CULTURE AND IDENTITY: A STUDY OF ASSIMILATION OF IRANIANS
IN TEXAS AFTER IMMIGRATION AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
with a Major in Anthropology
December 2014

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DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing this thesis project was possible with the help of many individuals. I would like to thank my thesis committee members, Drs. Richard Warms, Jon McGee and Michael Hillmann for their advice on theoretical aspects of my thesis and for their editorial comments. I owe my knowledge of anthropological theory and research methods, and my motivation to finish this project to all of my professors at Texas State University and the faculty and staff at the department of Anthropology and the Graduate College who did everything possible to keep me on track.

This research would not be possible without the cooperation of my informants. They welcomed me to their homes with open arms and open minds and generously shared their personal stories with me. I am grateful for their help and their support and for the delicious Persian food they made for me when I visited them! In order to keep their identities confidential, I have to keep this part of my acknowledgment anonymous and cannot use their names.

I am grateful for the assistance of Dr. Mohsen Mobasher for sharing research materials and for being a sounding source of ideas, as well as Ms. Hilary Davis for editing my work.

In addition to academic and professional support and leadership from professors and colleagues, every student needs support and encouragement from family and friends. I am grateful for my parents' unwavering support of my academic work from its inception.

Their encouragement and patience give me strength and the "sky-is-the-limit" approach in all aspects of my life, especially in furthering my education.

Special thanks go to all of my friends for their kindness and thoughtfulness, and to my graduate school 2012 cohort with whom I made memories that will last for a lifetime!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I.

Introduction

Many immigrant groups in the United States have their stories of departure from the homeland, entering a new society, culture shock and assimilation to a new culture. Iranian immigrants are no exception. Some Iranian immigrants have written and published their immigration journeys in the forms of novels and memoirs. Works such as *Funny in Farsi* (2004) by Firouzeh Dumas, *Journey from the Land of No* (2005) by Roya Hakakian, *Persian Girls* (2007) by Nahid Rachlin and *In the House of my Bibi* (2008) by Nastaran Kherad are examples of novels based on their authors' experiences in Iran and as immigrants in the United States. I am an Iranian immigrant to the United States, myself. I immigrated to the US in my mid-teenage years. Although most of the novels and memoirs I have read reflect events of the 1978-1979 revolution of which I have no memories, reading them has always fascinated me.

I was born and raised in the post-revolution era and learned about the events that led to the 1978-1979 revolution and the Iran-Iraq war that followed the revolution in my history classes when growing up in Iran. These events may only be parts of history for me but they were pivotal points in the lives of millions of Iranians who left Iran during and after the revolution. While I have always been interested in reading the historical events of the revolution, after moving to the United States, I specifically became interested in reading about assimilation of Iranians in the United States. The stories of living in the diaspora that I have read are all educational and interesting. However, I would always seek the chapters in which authors would share their joys and pains of

living in a western society, perhaps because this was the part to which I could relate. Learning a new language, creating new social and professional networks, and developing a new lifestyle and new social and moral standards were activities in which I participated on a daily basis. Eventually, studying these traits in Iranian immigrants' lives became one of my academic research interests.

One of the concepts Iranians discover in the United States is freedom of religious practice. Coming from a country in which Islam is the official religion of state and conversion from Islam to other religions is almost impossible, choosing what religion they want to practice and to what extent they want to practice it is a new kind of freedom for Iranians. As a young immigrant, I became friends with some Iranians who identified themselves as *Christian believers*. These individuals chose to convert to Christianity after leaving Iran. Getting to know this group of Iranians and other groups with various faiths (Islam, Baha'i, Zoroastrian) who had a better chance to openly express and practice their religious views in the US, I became interested in how individuals and groups of people plan and execute their religious beliefs when they have newly acquired the freedom to do so. I also became interested to see how changes in their religious views affect their assimilation into American society.

Pursuing degrees in cultural studies and anthropology, I decided to make my interest in culture and religious studies of Iranians in the US the focus of my thesis research. As mentioned earlier, there are several novels about physical and emotional journeys that Iranians have taken. However, the scholarly research about Iranian immigrants in the US in general, and the anthropological research about groups of Iranian immigrants in particular, are limited. This thesis project is about the experience of

Iranian-American-Christian converts in the United States with regard to their ethnic identity as immigrants and their religious identity as religious converts. In this thesis, I argue that religious conversion is a spiritual experience but takes place in a historical, political and social context. I explore issues that affect the ethnic identity of Iranian immigrants in the United States, particularly in central Texas, and discuss how religious conversion affects their identities.

I chose to work with a community of Iranian immigrants in central Texas who have a specific common value: conversion to Christianity. Most Iranian immigrants in the past forty years have arrived in the US as Muslims. After their arrival, some of these immigrants undergo religious conversion. Although only a small number of Iranian immigrants convert, the majority of those who do so accept Christianity as their new religion. According to the Worldwide Directory of Iranian/Persian Christian Churches, currently, there are 22 states that have Iranian congregations [1].

My informants are Iranians who immigrated to the United States. Most of them immigrated during and after the Islamic revolution of 1978-1979 and were Shi'a Muslims prior to conversion to Christianity. Immigration and religious conversion introduced them to new identities. They no longer practice their previous religion, Islam, but at the same time they are still from a country whose culture has been affected by Islamic traditions and ideologies for over a thousand years. In this thesis, I examine how my informants view their new American identity compared to their Iranian identity and how assimilation into their new ethnic identity differs from their assimilation into their new religious identity.

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[1] http://www.farsinet.com/icc/

My thesis is not specifically about Iranian history and politics. However, some understanding of history and politics of Iran is necessary for this research. As anthropologist and sociologist Mohsen Mobasher (2012) states, understanding the history and politics of the home country and the host country of immigrants is important in understanding their immigration stories. Therefore, although a historical and political review of Iran and the United States is not the main part of my research, I will explain, where appropriate, the history and politics of the two countries as they have affected Iranians' lives.

Iranians and Christianity

Christianity arrived in Persia around the first century A.D. through Christians who sought refuge from persecutions of the Roman Empire and missionaries who came to preach to Jewish communities in Persia (Price 2002). Many Persian kings as well as lands that were parts of ancient Persia are mentioned in the Old Testament. Table 1 shows the names of the Persian kings mentioned in the Old Testament.

Table 1: Persian Kings in the Bible. 2001 *Persians in the Bible*. GA: Global Commission, Inc.

Date B.C.	Secular Persian Name	English Historical Name	English Biblical Name	Scripture Reference
539-530	Korrush	Cyrus	Cyrus	Isaiah 45-Daniel-Ezra 1-3
530-521	Cambujieh	Cambyses	Ahasureus (KJ) Xerxes (NIV)	Ezra 4:6
521	Berooyeh Dorougi (liar)	Pseudo Smerdis	Artaxerxes	Ezra 4:7-23
521-486	Darous	Darius the Great	Darius	Ezra 5, 6
486-465	Khashayarshah	Xerexes	Ahasureus (KJ) Xerxes (NIV)	Esther 1-10
464-423	Ardashir Derazdast (long hand)	Artaxerexes I	Artaxerxes	Nehemiah 1-13; Ezra 7-10

With the inception of Islam and the advent of strict rules against preaching other

religions to Muslim communities, the flourishing of Christianity in Persia ended (de Blois

2000). However, many Christians remained in the area, and despite persecutions, they

continued to practice their religion. Assyrians and Armenians are the largest groups of

Christian minorities in Iran (Price 2012). Majority of my informants told me that their

first exposure to Christianity was through their Assyrian and Armenian friends and

neighbors in Iran.

Assyrians adopted Christianity at the end of the first century A.D. and they trace

their ancestral roots to the ancient land of Mesopotamia (Kelley 1993:133). Iranian-

Assyrians are followers of Nestorian Christianity; they are culturally linked to the East

Syrian Christians and speak a modern form of Syriac (Kelley 1993:133). Their

population in Iran in 1977 was estimated to be about 20,000 [2]. Inside Iran, they are

accepting of their Iranian citizenship and take pride in it [3] (Cottam 1979: 82-83).

For the most part, Armenians of Iran follow the traditional Gregorian church of

Armenia. The Armenian population was estimated to be 270,000 in 1977 in Iran [4].

Armenians of Iran have had a significant influence on Iranian culture. They have

especially introduced Western culture to Iranians through music, dance, theater, movies

and even food. They have established several schools, libraries and hospitals in different

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[2] Encyclopedia Iranica, accessed February 21, 2013,
http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/assyrians-in-iran - pt1
[3] Because of their second-class citizen status in the dominant Muslim communities in
which they have had to live even prior to the revolution, Assyrians outside of Iran have
less attachment to their Iranian identity than other minority groups, such as Armenians,
and therefore, they have little to no allegiance to Persian culture outside of Iran (Kellye
1993: 135-136).
[4] Encyclopedia Iranica, accessed February 21, 2013,
http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/armenians-of-modern-iran

parts of Iran. Despite the violence and discrimination against Armenians at different times throughout Iranian history, and their limited representation in Iranian government, Armenians continue to maintain an Iranian-Armenian culture in Iran by establishing and improving academic, art and sports organizations. Their interaction with Muslim communities today, however, is limited.

For most of the informants, knowledge about Assyrians and Armenians, however limited, was their initial exposure to Christianity. Also, since Armenians and to an extent Assyrians brought aspects of Western culture to Iran, many Iranians associate these two groups with Western cultures. Because of this, they also associate Christianity with Westernization and Americanization. This thought affects the forming of American-Christian identities for the informants.

Another group of Christians in Iran are Protestant Christians. Protestant Christians arrived in Iran through foreign missionaries. The earliest Protestant missionary activities occurred in 1747 but seemed to make few converts (Price 2002). In 1834, the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions, a group including several Protestant denominations sent its first two missionaries and their wives to Iran. In 1870 missionary work was transferred to the Board of Missions of the American Presbyterian Church. American missionaries established schools and hospitals in order to provide education and health care for Christians and Muslims in the region. Because of their contributions to education and health care, these missionary educators and doctors were in high demand in Iran. Medical work, especially, became an integral part of Presbyterian

mission programs[5]. According to Price (2002), "by 1910 the American missionaries managed to establish 62 schools and 4 hospitals providing education and health care for both Christians and Muslims." In my fieldwork, the only informants whose conversion to Christianity had taken place in Iran were those who came to know Christianity through service institutions such as hospitals and orphanages in Iran that were established and managed by missionaries.

Christianity after the Islamic Revolution

After the Islamic revolution of 1978-1979, Shari'a law became the legal code in Iran. A new constitution guaranteed freedom of religious practice for Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians. The new constitution permitted religious minority groups to follow their own laws in marriage, divorce and inheritance. These policies however, were, and continue to be, only applicable to those religious minorities whose religion is part of their ethnicity, such as Armenians and Assyrians. The policies did not prevent hostility and violence against groups of Christians or other religious minorities. After the revolution, some pastors and/or their family members were murdered or injured in acts of persecution against their religious groups. Many Christian schools and hospitals in different parts of the country were closed and missionary activities in Iran decreased. Currently, being a foreign missionary in Iran is extraordinary difficult and unusual and missionary activities carried out by Iranians take place in private meetings and underground churches and if missionaries are caught, they face punishment.

Iranian Christians, and those who want to learn about Christianity and possibly

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[5] Encyclopedia Iranica, accessed February 21, 2013, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/christianity-viii

convert, form their own communities in the countries to which they immigrate. In the United States, most Armenian and Assyrian populations live in Los Angeles, although there are also communities in other cities (Kelley 1993:115-139). Non-denominational Christians, Christian converts and Muslims who want to learn about Christianity join Iranian-Christian communities and attend church services that are usually held in other American host churches. Iranian Christians International, Inc. (ICI) was established in 1980 and claims to minister to approximately 8 million Iranians and Afghans who live outside of their countries [6].

Research Methods

Data collection took place with an Iranian congregation in Texas during 12 weeks, from August to October 2013. The congregation meets in a church building that also hosts other ethnic based congregations. This church complex has one main sanctuary and several buildings that house programs, such as Sunday school and support group meetings for senior citizens, parents, etc., for various congregations. All congregations would meet in the main sanctuary only for occasions such as "diversity appreciation day". Otherwise, different congregations hold their own services separately. Per the congregation's request, the name and location of this church as well as identities of informants will remain confidential throughout this thesis. The Iranian congregation identifies itself as non-denominational, although the host church belongs to a specific Christian denomination.

I used direct observation and semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data.

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[6] Iranian Christians International, Inc, accessed September 13, 2014
http://www.iranchristians.org/whoarethey.shtml

Direct observation was used in church services, Bible study sessions and church gatherings. At these sessions, I recruited informants with whom I had one-to-one interviews outside of the church building. Direct observation and participant observation are both qualitative research methods. Direct observation is "watching people and recording their behavior on the spot" (Bernard 2011:306). I attended all the cited sessions and took notes during each session while informants were carrying out their activities. Participant observation "involves getting close to people [by participating in their activities] and making them feel comfortable enough with your presence that you can observe and record information about their lives" (Bernard 2011: 256). Although I established rapport among my informants, I did not "participate" in their religious activities. My informants were evangelical Christians and some of them were active missionaries. Since I am not a Christian, I did not want my informants to misinterpret my actions as an interest in conversion. For the most part of my fieldwork, I was known as and behaved as a researcher recording data. However, at times, I would participate in some symbolic church activities. For instance, when the congregation rose during worship, I would stand up like the rest of the church attendees, sometimes for gaining a better view of the crowd but most of the time out of respect.

Fieldwork

The fieldwork for this research took place at an Iranian congregation in a host church in central Texas. I attended church services, Bible study sessions and other church events for data collection.

Bible study sessions and church services took place on Sundays and started at 11 a.m. Each Bible study session had an agenda and was led by a lead speaker who had

previously been assigned a discussion topic. During Bible study, participants would sit in a circle, and a lead speaker would discuss verses of the Bible and personal stories and would ask others to share their stories. Bible study sessions were about 30-40 minutes long and while discussion was going on, about 4-5 people were always in the room preparing musical instruments and sound systems for the service that would follow. The door was also open and those who arrived during the session would come in and join. After the Bible study session and a short prayer, people would socialize for about 10-15 minutes while the musicians got ready for the worship service. Worship singing would start at around 11:45 a.m. and during this time more people would arrive. Church attendance was at most about 40 people. The smallest service I observed had 15 people.

During worship time, three to four musicians would play music on drums, a violin, a piano and occasionally a Persian instrument called "daf" [7]. A female lead singer would sing worship songs in the front and sometimes a male singer would join her. Song lyrics were displayed on a screen in front of the attendees, who would stand on their feet and sing along. These songs are numbered and appear in hymnals that are available to the congregants but the books were used only when the screen was not available.

After about 20-30 minutes of singing worship songs, the sermon would begin. A male speaker who identified as the "lay pastor" would deliver a 30-45 minute long sermon. He would stand at a podium. He would use Bible verses and personal and social examples to discuss a variety of topics during his sermon. The sermons usually would attract the largest number of people among all church activities. After the sermon,

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[7] Daf is a Persian drum instrument which is popular in classical music. Although it is used in various places and events, this instrument is played in religious celebratory events in Iran, especially of those related to celebrating the life and accomplishments of Ali, the first Shi'a Imaam.

attendees would usually socialize for about half an hour and eat snacks and drink tea and coffee provided for them right outside of the room.

Other church activities included monthly luncheons and worship sessions. Church member volunteers would organize these events and provide food. Luncheons would be after the usual Sunday services in the gym at church. They would set up tables and serve a variety of Persian food, pizza and desserts. Monthly worship services were laid-back gatherings at a house that was owned by the church. Although there were no sermons at these events, attendees would sing worship songs, share stories about their faith and, then, eat dinner.

I recruited informants at church events and then conducted interviews with eleven people in their homes, at restaurants and at coffee shops. Interviews were 40-70 minutes and were audio recorded. Interviewees' age ranged from 30-80. All interviewees converted to Christianity after they turned 18. I chose informants who had lived in Iran for at least the first 15 years of their lives. These individuals were more likely to have an understanding of Islamic teachings and how to practice Islam than those who left Iran as young children. Having some knowledge about their previous religion, even if participants were not practicing Muslims, impacts their conversion experience. In these semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to answer questions about their life before conversion, about how and why they converted to Christianity, and about how they practice their new religion. I also asked them about their Iranian identity, their immigrant identity and their Christian identity.

Since I was working with a community of native Persian speakers and all worship services were held in Persian, I also held my interviews in Persian. I transcribed and then,

translated all interviews into English before coding. Finally, I used content analysis in order to analyze the collected data from my observations and interviews.

Gathering quantitative data and literature for this research was a difficult task. Although this was not a quantitative research project, having demographics of Christian Iranians in the US and in Texas is important. An estimate number would be helpful in interpretation of cultural and social behavior of minority groups and for future comparative studies. However, finding the number of Iranian Christians is close to impossible since there is no census of religious membership in the United States. All the estimated numbers I have come across were reported by missionary sources. Such numbers may be reported to imply an intended interpretation. In this research, I only focused on the number of Iranian Christians that attend the specific church at which I conducted my fieldwork.

Another problem I encountered was finding academic literature about the history of Christian missionaries among Iranians in the United States. Most information about the history of conversion and history of Iranian churches comes from weblogs and church websites rather than from academic journals. One of the goals of this research is to contribute to this very small body of academic literature. This research brings together important information about a topic which has received little academic attention before.

The rest of the thesis is organized in six chapters:

Chapter 2 is about Iranian ethnic identity. Many scholars agree that Islam is a key marker of Iranian identity. Although my informants all claim Iranian identity, they lack this critical element. In this chapter, I explain how these Iranian Christians manage to reconfigure other aspects of identity to substitute for Islam.

Chapter 3 is about informants' new identity as Americans. Upon immigration,

Iranians face a new set of values and traditions. As they settle in the United States, they choose to practice some American customs but continue practicing some aspects of their original culture. This negotiation between traditional and new values establishes a dual Iranian-American identity (Mostofi 2003). In this chapter, I argue that Iranians' assimilation into their American identity is uncertain and problematic. Although some of them have lived in America for a long time, most do not feel particularly American.

In chapter 4, I consider some of the existing literature of conversion in light of my data. I argue that attempts to classify different types of converts are problematic since conversion experiences are extremely diverse.

In chapter 5, I explore the evangelical Christian beliefs of my informants. I discuss the ways in which they experience and practice different aspects of evangelical Christianity.

Chapter 6 is about the relationships among three parts of my informants' identity: Iranian ethnicity, American identity and Christianity. The role that the church plays in maintaining Iranian identity and in creating American identity is the main focus. There are several stories in this chapter abased on collected data from my fieldwork, however, the names in the stories are fictional in order to keep my informants' identities confidential.

In Chapter 7, I suggest several broad conclusions focusing around the idea that the religious identity of my informants is constantly reinforced but their American identity is not reinforced and is problematic. This is why they accept their Christian identity easier than their American identity.

CHAPTER II.

Iranian Ethnic Identity

For most Iranians, Islam is a cornerstone of Iranian identity. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which Christian convert informants identify as Iranians, what markers of Iranian identity they choose to associate with and how they get around the fundamental fact that Islam is not part of their Iranian identity.

In a lay view of identity, national identity refers to allegiance to and identifying with a specific nation. Cultural identity refers to identification with values and norms of a specific culture. Ethnic identity covers both national and cultural identities (Mahdi 1998:80). What defines Iranian identity is part national identity and part cultural identity. Therefore, Iranian identity is an ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is a "call and response system" [8]. Self-definition – or the "call" part of identity – means individuals claim a specific identity (in this case national identity). In most cases, they base this identification on the country in which they were born, legal citizenship, ancestry, the language they speak, appearance, and cultural practices, etc. Although self-identification is an important part of ethnic identity, the "response" of one's surrounding community is also important. Response refers to recognition (or failure of recognition) of the community to which individuals believe they belong. In other words, when one "calls" oneself part of the group, the group must have a positive "response" to the call, otherwise the identification is not completely valid. This response or recognition happens at the state level through documents that show one's nationality and also on a community level, where members of a community approve each other's membership. As for Iranian ethnic identity, the most

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[8] The term was introduced by my advisor Dr. Richard Warms in discussions about ethnic identity.

15

common characteristics debated in recognition of being Iranian are Islam, location of birth, ancestry, history and Persian language (Cottam 1979). In this chapter, I will explore these aspects of Iranian identity.

Many scholars argue that Islam is an aspect of Iranian identity. Islam entered Iran at the end of the ruling of the Sassanid dynasty (around 650 C.E.). The credit for making Iran a dominantly Shi'a country goes to the Safavid dynasty around 830 C.E. There are many debates over the reasons why Iranians responded to Shi'a Islam. The Safavids promoted Shi'ism by portraying Ali and Hussein, the first and third Imams, as "semi-detached from the Arab elite" and "virtual Iranians" (Gordor 2010 : 58). Also, the third Shi'a Imam (the grandson of the prophet Mohammad) married the daughter of the last Sassanid king. According to Cottam (1979), this way, the line of the Imams was Iranianized and therefore, being a Shi'a Muslim gives Iranians the independent identity they longed for from the Arab dominant Islamic world. Despite the fact that there are some groups of Arab Shi'a Muslims, some scholars argue that not only did Iranians accept this sect well but also, Shi'a Islam became a part of Iranian national identity.

For those Iranians who identify as Muslims, Shia' Islam has been a central part of their Iranian generic identity. When they move to the US, Shia's Islam puts them in a religious minority group among Muslim communities in the US. According to some informants who, before conversion, have attended Islamic prayers at mosques around the US, Iranian Shi'a Muslims are both ethnic and religious minorities in most Sunni dominant Muslim communities in the US who have non-Iranian populations.

Once converting to Christianity, the informants reject Islam as one of the fundamental pillars of their ethnic identity. Therefore, when one part of Iranian ethnic identity is eliminated, Iranian Christians retain their Iranian identity by asserting more importance on other parts of their identity such as location of birth, ancestry, pre-Islamic history and Persian language.

Location of birth determines one's citizenship in some countries, which is at least part of one's national identity. Article 976 of the Civil Code of Iran states that those who are born in Iran, and those who are born outside of Iran to Iranian biological fathers, are considered Iranian [9]. This law defines the legal status of those who are born within the borders of Iran and is followed for legal purposes such as inheritance and marriage. Besides the definition of citizenship by the Iranian constitution, many Iranians identify their nationality based on their birth location. The majority of my informants' first response to why they consider themselves Iranian was that they were born in Iran. One informant referred to her heritage as her "roots" that go back to Iran, where she was born: "[My] roots go back to Iran. My children were born here and although their parents are Iranian, [the children] are more American, I think," she said, emphasizing how important it is to her national identity that she was born in Iran.

Followed by the location of birth, ancestry – especially the nationality of biological parents and specifically of fathers – is an important factor in determining one's Iranian national identity. Although in the Iranian law, heritage is traced through Iranian fathers, in a social context, many Iranians consider their "Iranianness" partly due to the

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[9] The constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran. Accessed from http://www.shahrwandan.ir/ and translated by the author.

fact that they have Iranian parents, including both mothers and fathers. All of my

informants were first generation immigrants, most of them more than forty years of age.

Their age and the fact that they were first generation immigrants decrease the chances of

being born to only one Iranian parent. The location of birth and having biological Iranian

fathers, are the only characteristics of Iranian national identity that are both defined by

the Iranian constitutional law (for legal purposes) and by social norms, inside and outside

of Iran.

Iranian history is also associated with Iranian national identity. For most Iranians,

all parts of Iranian history are important in identifying as Iranian but how they tell this

history and how they use it to their advantage is situational. The history of Islamic Iran

plays an important role in connecting Iranian identity and Muslim identity. The history of

the revolution and of post-revolution Iran is important for the effects of the revolution on

the lives of Iranians. For most Christian Iranian informants, the pre-Islamic history of

Iran is significant to their Iranian identity. They consider the 1979 revolution a defeat,

and also seek separation from Islam and from Arab culture. For this group, there are two

issues on which they rely in identifying with Iran: Persian language and pre-Islamic

history. The history of pre-Islamic Iran serves as a reference to the Iranians' longing for

an identity that is not interwoven with Islamic and Arabic identities. This becomes

especially important for Iranians residing outside of Iran who face negative attitudes and

discrimination towards Muslims and Arabs. In the case of the Iranian Muslims who have

converted to Christianity, the pre-Islamic history of Iran is the only escape from over a

thousand years of Islamic domination of Iranian culture. References to Persians, Persian

kings and Persian dynasties in the Bible, as well as the Persian biblical figures, are

sources of information as well as proof of Iranians' nationality separated from Islam and closer to Christianity for these informants. This source of information is a source of pride for many Iranian Christian converts. For instance, Iranian Christian converts interpret the reference to the Persian King Cyrus the Great who permitted the return of the People of Israel to their promised land (2 Chronicles 36:22-23) as a sign that the fate of all Iranians is to be Christians.

The importance of celebrating Nowruz as a holiday that my informants claimed has no association with any religion and is a "pure Iranian historic celebration," shows the importance of history for Iranians, especially for Christian Iranians. "Nowruz has no association with religion whatsoever," said one informant. As a matter of fact, Nowruz is a Zoroastrian event for remembering spirits of ancestors. However, many Iranians both inside and outside of Iran associate this event and even the Zoroastrian faith with the history of "true Iranians," and therefore, find it to be a legitimate celebration for all Iranians regardless of their religious views. Nowruz is one of the Iranian holidays in which all of my informants take part, and the congregation also has a special celebration for it aside from its usual monthly lunch and potluck events. Iranian ethnic identity and Iranian history, especially the parts of history, which Iranians interpret to be eras in which Iran was the most tolerant of nations in accepting cultural and religious diversity, are closely associated.

Language is one of the fundamental aspects of culture. Persian has been the most widely spoken language in Iran for 2,500 years. The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran recognizes Persian language as the official language and script of the country

required for official documents, correspondence and for teaching textbooks [10]. Although not a requirement of Iranian citizenship by the Iranian constitution, speaking Persian is one of the fundamental aspects of Iranian identity.

Persian language is one of the factors, which distinguishes Iranians and Iranian Muslims from the Arab culture. Since Iran is located on one of the borders in the Middle East where the Arab world ends and the non-Arab World begins, Iranians who are concerned with the geopolitics of Iran are also concerned about creating an identity that is specifically Iranian and is not mistaken for Arab identity. In addition, Islam in this area is heavily associated with Arabic culture. For Iranians outside of Iran, including Iranian Christian converts, who want to retain an Iranian identity but without any association with Islam, Persian language is one of the pillars of Iranian identity that gives them independence from the Arab culture.

All other aspects of Iranian identity make this ethnic identity complete if they are combined with fluency in Persian language as a native, first language [11]. All of my informants consider their ability to speak Persian as an important part of their Iranian identity. Many Iranian parents among my informants see teaching Persian language to be an important part of raising their children. Although many have not taught Persian to their children for various reasons, they regret their decision for not doing so. They even consider the second-generation immigrants "less Iranian" if they do not speak Persian.

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[10] The constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran. Accessed from http://www.shahrwandan.ir/ and translated by the author.
[11] By native, first language, I refer to the language Iranians speak at home and the first language to which their children are exposed. Fluency is not necessarily guaranteed even if children of Iranian immigrants are exposed to Persian language at home. If they are not literate in the Persian language and/or have no other exposure to Persian language outside of their home, they are not fluent.

An informant, who had been educated in English language before moving to the US and considers herself fluent in English, said that praying in Persian language, the language that she understands better, is more effective in calming her when she is nervous or upset.

Many of my informants believe that Persian language is a poetic language and carries more emotion than English language. An informant who only knows Persian told me that many emotions that come to Iranian Christians during worship cannot be expressed in English and must be sung or spoken in Persian.

Continuous use of Persian language is an aspect of identity that my informants all have in common. Many issues play a role in preserving language skills. It is very unlikely for someone who has learned Persian language as their native language in Iran and moved to the United States after their adolescent years to forget this language. However, if language is not used regularly, it may become difficult over time to use solely the Persian language in conversations. Therefore, it is not only Persian language as a native language but also fluency and continuous use of Persian language that perpetuate Iranian identity for Iranians outside of Iran. I have explained earlier that many of my informants hesitated to call their American born children with little or no fluency in Persian language "completely Iranian". Therefore, passing on their language skills to the next generation, does not necessarily translate to passing on Iranian identity to their children since their children's fluency in Persian is not guaranteed. Informants would say they are Iranians because they speak Persian but their children or grandchildren are not completely Iranian because they do not know Persian as well as their parents.

Language acquisition and assimilation are related, and proficiency in the language of the host country improves communication and interpersonal relationship (Hojat 2010:159). Iranians who speak English fluently have improved their language skills by taking college-level courses, completing American university degrees, and working in the American job market. However, for my informants, although speaking Persian fluently and as a native language is part of what constructs their Iranian identity, fluency in English, does not necessarily make them American. Informants who have lived in the United States for 15-20 years, and claim to be successful in their professional and social lives in the US, do think they are "more Iranian than American" regardless of their proficiency in English.

My Iranian Christian informants also emphasized the importance of the use of Persian language in expressing the Christian message. They all speak of "the right feelings" for them that are associated with the use of Persian language in worship. They all agreed that the lack of strong English language skills prevents them from ever understanding the deep and correct meaning of Christian teachings as they are taught in English-speaking churches. They understand this as the reason for why it is necessary to have Persian services. All worship services in the Iranian congregation are held in Persian, and translations into English for occasional English-speaking visitors are provided. If there is a non-Persian-speaking guest, they use headphones to listen to the sermon as someone in the back of the room translates it for them. All informants stated that because English fluency is not common among the attendees, understanding Christian teachings in Persian is easier. Some also stated that for them, worship in Persian is more joyful. The following statements are direct quotes from two interviews:

1. I have been to 16 or 17 American churches. But worshipping God and talking to God in Persian is something else. It's different and I enjoy it much more.

2. I read God's words and the songs with a lot of passion. I can't express that passion [and joy] in English. And I think because God likes Iranians so much [Persian words] go to him better because we sing for his happiness.

Birth location and ancestry are independent from time and location of current residency. Birth location does not change with passing of time. Also, none of the informants can change the fact that they were born in Iran and/or the fact that they have Iranian parents and ancestors. They consider these factors necessary to their national and cultural Iranian identity. Iranian history, also, remains the same throughout time though its interpretation changes. Iranians pick and choose different parts of the history with which they identify. For instance, Iranian Christians choose parts of Iranian history that are mentioned in the Old Testament as a confirmation for their religious identity and beliefs. Non-Christian groups' choice of historical events with which they associate is situational as well. Using history as one of the necessary pillars of ethnic identity is common among Iranians. Unlike history, ancestry and birth location, Persian language skills and Islamic religious beliefs may change over time. They both depend on the location of residency and the environment in which Iranians live. Since my informants converted, Islam, as a religion, is immediately eliminated from their Iranian identity. Christianity is not a common belief system shared by the majority of Iranians and therefore, it is not a part of Iranian identity. Due to lack of an agreed-upon religion as part of their Iranian identity, my informants rely on something about their identity they can continuously and confidently show their ability to use: language. Therefore, for my

informants, Persian language is especially important because Islam, the other pillar of Iranian identity under their control for change, is absent from their identity.

Speaking Persian creates a sense of comfort that is associated with "being who they most essentially are" for the informants. An informant who has received higher education in the United States told me that he is more comfortable speaking English when it is necessary for him to be "serious and straight forward," characteristics that he associated with being Americanized. He mentioned that he spent more energy when speaking English. He said he used more facial muscles in speaking English, had to speak louder, and that speaking English made him tired. When speaking Persian, "there is more Persian culture," he explained. Another informant mentioned that when in the Iranian community, a look or a facial expression can be understood and interpreted, and words do not necessarily have to be used. Such communication in English-speaking groups was not possible for many of his Iranian friends, he explained. For the informants, Persian language is something detached from any religion and politics. It retains a part of identity for my informants that they hesitate to lose despite their attempts to assimilate into their new society. For first-generation immigrants, speaking Persian creates that comfortable environment in which they do not need to think too much about every sentence they construct, as they may have to do so when speaking English, even for those who receive university education in the United States. This comfort in use of language is what they associate with their identity.

In this chapter, I explained why certain markers of identity are important for Iranian identity. Some of these aspects of identity change as Iranians move abroad and convert to another religion. For the first generation immigrants, fluency in English

facilitates communication, but does not necessarily indicate association with, and integration or assimilation into, American society. For instance, an informant who has lived in the United States for 18 years, said: "For me, I will always be a foreigner in this country no matter what, you know. Although I work here and I speak their language but at the end, I am still an Iranian". In the next chapter, I will further explain how my informants apply these aspects of identity to their American identity.

CHAPTER III.

American Identity

In the previous chapter, I explained that birth location, ancestry, history, Persian language and Islam are parts of Iranian identity. I also argued that Islam is no longer a part of my informants' Iranian identity. The American idea of identity is fundamentally different from the idea of Iranian identity that seems to have specific characteristics upon which many Iranian people and many scholars of Iranian culture agree. However, my informants try to apply the markers of identity that they recognize for their Iranian identity to their American identity.

None of the factors that the informants know in their Iranian identity are applicable to forming their American identity. Not having been born in the United States and not having American parents or ancestry immediately eliminate two important pillars that my informants associate with ethnic identity. Many Iranian immigrants obtain American citizenship. U.S. citizenship documents, however, do not substitute birth certificates. Although acquired citizenship indicates their national identity, it does not provide a substitute for the informants' ethnic identity. Shared history with Americans as a marker of shared identity does not belong to this group of people, either. They cannot rely on this part of identity as they are not as familiar with American history as they are with Iranian history. This issue makes their identification with American history problematic. The only other items over which my informants have some control are language and religion. They use the former to retain their old identity and the latter to create a new one.

In addition to the lack of some key elements of ethnic identity in their American identity, my informants also face difficulties in their American social environment. Many immigrant groups would like to retain some of their cultural traits and assimilate into their host society at the same time. For Middle Eastern immigrants, assimilation has become an obstacle due to conflicted and negative views of this region in the West. In this chapter, first, I will explain what some of the social and political discriminations that Middle Eastern immigrants face in the United States are. I will then proceed to an analysis of the informants' American identity with regard to the parameters that they associate with Iranian ethnic identity.

Although I continue using the terms "Middle East" and "Middle Eastern," the definitions of these terms are problematic. Middle East or Near East is a geographical location that emphasizes distance from the Western hemisphere (Özalp 2011). The boundaries of the Middle East that are mostly defined by Western countries can and do change as the foreign policies of these countries and their relationships with the countries in the region change. "Middle Eastern" refers to someone who is from the Middle East. However, defining the term Middle Eastern is difficult when the definition of the Middle East is vague. Although similarities among all so called Middle Eastern cultures can be traced, they have various identities and cultures. In popular parlance in the west, "the Middle East" has stereotypical associations.

Another common false generalization in the West is categorizing Muslims as Middle Easterners and vice versa. Referring to Muslims as Middle Easterners (and to Middle Easterners as Muslims) is simply based on the misconception that most Muslims are from the Middle East. Islam is a religion that came out of the Arabian Peninsula.

Although the language of Islam is Arabic and Arabic is spoken in most of the countries in the Middle East, not all Arabic speaking people in the region are Muslim, not all Middle Easterners are Muslim and not all Muslims are from the Middle East.

Not only are the ethnic and geographic determinations of "Middle Eastern" problematic, but so is construing the term as a racial designation. Middle Easterners are considered "white" in the United States [12]. However, Middle Eastern is not a clear concept and Middle Easterners are treated as a culturally minority group and have to deal with prejudice and discrimination like all other minority groups in the US. Therefore, their "whiteness" in cultural context is not exactly the same as that of an average European-descent American. This ambiguity of definition magnifies the problem of putting all the people in the region under one category, "the Middle Easterners".

The media is very powerful in creating and spreading social stereotypes. Middle Easterners are portrayed stereotypically in western media and the portrayals are often negative. This is not a new concept in the West. There is a long history of scholarship about Orientalism. Orientalism is a representation of the Middle East "through the imaginative Western eye to construct and confirm their superiority and dominance of an equally constructive inferior East" (Abu Lughod 2011). The production of knowledge through the negative images colors the relationships of Middle Easterners with the rest of society in the United States. Middle Easterners labor under the burden of the negative stereotypes.

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[12] The US Census Bereau http://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html#

Negative attention towards Middle Easterners in the US, due to historical events, such as the 1979 hostage crisis in Iran and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, affect their personal as well as their professional lives. The generalized categorization, Middle Eastern, makes them all the victims of the highly visible wrongdoings of a small group of people in this region. Especially following the historical events and Western political conflicts with the Middle East, Middle Easterners become the sudden focus of social and political attention. Iranian immigrants, as members of this Middle Eastern category, deal with discriminatory immigration laws and social behavior. For instance, there are employers that are required to fill specific job positions with US born citizen employees due to the sensitivity of their work. Iranian citizenship makes employment in such institutions more complicated due to the problematic political relations between Iran and the US and the recent economic sanctions on Iran. Assimilation and forming an American identity is a process that social and political issues affect them. In what follows, I explain how these issues impact various aspects of assimilation.

Many scholars of anthropology and sociology agree that assimilation is a process. For Iranian immigrants in the community which I studied, assimilation into American society is a process and not a single event. Learning English, becoming familiar with common ways of behavior and obtaining necessary education and training in order to enter the labor market are all essential for economic survival of these immigrants. Understanding and absorbing social behavioral aspects of their host society is a requirement for a successful economic survival. The fact that certain events, such as political tensions between the host society and the home society of immigrants influences assimilation at different stages of it by perpetuating stereotypes and discrimination is

evidence that assimilation is a process. If there were an end product of assimilation, those who were fully assimilated would not be affected at all by such events.

My research shows that every informant is at a different stage of assimilation and although there are similarities in their experiences, not all have the same way of assimilating. Also, depending on their age of immigration, their educational, professional and social backgrounds and their immigration experience, every part of their assimilation process takes a different amount of time and the time period of each part varies for different informants. At the time when I was conducting this research, none of the informants felt as if they have become a member of the American society (they did not identify and neither felt completely American regardless of their legal citizenship.) Although the same informants may be more comfortable in their host society ten years from now, I argue that for these first generation immigrants, there will never be an end product of full assimilation. As their experience as immigrants matures and most become more and more comfortable in their new environment, they will most likely identify more with American society but their assimilation continues.

Sociologists Park and Burgess suggest that assimilation incorporates both individuals and groups (Teske 1974: 362). Iranian immigrants do not move to the United States in groups and depending on their pre-immigration social and professional lives, they have isolated assimilation experiences. However, events such as the hostage crisis or terrorist attacks, affect them as a group and links them to other Iranians and even larger groups of Middle Easterners, which makes some aspects of their assimilation a group process. The fact that negative images are created against them in the West and that they

are facing discrimination in social life and in employment are common issues that affect their assimilation as a group.

Whether as individuals or as groups, what my informants seek in the process of forming a new American identity is acceptance into American society. However, the acceptance of Middle Eastern and Iranian immigrants by American society is problematic. Examples of discriminatory immigration laws and social behavior towards Middle Easterners are evidence for this claim. What concerns this group is cultural citizenship, where the word citizenship defines their legal status and the word culture offers "vernacular definitions" of citizenship (Rosaldo 1994: 402). Their legal citizenship is solely defined by documents that the government of the United States issues to them. Nine out of eleven of my interviewees were U.S. citizens. They had obtained their citizenship through the legal process of seeking tourist or student visas, then permanent residency and then citizenship through naturalization and/or permanent residency through the annual Green Card Lottery. Of these nine people, only one had declared that besides his legal citizenship, he considers himself an American, as well. When asked other than being an American citizen by law, if he identifies as an American, he responded:

> I know that I am here and have a responsibility to obey the
> American law […] If anything happens in the US and if there is
> a war, for example, and they ask me to do something for the
> soldiers, say cook for the soldiers, I will do that.

This informant was an individual living under his adult children's care and other than occasional visits to a grocery store for shopping, he did not really have any communication with members of the American society in which he lives. His lifestyle suggests that there is a lack of involvement in American society for this individual.

Therefore, despite his isolation, he does not need to feel that he belongs to American society.

Other informants, despite their U.S. citizenship, claimed they did not identify as Americans. One told me that although he was a U.S. citizen, "naturally, his thoughts are Iranian." He said: "We like Iranian culture and we are very proud of it. We are talking about our land. We are not talking about politics. Because we are not into politics." Another individual indicated that "as far as the law goes, yes, but from the bottom of my heart and emotionally, no, I'm not an American citizen".

There were two interviewees who were not U.S. citizens. One denied any identification as an American at the time of interview and claimed that "the feeling to be American" will never happen to her because she "likes her Iranian identity better":

Bita: "Are you American?"

Informant: "No, I don't like to be American. I like the culture I was born in and raised with."

Bita: "So even when you get your citizenship, you don't think you'll feel American?"

Informant: "No, I'm Iranian".

The other informant told me that he is "a little bit American." He has been educated in a university in the United States and has a job in an American company, and he has American colleagues and friends. These facts show that he is involved in and interacts with American society. I asked him if he identifies as Iranian-American and he said he

identifies as Iranian; however, his identity is now influenced by American culture and therefore, some changes have occurred in his behavior.

As shown in these examples, in addition to not being born in the US and not having American parents, informants find the negative attitudes and discriminations against Middle Easterners and Iranians conflicts in shaping their American identity. I continued my interviews with questions with regard to language proficiency and identity. Unlike knowing Persian language as the first language, and fluency in this language, which guarantee Iranian identity, neither documents that prove U.S. citizenship nor fluency in English language lead Iranians to identify as Americans. In general, immigrants have various goals for their immigration and different visions of life in the host country, which affect their settlement pattern, level of assimilation and their immigration experience. In the process of assimilation, what the informants seek is a sense of belonging. Unless that sense of belonging has been created, these immigrants are unlikely to identify with the host culture.

CHAPTER IV.

Religious Conversion and the Converts

For the period of time I was with this community, the topic of discussion was about the nature of God. During each 40-45 minute long Bible study session, one of the members would analyze a few verses of the Bible relevant to the subject of the day, and then he/she would call on the participants to share stories relevant to this topic. This was the only interactive session on Sundays where participants had a chance to share their opinion and ask questions. Shared stories would include anything that had happened in their lives in the past or recent time that they thought was relevant to the topic of discussion. I was able to interview some of the church members but in these circles, I had the opportunity to hear almost all regular attendees share an idea, an opinion or a story. It was during these sessions that I realized I was not the only person whose point of view was different from the rest of the group. By listening to these stories, I realized that members of the congregation had various views of conversion. Telling their stories was not only for the purpose of sharing something about themselves, but also an opportunity for them to make sense of their experience for themselves and others.

Religious conversion is a change in one's spiritual and religious beliefs. Studying this change among a community of Iranian immigrants, I found out that the experience of religious conversion varies among members of the community. This experience depends on where each member is in the process of conversion. Not only do interpretations of religious conversion vary among members of this community but their point of view certainly differs from my point of view as an outsider and as a researcher.

In the first step of my data analysis, I tried to categorize the conversion process of the participants according to Lewis Rambo's categories of religious conversion introduced in his book *Understanding Religious Conversion* (1993). However, I found out that the boundaries among these categories are not as clear as Rambo intended. In this chapter, I explain why it is difficult to apply these classifications to most of my informants' experiences by explaining how participants in this research have different interpretations of religious conversion.

Lewis Rambo (1993) in *Understanding Religious Conversion* divides religious conversion into five categories. According to Rambo, conversion falls under one of the following groups: apostasy (repudiating a previous religion), intensification (committing to a religion with which the convert had some connection), affiliation (accepting a religion by someone who had no commitment to any other previous religions), institutional transition (changing denominations within a religion), or tradition transition (converting from one major religion to another major religion). Although these categories are helpful in understanding different patterns of conversion behavior, they only touch the surface of this complex phenomenon. Even in the small community where I conducted my research, it is difficult to put participants exclusively in one category.

Knowing that the majority of Iranians are Shi'a Muslims, before starting this research project, I assumed the majority of my participants had also been Shi'a Muslims prior to conversion. I also assumed those who attended church were all converts. As it turned out, not all participants identify as previously being Muslims even if they were

"cultural Muslims"[13]; and not all of them consider themselves converts; even some of those who actively participated in worship told me they did not exactly "convert". Once I sat down with the members of this community, I realized their perception of religious conversion varies amongst themselves and differs from my understanding of this change.

Superficially, Iranian converts who were previously Muslims, abandoned their previous religion and joined a new one. From the Islamic point of view and according to Rambo's framework, one who declares that he/she no longer follows Islam is an apostate. Among these participants, I encountered several people who used to identify as Muslims because their fathers were Muslims. However, they claimed they had never been "real" Muslims. They were born in Muslim families and they were raised with Islamic values. However, to them, the fact that they had never followed Islamic rituals meant that they were not really Muslims. One of my informants told me that despite growing up in a slightly religious family, she did not think she was 100% Muslim because she "never did Islamic prayers, never wore the *hijab*, and wouldn't do other things". Another informant, whom I met at an Iranian-Christian Conference, told me that he and his wife started practicing *yegaaneh parasatee*, which literally means monotheistic worshiping, a few years before leaving Iran. He explained they would pray to a God that they thought was the only creator of this world and everything in it but was not necessarily associated with Islam or any other religion. Instead of Islamic prayers in Arabic, they would pray in Persian. These informants viewed being Muslim as being both a cultural as well as religious phenomenon where the two phenomena are not necessarily equivalent.

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[13] I define cultural Muslims as individuals who do not have Muslim beliefs but participate in some cultural aspects of Islam, such as holiday celebration, with family and friends.

When recruiting interviewees, I approached an informant who would participate in all church prayers and activities including taking communion. When I asked her if she would like to be interviewed, she told me if my interview was about religious conversion, she would not be the right candidate because she was not Christian. I interviewed her regardless and when asked, why she went to church if she is not a Christian, she said her family liked to go and she accompanies them. She said:

> I like their teachings, too. They don't say anything bad
> or wrong. I just do not have time to learn about other
> religions than [Islam and Christianity] and there are
> other denominations of Christianity, too. I don't know
> about those. So it's hard to associate with one rather than
> the other.

This informant took part in religious activities of Christians but did not identify as a Christian.

Some members were not sure if they had completely converted and become Christians. An informant told me that she could not completely consider herself Christian because she had not learned everything about Christianity and that made it difficult for her to completely identify as a Christian. Another informant, remembering her thoughts prior to conversion, told me that she used to be very hesitant to be baptized and to announce she was a Christian because she was worried others might have judged her for her lack of knowledge of Christianity. Some church attendees refused to take part in interviews because they were not sure of their faith and thought their information would skew my research data. I had seen them pray, kneel in the front of the room in prayer, and even take communion, an activity in which only Christians are supposed to take part. However, they thought they had to be more confident about what they believe in order to participate in an interview.

In the cases just mentioned, it is not clear these people have completely repudiated a previous religion and started a new one. This is particularly true in cases where informants have not taken part in baptism, a conventional public symbol of the acceptance of Christianity. During the learning process and before taking part in baptism, informants usually did not participate in Islamic activities any longer and have begun to participate in Christian activities but it is not clear when being a Muslim ends and being a Christian begins.

Leaders of the community, pastors, organizers and visiting preachers have all been baptized. This group fits Rambo's idea of apostasy better since baptism is a public declaration of committing to Christianity and no other creed. However, my informants from this group had interesting descriptions of religious conversion that makes it difficult to think of them as apostates. In interviews and conversations, they insisted on referring to their belief as a relationship with God and not as a religion. They reminded me several times and on different occasions that they do not think of their practices as religious practices. In Bible studies, my informants would discuss how it may be difficult for some people to understand their relationship with God and to obey Him without thinking of such thoughts as a religious practice. They explained that the reason those Iranians who are new to Christianity think of Christianity as a religion is due to the background they used to have with Islam. Since they were following a strictly structured religion previously, they may think of what they are doing right now as following a religion as well. In coming from a Muslim background, the informants saw Islam as a religion because of its highly structured rules. However, they did not see the Christianity that they practiced as a religion because their observance of Christianity is not centered around

highly structured rules. These informants' beliefs and behavior do not fit the exact

distinctions explained by Rambo.

Among other classifications introduced by Rambo, intensification is also difficult

to clarify. Intensification is a type of conversion in which converts have previous

connection with the religion to which they convert. Before I started my fieldwork, I

classified my informants in this group because of their exposure to Christianity in Iran

and prior to conversion. Growing up as Muslims in Iranian society, both before and after

the revolution, people learn about Christianity in their daily lives as well as in parts of

school curricula. Islamic education introduces Christianity as one of the major religions

in the world and introduces Jesus as a prophet. I thought Iranian Muslims receive enough

information about Christianity so that their conversion can be of the "intensification"

type. Members of the Iranian-Christian community themselves agree that they had some

connection with Christianity. Some had neighbors, family friends and coworkers in Iran

who were Armenians or Assyrians and the informants were able to observe and even

participate in Christmas festivities with them. However, such connections and education

were very limited.

Iranian converts would often compare their education and knowledge about

Christianity in Iran to their education and knowledge about Christianity in the United

States. They spoke to me about how limited their knowledge had been prior to attending a

church in the United States. Many of the informants born after the revolution said their

education about Christianity has always been negative and the classroom environment in

their religious studies classes was never open for discussions about different religions.

Informants explained to me that in grade school level, students had to memorize a

"historical" introduction to Christianity. At university level, religious courses included more discussion and debate. However, in Iran, even such debate was limited to basic question and answer formats and any further argument would result in academic and behavioral warnings and probation, and could negatively influence students' grades and even their right to attend class. Here is an example of such discussions about which an informant told me in their interview:

> One of the lessons they taught us in religious studies, a required course in college, was that one has to work and make their bodies and minds busy so they will not have sexual tendencies. And men and women must not have any relations beyond working relations and if their working relationship turns into friendships, then, that is problematic and the two must look into marriage, either temporary marriage or permanent marriage. One of my male classmates made a comment on how this idea was not right! The next day he was called to the [office of protection and preservation of Islamic values] and he was suspended from school for two weeks! You see, one can't have a personal opinion about a specific topic or issue in their own religion (Interview Discussion).

Other informants told me that despite some education about Christianity, they never learned many biblical stories that actually are relevant to Iran and Iranians. For instance, one informant said:

> Something that is very interesting for me is how much the Old Testament talks about Iran […] for instance, Daniel's grave is in Iran. He is one of the Old Testament prophets. Or for example, I know Esther was one of the queens of Iran. Nehemiah was the cup bearer of Ardeshir, [the founder of the Sassanid Empire]. Or it talks about Cyrus the Great and Darius. These are very interesting for me. Reading them is like reading stories that are very close to my heart because the events happened [in Iran], and I never learned any of this in Iran (Interview Discussion).

After hearing about how little education the informants had received in Iran, I decided that kind of education is not sufficient to qualify converts for an "intensification" type of conversion. After conducting fieldwork, I decided that members of this community do experience intensification but for a different reason than what I initially suggested.

Regardless of how Christianity had been introduced to these people in Iran, in the United States and prior to conversion, they all had a chance to become familiar with the belief system they practice now. They attended church, Bible study sessions and Bible classes and read some parts of the Bible. Therefore, I argue that the conversion that occurs after going through the Christian education process in the United States is of "intensification" kind for the members of this community. This is especially true for those who practice Christianity and take part in church activities for a while before they consider full conversion. They involve themselves in this new belief system that gradually leads to conversion.

The last three categories of religious conversion introduced by Rambo are easier to clarify with regard to my informants' experience because they suggest a broader picture of conversion. Affiliation is certainly a category to which none of the members of the community I studied belonged because all of the informants from this community had a different religion than Christianity prior conversion. Institutional transition does not describe conversion among this group of informants, either, since Islam and Christianity are not denominations of the same religion. The last category is tradition transition and it is the only category that accurately describes Iranian immigrants' conversion because their conversion is from one major religion to another.

As I mentioned earlier, classifying conversion is a difficult task because there are different interpretations of conversion among the informants and therefore, there is a fine line among Rambo's categories. The more general categories are applicable to this community but the more detailed ones suggest an overgeneralization of the conversion process.

Conversion is a diverse experience. The lived experience of the community members contradicts attempts to create a typology of religious conversion. During fieldwork, I realized there are few similarities among the processes that these Iranian-Christians experienced when converting. I expected to hear most participants talking about having a single vision or dream leading them to conversion. Although some people did report such experiences, many others reported a wide diversity of individual religious experiences. Since each informant has a unique experience, I found no logical classification for their experience. Instead of categorizing types of religious conversion, I acknowledge that there are different ways of understanding this phenomenon. I attempt to report on how I think my informants conceptualize and understand the change in their religious beliefs.

Members of this community all sought to associate with a belief system. Some of the immigrants were actively looking for a religion other than Islam for several reasons. Some believed that Islam was not the right religion for them because they could not or did not want to fully practice this religion. Some did not want to associate with Islam due to the negative attitudes towards Islam in the West. Others thought that they had learned all they could learn about Islam and the ability to learn about a new religion was an educational opportunity. Clearly, they all shared a desire to live religious lives. This

desire often times was described by the members of this community as a way to find "spiritual peace," "a peace of mind they searched for but were not sure what it was" and "a wish for change". Ritual or religious fulfillment could have been achieved by any other religion. However, the fact that the response to this search was answered with Christianity is due to the overwhelming presence of this religion in the region.

Religious conversion is a process, a continuous attempt to reach a spiritual or religious fulfillment. Freedom of religious practice in the United States provides the opportunity for Iranian immigrants to seek different religious experiences. The dominance of Christianity in the US and its association with Westernization makes it more available than any other belief system to Iranians. Religious conversion to Christianity, for Iranians, is a religious conversion process to the most dominant and accepted religion in the region. As Iranians go through this process, they have various spiritual and cultural experiences. Converts' previous religious background, education, previous and current socioeconomic status, as well as their immigration status influence their religious conversion. Categorizing types of religious conversion may be helpful in statistical analysis of conversion. However, to classify converts by the process they follow does not help with understanding this process. Therefore, in order to fully understand this process, this phenomenon must be viewed from different angles. Informants offer various types of interpretations of their conversions. My informants told me that an outsider may think that conversion to Christianity is a way to make assimilation more smooth but that is not necessarily true. I am not a native in this community and unless I become a convert, I will never know how their experience *feels*.

As an anthropologist, I tell my informants' stories and my interpretation of the data I

collected.

CHAPTER V.

Conversion and Evangelism

Many anthropologists have attempted to study religious practices, not only to describe how people organize their religious beliefs, and how they worship one or more deities, but also to explain why they do so. Defining Protestant Evangelical Christianity as a religion or a religious movement is difficult because the term covers a variety of Protestant denominations. Although a definition of religion in anthropological studies cannot be complete and universal, there are specific characteristics that scholars have agreed all religions have in common (Warms, et al. 2004). In this chapter, I will apply some agreed-upon standards in order to introduce Evangelical Christianity. I will explain the common characteristics of Evangelical Christianity and will identify these elements in the beliefs and practices of the Iranian-Christian community with which I worked for my fieldwork.

All definitions of "Evangelicalism" are related to the etymological root of "good news". For most Christians of different types, this term "describes God's redemption of sinners by the work of Christ" (Noll 2001:13). Historian David Bebbington (Noll 2001:14) identifies four key elements of Evangelical Christianity: *conversionism, crucicentrism, biblicisim*, and *activism*.

Conversionism is an emphasis on a new birth through accepting Jesus Christ as one's savior. All Evangelical Christians profess a personal relationship with Jesus as their Lord and savior.

On the day that the topic of discussion was "God is Love," one informant said he saw love in the first church to which he went. He saw people that were welcoming, happy

to help and caring, and noted that he had never seen that before. He mentioned how that must have been God's plan to show him what a heavenly relationship is. He said he always wonders why he never attended a mosque and instead went to a church after leaving Iran. "That must have been why, for me to see that there is love there," he explained (Observation Notes). Although baptism is a public sign of conversion, the most important part of the informants' conversion is accepting Christ at their Lord.

As all of my informants noted, the informants' beliefs are not about religion but about a relationship. Anthropologists typically define belief as a "linguistic-cognitive stance vis-a-vis propositional claim or a social–psychological–emotional commitment evidenced through practice, embodiment, and memory" (Bielo 2012: 258). For Evangelicals, they understand "authentic Christianity as a faith defined by relationships" (Bielo 2012: 258). In an interview with one of the leaders of the Iranian congregation, and after I referred to the collective beliefs of his congregation as a religion, several times, he kept reminding me that "this is not a religion," and that "it's a relationship" (Interview Discussion). As explained in previous chapters, almost all of the informants would refer to the time when they converted as when they "started believing in Jesus" or when they "accepted Jesus as their savior" rather than when they "changed religions". According to the informants, accepting that they are sinners and that they need a savior to save them is a chance to be born again. They refer to this re-birth as gaining a relationship with their "heavenly father" and insist that this relationship separates them from those who believe in a religion. "My relationship is always with Lord, Jesus Christ, I don't care about different sects and branches of religion," said an informant in response to my question asking with which denomination of Christianity she identifies. Another

informant explained to me that a relationship with God must be created first, and then, comes religious obligations:

> It's not like anyone can say they are Christian and be baptized, no, God must call them, hold them in his arms and the individual must taste the warmth of Christ! When the warmth and happiness and love of Christ is felt, you will work for God, too (Interview Discussion).

Following this concept is *crucicentrism*, which is an emphasis on Christ's redeeming work on the cross as the only way of salvation. Once accepting their sins and recognizing the requirement for a savior to clear them from those sins, Evangelical Christians believe to be "washed in the blood," which means to be freed from sins by the death of Jesus (MacQuerry 1979: 151). One informant used the following example to explain crucicentrism:

> Jesus is about love. Love is all that matters. There are three things that are important: belief, faith, and love. There is an example for that. Let's compare that to a parent's love for a child. Imagine the child is drowning in a pool. Parents do not think whether they know how to swim or not, or how deep the pool is. If their child is drowning, they will jump in to save their child; that is love! And that is how God, like a parent, like a father, saved us (Observation Notes).

With this example, this informant explained to me why Jesus lived among people as a human being: because he loved his children and wanted to save them.

Another example, and one of my favorite examples, was the "ant story". One of the informants asked me once how I would save an ant that is about to be killed by a shovel that is moving dirt. I responded: "I would probably pick the ant up to save it." He explained that I, as a human being, would definitely scare the tiny ant and it would try to escape my hands even though I had good intentions to save the ant. But if I would

47

become an ant and walk side by side with him in dirt and tell the ant that it would be in trouble going towards danger, then it would be easier for the ant to be receptive of my message. This informant explained to me how a God in the skies or in heavens is like a human being trying to save an ant. Furthermore, he explained that is why Jesus walked among humans and even put his life in danger in doing so in order to be one of them and save them. Unlike a God that is not physically present among people, Jesus walked among people to guide them and to help them.

The next concept is *Biblicism,* which is an emphasis on accepting the Bible as the ultimate word of God and source of religious authority. Although Bible study sessions were interactive sessions and attendees were highly encouraged to use real-life examples in the discussions, the ultimate source for discussion and examples is the Bible. Some informants told me that they had read many books and they never found a book that is as complete and as good as the Bible. Persian translations of the Old Testament and the New Testament are available for this Iranian congregation. Copies of the Persian Bible are available at church. Electronic versions of the Persian Bible are also available on smart phone applications, which provide easy, free and fast access to the Bible. The amount of time and energy invested in making the Bible available to Iranian Christians, and the emphasis on referring to the Bible for lessons and teachings of Christianity confirm its importance as the one source of religious authority among this congregation.

Finally, *activism* is the fourth key element of Evangelical Christianity. Activism refers to the concept of sharing the word or "the good news" of all the three other elements. Evangelical Christians are committed to "proclaiming the messages of the gospels" (McQuerry 1979: 148). From praying publicly for non-believers to passing out

Bibles on the street in order to invite people to attend church as visitors and guests, Evangelical Christians remain active in spreading the word. Although the relationship explained earlier is a human-divine relationship, as Bielo (2012) suggests, a part of this human-divine relationship develops through human-human relations, which necessitates activism.

Members of the Iranian congregation are often encouraged to bring guests to church services and church social events. Leaders of the church encourage proselytization as one of the required tasks in which God expects Christians to be involved. They teach church members that if they are not capable of sharing the gospel verbally, they should at least bring their non-Christian friends, relatives and colleagues to church so that they can be exposed to Christian practices.

There are different types of activism evinced by Evangelical Christianity. The most common way of activism is through direct proselytization. Many Evangelical Christians speak to their targeted audience directly about how their Christianity is the right way of life and why their audience should convert. Iranian Evangelical Christians sit down with their audience, tell them about the Bible and their beliefs, and tell them directly to convert. In Iranian Christian TV, streaming from inside the US and Europe, Iranian and non-Iranian pastors host TV shows in which they invite Iranians to accept Christianity. Pastors often have their own TV shows as well as segments on popular Iranian TV channels, commonly known as "Los Angeles channels" because they air from Los Angeles, CA, inviting Iranians to believe in Christianity. "Network 7" is a popular Iranian-Christian online TV channel, with programs for both adults and children. These programs, which are mostly produced in Texas, are specifically for the purpose of

proselytization through speaking directly to their audiences on TV or holding conversations with their audience through phone calls.

I was once one of the targeted audience members at an Iranian-Christian conference. A group of five attendees at the conference told me they wanted to speak with me after breakfast one day. We all sat down at a table and they told me about their beliefs and listed some reasons for why these were the right beliefs and encouraged me to take advantage of this opportunity and convert at the conference (Observation Notes). This kind of proselytization happens often. Iranian Evangelical Christians invite Iranian non-Christians to their Bible study sessions and church services, and while they provide a direct exposure to Christian worship, they invite them to convert.

Not all Christians are able to perform direct proselytization. Some informants told me they do not feel comfortable talking to others directly about conversion. Their reasons vary from not having enough information to not finding it necessary to proselytize. One informant told me she does not have complete enough knowledge about Christianity to educate others (Interview Discussion). Another one told me that with internet access and TV programs available to Iranians inside and outside of Iran, individual proselytization is not necessary (Interview Discussion).

Although Christians are encouraged to develop skills for direct proselytization, they are told to do so through their actions and testimonies as well. Christian leaders teach their fellow Christian believers that they can set good examples by applying Christian teachings to their everyday lives and in this way show others how they live a moral, good life (Observation Notes). One informant told me that she had seen Christian

families being very honest, and that honesty attracted her to Christianity very much. She told me about a time when she had told a Christian family to lie about a car accident to the police in order to save time instead of waiting for the police to show up. The family had told her they could not do that because they were Christians and their faith teaches them to tell the truth even if it is not to their advantage. This has impressed the informant very much (Interview Discussion). Another informant expressed how much the loving and caring environment at a church had attracted him to Christianity. When I first visited an Iranian church in Europe, "they genuinely loved me and cared for my well-being at the most vulnerable time of my life," he said (Observation Notes).

Proselytization through testimonies is also very common in the Iranian congregation and takes place both at church services and at social gatherings. Although testimonies were shared between individuals and in small groups on several occasions, the usual form of giving testimonies is through announcing volunteers and having them stand in front of the audience and tell their stories. In their testimonies, they do not only speak of how they came to know Christianity but also they give some background information about their lives. Very often they include stories about their difficulties with living in Iran before and after the revolution and during immigration, issues to which many Iranian immigrants can relate.

There are millions of Christians that confess to being "born again". These people are divided into different denominations that all have various forms of practice and worship but because they all share the named characteristics, they are called evangelicals. All four characteristics are present in the Iranian congregation. Members of the congregation believe that they first need to confess that they are sinners and they need a

savior and after this confession and "inviting Christ to their hearts", they become

Christians. They all believe in the Bible being the authentic word of God, they believe

they need to tell non-believers about their own beliefs. The strength of each element is

different for each member of the congregation. Luhrman (2012) calls this "attentional

learning," meaning that one's way of paying attention determines one's experience with

God. Although the degree of performance upon these beliefs varies among Iranian

Christians, most of them accept and present the key elements of Evangelical Christianity.

CHAPTER VI.

Christianity and Iranian-American Identity

Many immigrants move to this country with hopes for better economic, educational and professional lives. Achieving these goals calls for some level of assimilation. Learning English and at least some parts of American culture is part of this assimilation. As religious converts, in addition to assimilation to a new ethnic identity, my informants also assimilate to a new religious identity. In this chapter, I compare and contrast these two kinds of assimilation.

I believe that brief life stories lead to a better understanding of the assimilation experience. In what follows, I present three typical immigration and religious conversion experiences. These stories are drawn in each case from several different informants. However, I believe that the result is true to the lives and experiences of individuals. I wrote these stories to describe three characters that represent my informants the best. These stories show examples of my informants' understanding of their ethnic identities as well as their assimilation into American and Christian cultures. In order to keep my informants' identities confidential and to prevent any possibility to link these stories to specific individuals, I have changed key information, such as name, age, and location of residency. The characters whose stories follow are:

1) Maryam: a middle-aged female informant who came to the US to attend school, right before the revolution but decided to stay here when the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war took place.

2) Shahrzaad: a young woman who moved to the US five years ago in 2009. She came to the United States to study at a university and to build a career. She has traveled to Iran several times since she moved here.

3) Haadi: a young man who left Iran with his wife and two young children in 2011. They always wanted to leave Iran and had sought several options. At the time I talked to him, they had lived in the US for 3 years.

Maryam

I moved to the Unites States in my mid-twenties in 1977. Many of us came here to pursue education and intended to go back and we all ended up not going back. I am a U.S. citizen now. It did not take me too long to become a citizen though. Despite the political issues back then, it was still much easier to become a legal resident and a U.S. citizen than it is now. You know, although I have been a U.S. citizen for over twenty years, I don't think I naturally belong here because *naturally* I am Iranian. My parents were Iranian, I was born in Iran, you know. I love my Iranian culture.

I knew some English when I moved here, but it was a struggle to understand this English people speak here. It was very difficult. I had to learn it, though, because I needed English to succeed in my classes and for work.

I did not have too much trouble being a foreigner in this country. It is true that people have their prejudice but I think I was always protected by God even before I knew I was a Christian. I try to focus on the good things America has given us. So this helps to make up for some minor groups with prejudice. Other places did not give me all the good things that America has given me: freedom of religious practice, freedom of speech, etc. I

like American culture. It's straightforward and simple. I like that. People's expectations are not high. They just don't expect too much from you. That's good.

I learned about Christianity in Iran. I knew Christians would celebrate Christmas. There were some Armenians and Assyrians in our neighborhood. So it was not all unfamiliar for me. I was born a Muslim but my family was not too religious and we all respected each other's decisions. I learned about Christianity again when I moved here. It was actually through a Christian organization at my college. My parents were not too thrilled to find out I became a Christian. However, I was old enough at the time to make my decisions and they eventually came around. But I have never traveled to Iran since I have become a Christian.

I became a Christian through the relationship I established with Jesus. Yes, I got a baptism certificate but that does not show anything. The certificate -I don't know what other people do with it, they can do whatever they want - but it only shows that you were baptized. That is all. It doesn't indicate you have a meaningful relationship with God. I have a certificate, too, but I have no idea where it is. I established a peaceful relationship with my heavenly father. That's what's important.

Now, I do socialize with my Iranian Christian friends more than Iranian, non-Christian friends. I think that's all natural. People who have the same thoughts like to hang out together. We go to all Iranian events and have our own celebrations at our church, as well. When we go to Iranian events, we sing worship songs and we pray. Non-Christian Iranians stand and watch or they pass by. That's ok. They are very accepting. I think all

Iranians are very open-minded about Christianity. They all like it, but some don't know that yet.

Shahrzaad

I came to the United States to go to school. I went to college in Iran in the 90s and moved here for graduate school. After finishing graduate school, I found a job and stayed here. But I always knew I would stay here. I had come to stay here. However, I also knew that despite the values I was seeking in America, I would always be true to my Iranian culture. I know that I am completely Iranian. If you are born and then grow up and remain in one country for thirty-something years, you just have something, some culture, in you that cannot change.

I like a lot of things about the US, actually. This country has done a lot for its citizens and for people around the world as well. But my identity is Iranian because I was born in Iran, my family is from Iran; we have a rich history in Iran; our roots are in Iran. I do not think I will ever be completely American.

Socializing with my American Christian friends helps with improving my English skills, not to mention that they are extremely lovable. But there is something about the Iranian church that clicks so well with my culture. I attend both services.

I have learned a lot about American culture and made some friends at work. They ask me a lot of questions about Iran and whether I am a Muslim. I am happy to answer their questions. I tell them I am a Christian like they are. When I am with Christian friends, even if they are Americans and have a different culture, Christianity becomes a shared value. It is something I have in common with them that we both understand. And yeah, I

feel safer, too, when I let people know I am a Christian…safer and more comfortable and more confident.

Haadi

When we moved here three years ago (2011), we were very lonely. My wife did not like it here at all. I don't think she likes it now, either. I don't like it that much, either, to be honest. It turned out to be very different than what I had imagined. I have been working in a restaurant but recently found a part time job in my own field, engineering, and I think once I get better at it, they will offer me a full time position.

We know that our children will have a bright future. But we will definitely raise them to be Iranian. To be honest, I don't like to be American. As long as I am Iranian, and my first language is Persian, I speak Persian with my children and raise them the way I was raised. I am not a US citizen but even when I become a citizen, I am still Iranian. That will not change. I don't think I will ever feel I am American. I like certain freedoms I have here but that's not going to change my identity.

After we moved here, we met an Iranian lady at a store one day. It turned out that she was Christian. We did not know that at first, but she was very helpful. She helped us find our first house. One day she invited us to go to church with her. My wife insisted we go so that we can meet other Iranians. I was hesitant. I did not know what to expect but I really liked it. It was like I had been looking for something, some religion or faith, to fit my beliefs and I had found it. Their words and their thoughts were so familiar. It was just like they were saying exactly what I had been thinking for years in my head, as far as

religious views go. So now we go to church as much as we can. We became Christians, just like that.

Muslims have become really isolated in the US in recent years. Americans don't view Islam in a positive light here. Everyone here thinks Iranians are all Muslim. I do tell everyone at work that I am not. And yes, I do feel safer when I say I am a Christian. There is no immediate threat or danger to be a Muslim but it is a good feeling to let some people know I believe in Christianity. When I say I am not a Muslim and I'm a Christian, I feel more comfortable. They ask me at work if for example, I fast during Ramadhan and when I say no, because I am a Christian, they act surprised. They think all Iranians are Muslim. But that is not true.

To assimilate or not to assimilate…

These stories highlight some of the important aspects of Iranian ethnic identity and assimilation into new identities. All three characters, despite the different ways in which they immigrated, identify as Iranians. They emphasize some of the aspects of Iranian identity mentioned in chapter 2: location of birth, ancestry, history and language. Maryam believes that her "natural culture" is Iranian. Shahrzaad considers location of birth and where she grew up essential in what makes her Iranian. Although she shows satisfaction with her conditions in America, she identifies as Iranian and knows that her ethnic identity will not change over time. Haadi is staying true to his Iranian identity by speaking Persian with his family and by intending to raise his children to be Iranian

although there is no guarantee for the outcome of such intention[14]. I explained in chapter 5 and in other parts of this thesis that in addition to Persian being the first language, fluency in Persian and continuous use of it are critical elements of Iranian identity.

The informants' age and their length of residency in the United States affect my informants' experience. Based on such factors, I have organized them in three inclusive groups: Those who have limited English language skills that are not very likely to improve—because they immigrated at relatively advanced age, those who have moved to the United States in the past ten years or less and are between 20-50 years old, and the group that has been in the U.S. for more than a decade whom are mostly over 50 years old. The first two groups seek a sense of connection to the rest of society or at least to a sub-group. The first group has mostly moved to the United States in order to be close to their children, and as one informant stated, they are here "for the love of their grandchildren." Due to their age and limited access to ESL classes and because they are taken care of by their adult children, they have very little to no interaction to American society. They do not need to have any interaction with their host society. They are observers of what goes on in the society, and for the most part, they have little to zero economic productivity (they are consumers, not producers). Therefore, if they have become Christians, the Iranian congregation is a place where they come together with other people that are "like" them. Note that the focus is not on the faith aspect of their religion but how their Christian identity is constructed through relationships they build at

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[14] By Haadi's standards today, if his children do not speak Persian in the future, they will not be completely Iranian. Therefore, by this standard, even if Haadi and his wife, and other first generation immigrant parents teach Persian language to their children, their children may not grow up to identify as Iranian because they may not use the Persian language much after childhood and may not retain fluency in it.

church with people with whom they have connections beyond their religious and spiritual beliefs.

The second group needs to join the American socioeconomic cycle but still have social struggles due to their lack of understanding of the new culture and because of language barriers. They do not have what I call a "circle of trust". They seek trust, connection and a sense of belonging, feelings for which providing happen to be top priorities for Christians. Whatever is the force that brings them to church, once there, they find themselves welcomed among a group of people who know their language—not just their words, but also their culture.

The last group is the group of "immigration veterans": those who have been in the U.S. for more than a decade and/or their fluency in English language has helped them succeed at school and at their jobs and therefore, they most likely have a place, at least economically speaking, in American society. This group of Christians are the providers for the first two groups; they help the first group with their need for a community where they can understand its teachings, and they help the second group with their transition into American culture. As one informant from this group told me, many Iranians do not know English and need to be part of the Iranian congregation in order to be able to communicate their Christian thoughts. Their religious beliefs call on this third group to help with creating an environment that provides a sense of belonging for the other two groups.

Maryam and Shahrzaad are clearly more comfortable with their social status in the US than Haadi. They belong to the third group and Haadi belongs to the second group

introduced earlier. Maryam and Shahrzaad have lived in the US longer than Haadi. They have received higher education and have jobs they find satisfactory. This makes it easier for them to be involved in American society and as a result feel more associated with it. Maryam and Shahrzaad have a greater sense of belonging to American society than Haadi, who has an entry-level job and has weak English language skills. Overall, Haadi is at a comparative disadvantage in having contact with American society.

All three characters agree that regardless of the length of their residency in the US, they will not be completely American. Assimilation is a process and especially for first generation of immigrants, there is no end product of complete assimilation. In general, the longer immigrants have lived in the United States and the more education they receive, the more they may be comfortable with their environment in the US.

"A group which assimilates must not only be accepted by the [dominant] group, it must also identify with it" (Teske 1974:362). When the informants seek assimilation into Christian community, they receive acceptance and step in to the process of identifying with a new religious identity. Eventually some identify as Christians. They declare their identification by taking part in baptism. They are both accepted by the church and identify with it on individual and group levels. They continue to have a cultural assimilation into their Christian identity. However, when the informants seek acceptance from American society, they face obstacles as political forces influence their assimilation. They do not feel like they receive complete acceptance on a social level and despite their acceptance on a legal level through obtaining U.S. citizenship, they rarely identify as members of American society.

Christianity and Assimilation

For this group of Iranians, Persian language is a mean of retaining Iranian identity whereas their new religion is a mean of assimilation. For the most part, my informants use these tools unintentionally and neither language nor religion guarantees the achievement of assimilation. I say my informants use these tools unintentionally because if asked directly whether they speak Persian specifically to retain their Iranian identity they may have responses that indicate this is not something they plan on doing on a daily basis. They continue to use this language because it is a point of unification for their community. Also, if asked directly whether they converted to Christianity solely to assimilate into the American culture, they would have a negative response. However, although their choice of Christian faith is based on their personal religious and spiritual experiences, their choice has had positive effects in their assimilation into American culture.

I have to clarify that in my research, I cannot comment on people's faith in Jesus as their Lord or their Savior. Although there are individuals who use their religious conversion as a tool to seek religious asylum in the United States (Akcapar 2006:836), none of the informants I encountered during my fieldwork showed any signs of having used conversion for that purpose [15]. How they have invested their faith in Christianity and how they have trusted in this religion versus another one, and how that feels for them are

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[15] People who seek religious conversion in order to receive religious asylum usually must do so in a "transition" country. Transition countries for Iranians are usually Turkey and sometimes other European countries (Akcapar 2006). However, most of my informants and all of the interviewees converted in the United States.

issues on which I cannot comment. However, I can comment on how for this group of Iranian Americans, religious conversion is both a unifying force and a separating one.

Assimilation into a new Christian identity is a process. Although the act of conversion is a single event - getting baptized and therefore asserting their belief in Jesus Christ publicly is one event- it takes a process to identify as Christians. All of the informants started learning about Christianity by socializing with other Christians and attending church and Bible study sessions. After these meetings and immersion in the Christian culture, eventually some of them became Christians. Since their learning process is continuous and their model is the American church, their assimilation is continuous.

Assimilation into Christian identity has both individual and group aspects. The process of finding qualities such as peace and trust with a new religion are personal. However, arriving at this state of mind requires some preparation that takes place within a group. Church gatherings for Christian teachings and for prayers create a group experience of assimilation. Whether their introduction to Christianity starts in an American church or an Iranian congregation, joining a new religion is a process that involves a group. It is also as a group that Iranian converts learn about and incorporate Christian teachings into their lives. They sit together and analyze what they learn from Christianity, when going through the changes that the new faith makes in their lives. Religious communities become key contributors to this process (Warner 2007:104). The American church provides an opportunity for the children of first generation immigrants to become Americanized while still reinforcing their parents' values, such as respect for their families, hard work, pursuing education and striving for upward mobility. The

Iranian congregation offers religious services and emotional support. It also helps first generation immigrants accept some aspects of their children's Americanization (Warner 2007:110).

Another aspect of assimilation is the concept of dominance. There are two agents in the process of assimilation: an assimilating agent and the agent that is being assimilated. The assimilating agent is the dominant agent (Teske 1974:354). Iranian Christian immigrants constitute a minority cultural group that desires assimilation into American Christian sub-society and into American society, which are both dominant groups. Iranian converts to Christianity seek social and religious acceptance from their Christian community, which includes those who have previously converted to Christianity and those who were born into the religion. Christianity is currently the dominant religion in the United States and by seeking and receiving acceptance from their Iranian Christian community, the converts join the larger American Christian community as well. The broader American Christian community receives no influence from the new converts' old religion and little influence from their Iranian culture. Besides occasional cultural events at church where limited information about Persian history, culture and food is provided to non-Iranian congregations, the Iranian Christian community has very little effect on the American Christian community.

Negative attitudes towards Iranians and lack of reinforcement of American identity lead to the informants' having less attachment to their American identity. Most informants indicated that they did not know how to address negative treatments other than with silence or working towards a higher social status that proves to them they are overcoming their immigration and assimilation obstacles. Having more prestige and

wealth insolates individuals from a certain amount of prejudice. Most informants had decided that getting a higher place in America's stratified social system will pay back for the difficult times they had to face.

As Iranian converts to Christianity, the informants are increasingly accepted by American Christians and the focus of their assimilation process is more on learning and integrating the Christian culture into their lives. Under these conditions, they experience less resistance to letting go of their previous religious values. In the case of assimilation into American identity, preserving an Iranian identity, which is associated with "community solidarity" and with "social networks promoting individual success" makes their assimilation a selective process (Portes and Zhou 1993:81). When Iranian converts accept Christianity, they attempt to accept all aspects of it and fully become Christian but when becoming Americans, they only focus on those aspects of culture that puts them on the track of "the upwardly mobile trajectory toward white middle-class status" (Warner 2007: 103). In this case, the focus of assimilation process is highly selective.

CHAPTER VII.

Conclusion

In the chapters of this thesis, I presented data collected during three months of fieldwork among Iranian immigrants in central Texas. In this research, through studying history of Iranian Christianity in Iran as well as history of conversion to Christianity outside of Iran, and also through anthropological fieldwork, I explored the concepts of ethnic identity with regard to religious conversion. I argued that in the absence of a key element of Iranian ethnic identity, Islam, the informants emphasize other aspects, such as pre-Islamic history and/or Persian language. Through direct observation and interviews, I collected information about how informants perceive their ethnic identity as Iranians, Americans and Christians and how conversion affects the process of assimilation.

Due to various experiences of conversion, Rambo's categorizations do not include all the differences and similarities in such changes in one's identity. Although researchers tend to create classification systems in order to organize and analyze data, these systems do not capture all the aspects of a social change. It is important to note that categories of such systems are not representative of all those who go through a change, such as religious conversion. Even when in chapter 3, I identified my informants as Evangelical Christians, such categorization was made with awareness of the presence of informants who do not proselytize and those who find proselytization unnecessary with so many online and TV programs available to the public.

Christianity is one of the most available religions for conversion for Iranian immigrants in the US. The availability of Christianity in the US and especially in central

Texas leaves a better chance for Christianity to be the option to which informants turn if they choose not to practice their original religion. Furthermore, with negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims in the US, and with Christianity being the more accepted and more practiced religion, converting to Christianity helps with assimilation into American and Western culture.

The fact that for Iranians in central Texas, Christianity has been the religion to answer these people's desire for having a belief system is not a coincidence. Communities of Iranians with different non-Christian religious beliefs do exist in the area but none of them have as active evangelical approach as the Christian community. Also, outside of the Iranian community, evangelical Christianity is more available than any other religion. It is easier for Iranian immigrants in the United States to hear about Christianity than it is for them to hear about any other religion. If one wants to learn about other religions, one has to initiate research for that purpose. Meanwhile, evangelical Christians do not wait for people to look for them. They approach people with their introductory Christian DVDs and pamphlets, making the initial attempts to teach about Christianity. In the highways of the town in which I drove for three months to conduct my research, I never saw a billboard promoting Judaism, Bhai'sm, or Zoroastrianism but there are several billboards inviting their audience to attend a specific Christian church or look at a Christian website or to listen to a Christian radio station.

Although religious conversion for all these members is a spiritual process, it takes place in a historical and political context, making it a contributing factor to assimilation. Despite the fact that conversion to Christianity contributes to assimilation into American society, my data shows that informants prefer to keep their ties with their Iranian identity

as well. Using their native language in worship services and promoting their cultural values suggest that these individuals attempt to retain their identity as an Iranian community. However, to American society, they are represented as Christians, which makes them seem less foreign.

It is true that the political issues between Iran and the United States have an influence on the immigration process for Iranians in the United States. It is important to focus on the impact of the Islamic revolution on Iran-US political relations in the studies of Iranians' lives in exile. "Other than the massive migration of Iranians to India in the seventh century, the 1979 revolution has been the only time in Iranian history during and after which massive numbers of Iranians emigrated. The United States hosts the second largest population of Iranian immigrants" (Mobasher 2012: 171). Since the US hostage crisis in Iran in 1979, the political relations between the two countries have not been good and "the discriminatory practices of US immigration policies towards Iranians have had a negative effect on the formation of Iranian-American identity in exile" (Mobasher 2012: ix). After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, history repeated itself: America categorized Iranians as backward terrorists. President George W. Bush called Iran a terrorist country and part of "an axis of evil". Due to these political issues, despite their successful economic, educational and professional achievements in the US, "Iranians feel marginalized and not accepted in American society and the level of satisfaction with living in the US is low among Iranians" (Mobasher 2012: 3). When not completely welcomed in the host society, Sometimes, Iranian immigrants seek a sub-society to join. The Iranian Christian congregation in this case, serves as this so-called sub-society.

The new Christian networks created through the church become sources of spiritual support as well as sources of sociocultural information. Christianity, both inside of Iran and inside of the US, is associated with Westernization and modernization. I do not argue that people who convert are more modern or more Westernized than those who do not. I also do not suggest that people approach Christianity to achieve such purposes. As a matter of fact, during my research I saw what seemed to me as genuine practice of Christianity and it never seemed to me that any of the Iranian Christians I met at this church were any more Americanized or assimilated into western culture than any other non-Christian Iranian immigrants I have ever encountered. However, when presented to the non-Iranian society in the US, association with Christianity is better understood, making immigrants look more assimilated and less foreign.

The Iranian congregation serves as an opportunity for the informants to continue having ties with their Iranian identity especially by speaking Persian and practicing certain cultural activities, such as celebrating the Persian New Year. As converts to Christianity, they have a new religious identity. Their church supports such transition by reinforcing their Christian identity. As immigrants they have a new ethnic identity. Their host society, however, does not fully support such change. At their Evangelical church, the informants are continuously and verbally told that they are accepted and loved. This is a message that they do not get from the broader society. Therefore, informants fully accept their new Christian identity once they convert but in accepting their new American identity, even after receiving their U.S. citizenship, they are highly selective.

Suggestions for Future Research

As discussed earlier, the sociocultural aspects of immigration and assimilation among Iranian immigrants with regard to religion is a topic not very much explored in academic research. Although data collected from previous research has shown discomfort among Iranian immigrants with establishing a new American identity, there is not much research on their preferences with establishing a new religious identity.

The former secretary-general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, once said, "[t]olerance, inter-cultural dialogue and respect for diversity are more essential than ever in a world where people are becoming more and more closely interconnected"(The United Nations Website). We live in a world where the meaning of dialogue is shifting as cultures themselves shift and coalesce. With the large number of immigrants to the United States every year, it is extremely important to develop immigration service plans that helps them with their transition. Addressing cultural aspects of their assimilation helps immigrants. This research is a useful source for policy makers and community organizers. It promotes a better understanding of diversity and can contribute to a better understanding of culture and religion in American society.

The collected data from this research offers an insight into immigrants' lives. The information is helpful in shaping future immigration policies for Middle Easterners as well as in addressing Middle Easterners' and specifically Iranians' needs and expectations in designing immigration and refugee programs. However, my research only covers a small portion of a more advanced phenomenon. Although many aspects of immigration, assimilation and religious conversion are similar among all Iranian

immigrants in the United States, my informants are not representatives of all Iranian Christian converts in the US. Further research on this topic may address patterns of similarities and differences among communities of Iranian Christian converts and offer comparative studies with communities of non-Iranian Christian converts. Also, continuous research on this topic is necessary as the political and social contexts of immigration of Iranians change over time. Research on other aspects of sociocultural lives of Iranian immigrants, such as marriage and childrearing in the United States, combined with this research, can clarify ways of integrating findings of such research into the policies and programs geared towards immigrants in the United States.

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