

AREA HANDBOOK
for
IRAN

Co-Authors

Harvey H. Smith

William W. Cover

John B. Folan

Michael L. Meissenburg

Julius Szentadorjany

Suzanne Teleki

Research and writing were completed on

June 23, 1970

Published 1971

(This pamphlet supersedes DA Pam No. 550-68, May 1963)

DA PAM No. 550-68



Influenced by Christianity and pre-Islamic mystery religions, their mystic love of God sought outlet in religious fervor. Some became so preoccupied with the contemplation of divine perfection that they sought ecstatic trances, eventually by prescribed phases, as a means of identifying with God. Mystic poetry and music were developed to a high degree as aids in achieving this selfless state. As a result, Sufi poets were among the greatest contributors to Iranian art (see ch. 10, Artistic and Intellectual Expression).

A number of Sufi brotherhoods were established during the early centuries of Islam, many of which continue to exist. In the late 1960s one Kurdish sect had members in nine Middle Eastern countries. One of the brotherhoods, which came into being in the thirteenth century, was that of the whirling dervishes (from the Iranian word meaning "poor"), mendicant ecstasies known for their gyrating dances performed while in a trance, a condition heightened by the gyrations. Dervishes and other Sufi orders maintain loose organizations and hold private meetings at which the traditional ritual chanting of Sufi poetry and invocations are carried on.

Modern-day Sufis are not all beggars or poor. Many important public figures belong to one of the brotherhoods. They tend to live sober, modest lives with a more than average regard for the precepts of Islam.

The Bahai movement had its origin in the eighteenth-century heretical beliefs of the followers of Shaykh Ahmed Ahsai, who taught that the hidden *imam* was a creative force with which contact could be made through a human intermediary, the Bab (Door). In 1840 Mirza Ali Muhammad of Shiraz proclaimed himself to be the Bab and gained the following of many tribal leaders. The Babi movement grew rapidly and assumed the character of a militant new faith at considerable variance with Shiism. The Babis interpreted the Koran as largely allegorical and represented the resurrection as a manifestation of divine spirit. Claiming to be Muslim nevertheless, they taught that all religions have elements of truth, peace, brotherhood, and tolerance. The heretics were severely persecuted by the Shiite leaders, and many were put to death, including Mirza Ali Muhammad.

A number of the Babis escaped, however, and followed Hussein Ali Baha Ollah, a disciple of Mirza Ali Muhammad, who declared himself the expected manifestation of the divine spirit, the Messiah of all religions, and the promulgator of a new era. The followers of Baha Ollah, known as the Bahais, were pacifists (unlike the Babis) and preached respect for the law. They advocated universal brotherhood of man and legal equality between men and women. The Bahai movement has spread throughout the world;

they have small groups active in Western Europe and the United States and claim a world membership of 500,000. The Bahais have been severely condemned by the Shiite clergy; the Bahai religion, while not under active suppression, is not legally recognized in Iran.

Religious Minorities

The official recognized minority religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Each of these groups is permitted to sustain an organization, to elect a representative to the Majlis, to maintain religious schools, and to publish periodicals. They are, however, restricted in their political activities since non-Muslims cannot occupy command positions in the armed forces and cannot achieve policymaking positions in the government (see ch. 5, Ethnic Groups and Languages; ch. 13, The Governmental System).

In mid-1970 there were about 67,000 Jews in Iran, living mainly in Tehran, Isfaha, Kashan (120 miles south of Tehran), Hamadan, and Shiraz. In addition, since 1948 some 45,000 have migrated to Israel. Iranian Jews form one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world, and through over 1,000 years of living among the Iranians, have become physically and spiritually very close to the majority population. They have preserved, however, a rather conservative, closed religious life. They are fully protected by the Constitution.

In the twentieth century the Jewish population has achieved importance in the commercial life of the major cities, particularly Tehran, and have entered the professions, most notably pharmacy, medicine, and dentistry. They have their own hospitals and academic and technical schools and are the only ethnic group that is considered 100 percent literate. The Jewish shrine to Esther and Mordecai is at Hamadan; the tomb of Daniel is supposed to be located near Ahvaz.

Native Christians are limited almost entirely to the Semitic Assyrians, numbering about 25,000, who live around Lake Rezaieyh and in Tehran, and to the Armenians, the oldest and largest ethnic minority, totaling over 190,000, living mainly in Tehran and Isfahan. Most Assyrians belong to the Assyrian Church of the East, formerly and mistakenly called the Nestorian Church, but as a result of the Western missionary work of the twentieth century, four distinct denominations also exist, including Roman Catholic and Protestant groups. Most Armenians belong to the Gregorian Church under the Catholicos of Cilicia at Beirut in Lebanon. This has led to a political split in the Armenian community as many Armenians continue to recognize the leadership of the Catholicos of Echmiadzin at Yerevan in Soviet Armenia, who claims to represent the entire community.