, character, and personality” (Pattison 2000, 83). Most of the body of literature on chronic shame and its clinical importance is written by Americans (ibid, 95). However his conclusion is, “Any experiences that induce a sense of persistent inferiority, worthlessness, abandonment, weakness, abjection, unwantedness, violation, defilement, stigmatization, unlovability and social exclusion are likely to be generative of chronic shame” (ibid, 108). He goes on to say, “Perhaps the lowest common denominator in all the factors outlined here is the experience of human individuals being dishonoured, disrespected or objectified” (ibid).

Reactions to chronic shame are:

1. Withdrawal. Pattison suggests that withdrawal can be literal and physical and /or psychological and internal. The defense mechanism is withdrawal to safety. The withdrawal response is often accompanied by distress and fear which is interpreted as depression. My interviews reveal this propensity of withdrawal in conflict or perceived conflict.
2. Attack self. “The person constantly seeks to be in the position of suffering victim; you are never powerless, alone and

abandoned so long as you are a victim, the unconscious script runs” (ibid, 112). Pattison suggests the means used to attack self include self-ridicule, putting oneself down all the time, and being perpetually angry with oneself. Should this reaction be found within the church, the person needs to give up the inner hostility or shame-related feelings of abandonment, powerlessness, unlovability or emptiness may result.

3. Avoidance. Strategies of avoidance can include self-aggrandizement and seeking perfection. This may in part be reflected in the high achievement both in business and education found within the Iranian community, particularly in North America. Self deception is another strategy. “These are...people whose very identity is a lie, who live with a sense of self so false that they may be seen as imposters” (ibid, 113). Other strategies are flight, often into addictive substances, and caring for others from which they get their self-worth. Tension between the pastor’s identity and their personal life which does not match reality may be a factor of disharmony found within the church.
4. Attack others. The strategy is directing rage onto a scapegoat, projecting self-contempt on others, or blaming others is a way of avoiding, confronting, and owning shame in the unsatisfactory self. Strong negative feelings towards authority figures such as the pastor will result (ibid, 116). He concludes by saying,

This selective account of some of the ways in which people react to shame shows just how pervasive and varied are the implications of this condition. From laughter to despair, from hiding to grandiosity, shame has enormous implications for the way in which people think about themselves and others. It also affects their behavior. One must beware of associating all the woes and defensive reactions of humans everywhere with chronic shame (ibid, 119).

Shame is often associated with morality. Chronic shame may create a strong reaction to other people’s opinions and may cause

the individual to be supersensitive about the effect of other people's attitudes and actions upon themselves (ibid, 124). He indicates that a general problem for shame-prone people is that they may radically over- or underestimate their place in relationships and events. "A person may be as mortified over a small or trivial offence as they are over a major offence" (ibid 128). In the moral dimension Pattison believes shame is a more primitive, a-social condition than guilt. He even states that, "Chronically shamed people are pre-social and pre-moral" (ibid, 124). The majority of Iranians I interviewed remarked that "Iranians are sensitive". This sensitivity expressed itself in "dramas" over seemingly everything. Iranians can get offended if they believe that someone didn't greet them in a proper way. A glance, a raised eyebrow, or the intonation of the voice all become major signals of communication that can be easily misread. Even expressions in Farsi reflect shame and not wanting to offend others. If you are in the backseat of the car you will hear, "excuse me that my back is to you." This sensitivity extends to the church where Iranians must be attentive to the situation – is this a casual setting or a formal setting? Will they judge me or accept me? As one person put it, "There is always a risk of someone being offended or judging you. So you're always walking on eggshells". Chronic shame theory seems to give meaning to the hypersensitivity over perceived offenses that were often overlooked in Western churches.

9.3 Discipleship and Shame

Pattison suggests that shame needs to be superseded by guilt if people are to live together in a way that enhances mutual life and well-being. "What is required for society to be more moral, in the sense of being more respectful and other-regarding, is more guilt and less shame." (ibid, 129) He goes on to suggest that self-preoccupying chronic shame might be minimized so that other-regarding guilt might have a more prominent place (ibid, 129). Discipleship within a chronic shame based culture may need to introduce the concept of guilt within a redemptive, Christian worldview. One place to begin is the recognition of the "other", allowing individuals to be part of society and respected. Islam has systemically

and foundationally inscribed into the primary documentation of their religion by defining the “other” with isolation, humiliation and even death. Stigmatized groups are Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans, who ultimately have been defined as infidels (*kafir*) to be subjugated through the poll tax (*jizyah*) or to be killed.

9.4 Fear and Distrust

Among Iranians a culture of fear and distrust is endemic. Bar-Tal identifies two types of fear reaction: results of cues, which directly imply threat and danger, and conditional stimuli that are non-threatening in their nature (Bal-Tal 2001, 603). Fear is stored in memory and dominates and controls thinking and prolonged experience of fear causes overestimation of dangers and threats. His research reveals a tendency “to cause adherence to known situations and avoidance of risk, uncertainty, and novel situations; it tends to cause cognitive freezing, which prevents openness to new ideas.” (ibid, 604) He also suggests that societies may develop collective emotional orientations. Intractable conflict tends to dominate the collective fear orientation, and thus becomes embedded into the collective memory over time. Fear often becomes contagious.

Oversensitized by fear, a society tends to misinterpret cues and information as signs of threat and danger, searching for the smallest indication in this direction, even in situations that signal good intentions. The fear also leads to great mistrust and delegitimization of the adversary because of its harmful acts and threats. (ibid, 609)

The culture of fear and distrust appears to be an underlying reason for the disharmony and conflict so prevalent in Iranian fellowships. Cultural anthropologist Patai states that discord in the Arab world has always been present since pre-Islamic days. At the slightest provocation, violent verbal abuse and threats erupt, which easily degenerate into physical violence.

The situation is complicated by the fact that “unity” is merely a very abstract and remote ideal, while strife has its historical antecedent and underpinning in the age-old Arab virtues of manliness, aggressiveness, bravery, heroism, courage, and vengeance, which have been extolled by poets for more than thirteen centuries and survive in the Arab’s con-

sciousness, predisposing him to conflict even though he believes in Arab unity and brotherhood (Patai 2007, 239).

Donna Hicks explains one of the dimensions to protracted ethnic conflicts in quoting Herbert Kelman:

Threats to identity create a zero-sum view of the conflict, where one's very existence seems inextricably linked to the negation of the other. An acknowledgment of the identity of the other is perceived as an act of self-destruction, as recognizing the experiences of the other fundamentally brings into question one's own interpretation of history, the conflict, and of the responsibility one holds for the past, present, and future shared realities (Hicks 2001, 129).

Donna Hicks has noted that tolerance to uncertainty and ambivalence is a way of measuring egocentrism. "The more one steadfastly holds onto beliefs, especially when there may be disconfirming evidence, the more egocentric (embedded in one's own perspective) is one's understanding of the world." (ibid, 135) Added to the equation is that Iran ranks on the lower range in the GLOBE sample for assertiveness. "That is, Iranians are less confrontational and aggressive in social relationships." (Dastmalchian, Javidan, and Alam 2001, 540) When someone suffers from a history of traumatic threats, an overload to the senses takes place. Hicks believes that the assimilation/accommodation process shuts down in an effort to stabilize core beliefs. The process causes the beliefs to become, 'rigid and extremely resistant to change, complexity is lost, certainty of our assessment of what is "right" rises, and the feeling of ambivalence about what we "know" is lost.' (Hicks 2001, 137) She describes the defense mechanism of self-preserving/other-annihilating as being revenge and violence threatening the other. The survival mechanism under perceived threats of trauma and humiliation are: (a) closing down of the learning process; (b) certainty about one's beliefs solidifies and becomes rigid; (c) the need to place blame or deflection of responsibility; (d) breakdown in social interaction through retreat; (e) breakdown in trust; and (f) reaction of revenge as a survival mechanism. (ibid, 137-141)

Leaders with the Iranian community are held in high regard. Iranians are known to ascribe devotion to people in authority. Ebadi describes to what extent Iranians have a cult of leaders.

Unfortunately, Iranians are at heart hero worshippers....they cling to the notion that one lofty, iconic figure can sweep through their lives, slay their enemies, and turn their world around. Perhaps other cultures also believe in heroes, but Iranians do so with a unique devotion. Not only do they fall in love with heroes, but they are in love with their love for them (Ebadi 2007, 147).

Patron-client relationships and power structures of fellowships are another dimension. The Islamic view of power is often viewed as guardian leader (Beekun and Badawi 1999, 2). King recognizes that most of the literature on patron-client social structures emanates from within the Middle East. "Iran is clientelistic and is composed of many autonomous parallel groups formed in patron-client bounds". (Alamdari 2005, 1298) Clerics function as glorified social welfare agents who gather money and dispense it. This gives the cleric independent power (Mackey 1996, 118).

Despite the hierarchical nature of Iran it is difficult to determine where a leader leads and the follower follows.

Lay men look to their leader for guidance and pattern their behavior accordingly. At the same time, the cleric from his position of authority seeks to understand the will of his followers and then to shape his policies to reflect that will. As a result, religious leadership, unlike kingship, is circular rather than vertical. The leader both leads and follows and the followers both follow and lead (ibid, 118).

Even in the diaspora, new patron-client relationships are sought to replace the old ones. "Hope is a key component of patronage and clientage." (King 2005, 321) Patron-client relationships influence normative ideas about migration and resettlement processes (ibid, 324). It is possible that this repositioning influences relationships in the church.

Church structure is also an area of concern. Tracing how the new community shapes its structures of power to its own ideas and interest is important to understand (Geller 2008, 2). Geller sug-

gests a type of neo-patrimonialism may develop in which the leader (in this case the Iranian pastor) assumes power through patrimonial power. He suggests that this power is based on “authority, suppressed subjects and paid military organizations, by virtue of which the extent of a ruler’s arbitrary power, as well as grace and mercy increases.” (ibid, 2)

There is a strong emotional dimension in hierarchical societies. People either adore or despise the leader with equal intensity. Hofstede states that countries with higher power distance have more domestic political violence (politically-inspired riots) than lower power distance countries; and that large power distance countries are characterized by strong right and left wings with a weak center, which he calls a reflection of the polarization between dependence and counter-dependence (Hofstede 1991, 38). The center position (which is considered the ideal in Western societies) is seen as a position of weakness. There will be a power struggle of opinions and the pattern of leadership that can quickly develop reverts to old patterns of overpowering the others to keep strong opinions in check. Iran scores 59 in uncertainty avoidance, meaning they like to maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are intolerant of unorthodox behavior and ideas.¹⁹ Many Iranians are reluctant to compromise or to recognize the validity of others’ points of view and instead tried hard to convert others to their opinion. It is often difficult for an Iranian, especially a man, to admit that he may be wrong (Behjati-Sabet and Chambers 2005, 135).

A significant note for voluntary church organizations is “that Iranians had very little, if any, experience of participation in voluntary organizations in Iran, which could be carried over to the United States.” (Min and Bozorgmehr 2000, 720)

Compared to other new immigrant groups, Iranians have very few ethnic associations or organizations. The main explanation for this pattern is cultural. Voluntary associations were uncommon in Iran, and as such Iranians do not have the requisite experience to establish them.

¹⁹ <http://geert-hofstede.com/iran.html> (accessed 1:15 5/2/12)

Even when they are formed, many of these associations fail in their infancy (Bozorgmehr 1998, 24).

Ebadi affirms this inclination of Iranian organizations failing. “As has been the tendency of organized Iranian political groups from the beginning of time, is to splinter, and then its splinters splintered.” (Ebadi 2007, 155) This was the experience of the political groups in July 1999, after then President Khatami’s government cracked down on any voice in opposition or critical of the government. No one could agree anymore on tactics, let alone strategy. Iran ranks 20th from the lowest in the GLOBE sample, indicating that planning, investing, and future oriented behaviors are not highly emphasized (Dastmalchian, Javidan, and Alam 2001, 541). In 1953 Donald Wilber wrote, “Given the recognized incapacity of Iranians to plan or act in a thoroughly logical manner, we would never expect such a plan to be executed in the local atmosphere in a Western staff operation.” (Taheri 2008, 178) The first years of the Iranian Revolution from 1979–1981 were dominated by power struggles. “Many of the groups went through radical changes and schisms as they defined and redefined their range of political and ideological views, particularly their position on the future of Islamic leadership.” (Spellman 2004, 24) The way the hardline clergy secured their power base was by eliminating the opposition forces. Schisms followed them into the diaspora: “The political divisions that existed between the leftist groups have continued in exile and there have been many schisms within the parties.” (Spellman 2004:29) Yet Iranians seek to change these cultural traits. The top of the list of “should be” cultural traits is a desire to transform their two weakest orientations. “In terms of the desires to change the culture, the data showed that Iranians are most interested in reducing the power distance and increasing the future orientation aspects of the societal culture.” (Dastmalchian, Javidan, and Alam 2001, 548). This too has followed Iran into the diaspora.

My interviews with Iranians indicate that when they find new life in Christ, the culture of fear and distrust is not easily shed. All too often the certainty about one’s beliefs solidifies and becomes rigid. This is often exemplified by pastors or people in authority who

blame others when problems arise. When members ask questions beyond the scope and understanding of the pastor or teacher, the assimilation and accommodation process shuts down in an effort to stabilize core beliefs. This rigidity reflects a defense mechanism in light of perceived threats of trauma and humiliation.

10 Conclusion

We discovered that self-centered shame and its dominance in the collective mind of Iranians (and some other BMBs) help to explain the inability to differentiate between a minor offense to be overlooked or a major offense that needs to be addressed. Introducing other-centered guilt as an element of the discipleship process is more easily said than done. Fear stored in the memory dominates and controls thinking. Deeply embedded cultural distrust can explain the process of self-preserving and other-annihilating behavior as a survival mechanism under perceived threats of trauma and humiliation. Discipleship will have to address fears, real or perceived, and help the Iranian Christians work through the emotional element of distrust so they do not become rigid and extremely resistant to change, losing complexity, becoming entrenched in what is 'right', and avoiding humiliation. Structures, though they may have the correct form, may not reflect the operational paradigm dominant within their culture. Discipleship will need to understand and evaluate functional paradigms of power and help the nascent community grow in responsibility and participation. None of these core cultural values will change immediately. Patience, love, wisdom and a long-term commitment to see maturity through the discipleship process is what is needed.

The purpose of this article has been to investigate aspects of Iranian culture and worldview that influence relations within the Iranian churches. Specifically I have tried to identify some key areas of concern in relation to the category of emotion that I believe are sources of tension and strife within the churches. Therefore, any adequate discipleship program offered to/by Iranian Christians must in some form address these issues. All cultures have experienced the corrupting influence of sin in different manners; this is

true for Iranians. The Church, equipped with the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and wisdom accrued through centuries of witness and worship, has the resources to see salvation come not only to Iranians, but to Iranian culture as a whole.

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