

History of religion in iran



Introduction

Iran is one of the oldest nations and civilizations in the world. In the same general region that is considered the cradle of civilization, the Persian Empire came to thousands of years before Christianity or even Islam came to be. The location and history is a complicated one because while the nation shares a great deal with the many nations around it, in many ways, Iran is very different than the nations around it as well. A large and diverse nation, even modern Iran is very mixed with people who identify in many ways racially, ethnically and religiously. Often misunderstood by the west, particularly the modern west, Iran has in all actuality gone through events that are similar to the ones gone through in all other parts of the world. A nation that has, much like nations like Ireland, Sweden, Mexico and more, retained its own ancient traditions while incorporating a more Judeo-Christian religion as a cornerstone of its day to day life. To understand Iran's religious reality it is first and foremost important to know and understand who and what Iran was and is today demographically, ethnically, geographically and racially as they are a large part of the realities of the nation.

Background

Iran is often considered Persia and the people within it Persians. This at best is only about 50% accurate. The Persian empire was the name given to the people and the region by the Greeks who were a major competitor in empire against Iran in the past with multiple wars and conflicts between them over the course of hundreds of years. Iranians themselves would refer to their nation as the land of the Aryans. This is where the name Iran and the term

Iranians comes from as a form of stating Aryans. But Iran was not a nation that was only made up of these Aryan-Iranians who came to be known as Persians. State lines are an arbitrary and man-made construct and in reality, the peoples around Iran made up the nation as much as the Persians. This included groups who are known as Arabs, Afghans, Turks, Kurds, Balochi's, Lorestan's, Armenians, Azeri's, as well as peoples like the Assyrians, Babylonians and more. Iran still to this day is comprised of people from all these backgrounds who now come under the singular state flag of being Iranian, while also still being their own ethnic selves, much like people who are Native, black, Hispanic, Asian, Irish, Italian, etc. retain these titles and are all under the singular state flag of the US. This diversity in ethnicity is related to the many nations and regions surrounding Iran, including nations like Iraq, Afghanistan and Armenia as well as nearby nations that helped shape Iran in many ways, like Russia and Turkey. It is also because of this diversity in geography and ethnicity and culture that while Persian or Farsi is the official state language, other languages and dialects are also spoken all over the country like Kurdish, Arabic, Afghani-Persian, Azeri, etc.

Major Historic Monarchy Periods

All of this information is important for understanding faith and religion in Iran because it is important to know that there are many groups, subgroups and even smaller groups within the subgroups. For example, Islam is a major religion, but there are Sunni and Shiite, and within the Shiite there are many additional groups like Twelvers and Sufis. These different faiths, ranging from Islam and Christianity to Judaism and Bahaism show a nation that is far more complex than many believe as they are not aware of the diversity in

religion and beliefs in the past and the present of Iran. The Persian Empire itself stretches back thousands of years and has had many empires and dynastic controls, some of the most important ones are listed below as a full list of them all would not be feasible.

~Achaemenid Empire

This is one of the oldest empires period with the oldest dynastic family rule in the history of Iran. More importantly, in this 6th century DC empire, a religion that still stands today in Iran and places like India, came to stand as the major religion of the nation, Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism was the original state religion of Iran and was one that swayed life for the majority of the people in the nation/ empire. This is a religion that is considered one of the oldest monotheistic in the world and had many elements like fire that were central. Despite many attempting to eradicate the ancient Zoroastrianism practices from Iran at different times in the nation's history, those traditions are now incorporated into life in the nation in subtle ways (Weinberg 587). One prominent example of that is the Iranian New Year which falls on the first day of spring. A day filled with many traditions that take place both before it and after it, it has many Zoroastrianism elements celebrated. It is worth noting that despite being later conquered and forcibly converted to Islam, the Persian nation never took on the Islamic calendar and instead retained the Persian Calendar. Chehar Shanbe Soory is a day that is celebrated before the official new year in which people light bonfires and jump over them to cleanse the bad energy, spirits and allow the fire to essentially allow them to be reborn into the new year clean; this is a

Zoroastrianism tradition and not an Islamic one and is celebrated every year by Iranians.

~ Sasanian Empire

Islam came to Iran in the ending days of the Sasanian Empire. It was at this time that this became the majority religion of Iran and Zoroastrianism was weeded out for the most part. Splits had happened in the Muslim world before the invasion of Iran by their neighboring

Arab empire to the west. In this period, the nation was in turmoil and the old ways clung on as new traditions came into the country. The divide that existed in Islam before this was already forming as the death of the Prophet Muhammed had led to an internal conflict in which some wanted to have the leadership be by lineage and others wanted it to be a vote. This divide led to the formation of Sunni versus Shiite Islam and over time, Shiite Islam took form and hold in places now known as Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Syria, etc., with the majority if Shiite living inside of Iran (Khodadad 415).

~ Safavid Empire

The Safavid Empire in Iran is known as one of the more significant ones and also one that is seen as the modern turning point of Iran as a nation. In this period, another subset of Islam came about falling under the Shiite title, this was and is called Sufism. Sufism is a mystical set of Islam that has its own unique practices, beliefs and traditions as well as ceremonies, symbols and artifacts (Tucker 144). The Sufi group is often harassed, and many believe that their actions and beliefs are in fact heretic in nature and wrong.

However, there continues to be a large number of devout Sufis in Iran and beyond, and many believe that elements of Sufism have been around since the beginning of Islam as a faith with even the sect being present since the founder himself was alive. The Sufi's were a cornerstone of the Safavid Empire and they played a large part and role in the formatting and establishment of this empire.

~20th Century Monarchy-Pahlavi

Iran in the late 1800s and the majority of the 1900s was in turmoil due to the influence, presence and interfering of outside forces ranging from the US, the UK and Russia. The monarchy of the nation in the late 1800s was brutal and a paper tiger controlled in many ways by foreign powers. The nation, starting in the 1890s attempted to oust the kings and create a constitution. This led to multiple constitutional conventions from 1896-1920 in which the people of Iran attempted through religious leaders to create a more democratic system. However, this was thwarted ultimately in the 1920s when a man proclaimed himself, with no particular background for it, as the new shah and the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty. Throughout this period, the nation was still a majority Muslim nation with hints of other religions as well in many places. The Pahlavi dynasty was an utter failure and the founder and his son both needed the UK and the US to on more than one occasion forcibly keep them in power despite the people rejecting them. This even led the US and the UK to under a secret CIA operation called Ajax help to derail and overthrow the first open democracy in Iran and install their puppet king onto the people by force. This ended in 1979 when the people in Iran, frustrated went to the streets and demanded that the Shah leave, and <https://assignbuster.com/history-of-religion-in-iran/>

the US under Carter did not come again to the rescue to keep him on the throne to retain power.

1979 Revolution

The well-known 1979 revolution was a political, social and religious movement. The revolution saw many players come together to fight the Shah like communists, socialists, religious clerics and more. In the end, the Islamo-fascist groups like the MEK were kicked out of the country after committing acts of terrorism and the nation slipped into an ultra-religious clerical leadership. The nation's new leaders merged faith with politics and the Velayate-Faqih was written as the official rule of the land in Iran. While hair coverings were not a part of the revolution, it was quickly imposed on women who protested it as it was not what they had fought for in the revolution. In a hurry to rid the nation of the western influences that they saw as the problem in the country, the US embassy was taken hostage and eventually closed. Since that time, Iran has gone through varying levels of religious control on the general population with the 1980s and 1990s being more conservative and strict and the 2000s to the present more liberal in comparison and more relaxed.

Conclusion

Iran always had a large Jewish population and still continues to have them. However, most fled out of fear to places like the US in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution. Today, Iran has a Jewish, Christian and Bahai population in addition to many other smaller religious communities as well. These groups live alongside the majority Shiite and minority Sunni population (Ameli and <https://assignbuster.com/history-of-religion-in-iran/>

Molaei 32). Depending on sources, the treatment and rules against each group by the Shiite Muslim majority nation is described differently. Sabbath and Sunday services as well as religious holidays like Rosh Hoshana and Christmas and Easter are celebrated in the many Mosques and Churches that can be found in cities like Isfahan, Tehran and Shiraz. The Bahai religious group appears to be one of the more oppressed and harassed ones with many leaders arrested. The same can be said for some Sunni groups, particular yin places along the Iraq Border who are Kurdish, the Persian Gulf Coast area with Arab Sunnis and the Eastern border with Pakistan that has Baloch Sunnis. However, it seems that the arrests and harassment are aimed more towards political dissent, and not religious differences that exist in these groups.

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