

A Study of French Lazarists and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul's Activities in Isfahan, Iran, (1840-1914)

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Abstract

Backed by the Pope and the French government, French Lazarist missionaries and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul entered Iran to preach Catholicism among Iran's Christian minority in the early 19th century. Upon their arrival, they embarked on diverse cultural activities in Iran, including Isfahan. Thanks to its Christian quarter called Julfa, Isfahan city proved a hit with them.

The present study is an attempt to look into their activities from the arrival of French Lazarists in Isfahan (1840) till the outbreak of World War I (1914). In so doing, the following questions will be addressed:

1. What activities did French Lazarists and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul engage in during their stay in Isfahan?
2. What problems did they have to grapple with in conducting their activities?
3. What were their achievements in Isfahan?

The findings of the study reveal that with preaching their religious beliefs as their ulterior motive, they founded schools, clinics, and similar places, which met with the opposition and resistance of the majority of Julfa's Armenians and other rival missionaries, who were enjoying the widespread support of rival European powers. Despite their failure to spread their religious beliefs among Muslims, Lazarists and Daughters of Charity helped spread the French language and popularize modern sciences. Their contribution to the city's hygiene and health level, however limited its outreach, was also appreciable.

Keywords: Lazarist, Daughters of Charity, Isfahan, Cultural Activities, Qajar Period.

Introduction

In 1625, St. Vincent de Paul, a French Catholic priest, founded a congregation of the mission to preach Christianity, particularly among the rural poor, do charitable works, and train candidates for the priesthood. As he was based in the priory of St. Lazare in Paris, and founded his congregation there, he and his followers came to be known as Lazarists. A few years later, he also founded the congregation of Daughters or Sisters of Charity in Paris, made up of volunteer women, with similar goals.

Although they set out to preach their religious beliefs in different parts of the world soon after the foundation of their congregations, they came to Iran quite late, that was in the early 19th century, which coincided with the Qajar era. Galvanized by the success of American Protestant missionaries in Iran, the Pope decided to send Catholic missionaries to this country, too. Therefore, French Lazarist missionaries volunteered to go to Iran, initially planning to teach and preach Catholicism to Iran's

Christian population. In so doing, receiving political and financial support from the French government, the French Lazarists and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul set out to found their educational and religious institutions like churches, schools, medical institutions, printing houses, and charities.

This coincided with the rule of Qajar's third king, Muhammad Shah (1834-1848), when by different estimates, Iran's Christian population of different denominations ranged from 30,000 to 200,000, who mainly inhabited the northwest part of Iran, that is the Azerbaijan province, with some other parts of Iran such as Tehran, Hamedan, Kermanshah, and Isfahan. Thanks to its Christian quarter called Julfa and the presence of an Armenian minority, Isfahan, the former capital of Iran in the Safavid era and one of the most important cities of Iran, attracted the attention of the Lazarists.

The majority of Armenians in Isfahan practiced Orthodoxy and were called Gregorian as they had been converted to Christianity by Saint Gregory the Illuminator. By different estimates, their population ranged from 2,500 to 3,000. According to this, the first Lazarist priest entered Isfahan in 1840. From then on until the following 75 years, when the outbreak of World War I stalled their activities for a few years, first the Lazarists and then Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul with the Lazarists engaged in preaching Catholicism in Isfahan.

This study has classified their activities into three different categories based on three different time periods as follows:

1. Since the arrival of the Lazarists in Isfahan till the end of Muhammad Shah Qajar's rule (1840-1848);
2. Naser al-Din Shah Qajar's rule (1848-1896); and
3. Since the assassination of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar till the outbreak of World War I (1896-1914).

The study, then, goes on to look into the problems they had to grapple with in conducting their activities in each of these respective periods and their legacy during their stay in Isfahan.

1. The French Lazarists and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul's activities in Isfahan

1-1- Since the arrival of the Lazarists in Isfahan till the end of Muhammad Shah Qajar's rule (1840-1848):

Under Muhammad Shah Qajar's rule, the controversy between Britain and Iran over Herat, currently in Afghanistan, and Britain's occupation of Kharg Island, in the Persian Gulf, on the one hand, and Russia's failure to support Iran, on the other hand, made Muhammad Shah turn to France.¹ Since France was unable to politically compete with Britain and Russia in Iran, it embarked on cultural activities to achieve its political and economic goals in the region.² In so doing, the French government supported the Lazarists, who had been sent to Iran by the Pope, and through diplomatic relationships convinced Muhammad Shah to grant them some

advantages.³At the request of Count de Sercey, the special envoy of the French government, Muhammad Shah issued two royal decrees in support of Catholics' activities in Iran, as well as in Julfa, in 1840.

According to the first decree, French Catholics' possessions in Julfa, dating back to the Safavid era, were transferred to the Lazarists, and Isfahan governors were obliged to ensure that Armenians would not stake out a claim to any of these possessions. These possessions were the French church along with all its belongings including a library boasting 1500 volumes of books, three gardens, and one village, which had been seized by the local Armenians of Julfa over time.⁴According to the second decree, all Iranian Catholics were given *carte blanche* to practice their religion, found and renovate their churches and schools, and bury their dead co-religionists according to their own rituals. They were also granted an equal legal status with Iranian nationals in buying and owning properties and their inheritance.⁵

Once these decrees had been issued, Eugene Bore, a French Catholic believer who was an orientalist and researcher of Semitic languages, started his activities in Julfa.⁶Bore, who had advised de Sercey on the decrees issued by Muhammad Shah,⁷founded a school in Julfa in mid-1840 to teach the French language as a vehicle for conveying modern sciences and ideas, with his ulterior motive being the spread of Catholicism. Bore believed that familiarity with modern sciences would sow seeds of suspicion in Muslims' Islamic beliefs, eventually convincing them to convert to Catholicism.⁸

Five months after the foundation of the school, 31 students enrolled, 5 of whom were Muslims.⁹In view of the fact that the Catholic population of Julfa was 100, non-Catholic Christians accounted for most of the students of this school. The school would gain in popularity more and more, with the French language being the most popular subject with the enrollees.¹⁰

Teachers from different religious beliefs taught different subjects: a Muslim teacher taught Persian; an Armenian teacher taught the Armenian language; an Iranian cleric taught Islamic beliefs and rituals to Muslim students; and, in addition to geography and the French language, Bore himself taught Catholicism to Christian students.¹¹There were two Lazarist priests who were also active with Bore in Julfa.¹²

The school was going from strength to strength such that its student number finally reached 120.¹³The ever-growing popularity of the school made Bore flirt with the idea of founding a separate school for girls.¹⁴However, only one year after the foundation of this school and Lazarists' activities in Isfahan did Bore and the other two priests have to leave Isfahan in the wake of an uprising against them and the school in Julfa.¹⁵Once they had left, the school popularity declined dramatically to the point that there were only 20 Catholic students left to study there.¹⁶The fact is non-Catholics and Muslims could not risk sending their children to this school anymore.

These oppositions considerably curtailed the Lazarists' activities in Isfahan like other parts of Iran especially in Azerbaijan. From then on (i.e. 1842) till the end of

Muhammad Shah's rule and his death (1848), the French government made every effort to support the Lazarists and to help redress the damages done to them.¹⁷ However, such attempts only worked in Azerbaijan and were to little avail in Isfahan, most probably due to Armenians' opposition and their superiority there.

1-2- Naser al-Din Shah Qajar's rule (1848-1896):

Under Naser al-Din Shah's long rule, the activities of the Lazarists and Daughters of Charity were affected by Iran's political situation and the support of the French government and the Pope. The low number of Catholic population in Isfahan, tight budgets, and the mismanagement of the limited budgets they had been granted, also adversely affected the scope of their activities in Isfahan. The Catholic community in Isfahan was made up of only 20 families, and on some occasions Catholic priests failed to receive the financial support considered for them by the Pope, because of mismanagement and corruption. In contrast, non-Catholic Armenians, who were rich and powerful due to the Russian government's support, far outnumbered them.¹⁸

In the initial years of Naser al-Din Shah's rule, Amir Kabir, his chief minister, tried to support the Catholics as an antidote to the ever-growing influence of Russia and Britain in Iran, but when Mirza Agha Khan Nuri, who was under the influence of Britain, took over as the new prime minister, the pressure continued to mount on the Catholics, making them turn to the Pope for support.¹⁹ In response to their call for support, the Pope commissioned Pascal Araklian, an Armenian Catholic bishop, and another priest to examine the situation of the Catholics in Iran in 1864. Financially backed by the Pope, these two travelled to Isfahan.²⁰

Their activities helped improve the situation of the Lazarists and Sisters of Charity in Iran, as well as in Isfahan. After a few years, Father Pascal was appointed the head of the Catholics in Isfahan,²¹ and with the financial support of the French government, Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul opened a school for girls in 1864. Then, at the request of Naser al-Din Shah, the Catholics' library dating back to the Safavid era was transferred to them. Immediately after, the Catholics staked out a claim to the gardens and abbeys in Julfa.²²

All these, strongly suggest that after Bore left Isfahan following the oppositions against him and Lazarists' activities, the Catholics had had their properties relinquished again. That the Armenian Catholics, who had taken over from the Lazarists as the head of the Catholics in Julfa, were corrupt and did not take good care of these properties, further verifies this hypothesis.²³

However, a few years later, owing to some political upheavals in France and the Paris Commune (1871), Naser al-Din Shah, who was deeply worried about the spread of republican ideologies in Iran, had to curtail the Lazarists' activities.²⁴ But after four years when the situation had returned to normal, the Lazarists and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul resumed their activities, opening two schools for boys and girls each, and founding a health clinic.²⁵ Based on the reports written by European explorers: French, Persian, history, geography, calculus, handwriting, and painting were the subjects taught in these schools.²⁶ In addition to these subjects, girls

were taught sewing, too.²⁷Zill-al Sultan, the governor of Isfahan, was also allocating an annual budget to their activities. However, their financial situation did not still seem to be proper.²⁸

A few years later, desperately worried about the spread of revolutionary ideologies once again, in a royal decree in 1889, Naser al-Din Shah banned the foundation of new foreign schools in Iran. This dealt a blow to the Lazarists' educational activities in the final years of Naser al-Din Shah's rule.²⁹Father Pascal's more interest in commerce and trade than in the Christians' religious affairs further aggravated this situation.³⁰In short, the activities of French Lazarists and Daughters of St. Vincent de Paul in Isfahan under Naser al-Din Shah's rule saw a lot of vicissitudes, which ultimately adversely affected them.

1-3- Since the assassination of Naser al-Din Shah till the outbreak of World War I (1896-1914):

After Mozaffar ad-Din Shah succeeded his father, schools, both foreign and domestic, saw a boom as a result of some limitations having been lifted and a more liberal attitude toward cultural and political issues.³¹The Lazarists and Daughters of Charity seized the opportunity to extend the scope of their activities.

Having met Mozaffar ad-Din Shah and securing his support, Francois Lesne, the newly selected Pope's representative in Iran,³²travelled to Isfahan to examine the Catholics' situation in 1897.³³On his recommendation in 1903, Emile Demuth, a French Lazarist priest who had been serving in Azerbaijan before, was appointed the head of the Catholics in Isfahan.³⁴Following this appointment and the deployment of three Lazarists and some members of Daughters of St. Vincent de Paul in Isfahan, who had numbered 7 in 1907, their activities got into full swing.³⁵

Having paid a heavy compensation to the owners, Demuth settled the issue of transferring properties and other belongings, consisting of one church, one abbey, several gardens, and two houses, one of which was a school with no student at the time, and got back all of them from Father Pascal after around 40 years.³⁶Upon his arrival in Isfahan in 1903, Demuth opened a school for boys with seven students in Julfa. The following year, Daughters of Charity also opened the Holy Mary congregation and a school for girls in Julfa.³⁷The resumption of such activities suggests that their schools had been closed down in the final years of Naser al-Din Shah's rule. Moreover, Daughters of Charity turned a house into a charity for orphans and homeless children, which served 75 of them. They also admitted 60 patients to their health clinic.³⁸

In an effort to expand his activities, Father Demuth set out to renovate the buildings and further develop new ones. Having bought the construction materials of Safavid-era palaces, which Zill al- Sultan had them torn down, he founded a big building for the school, which was adjacent to the church.³⁹All these efforts helped schools attract many more students, such that by 1910 there were 120 and 130 boys and girls, respectively, studying in those schools.⁴⁰Meanwhile subjects being taught in the schools were tending towards more modern sciences and conventional skills.⁴¹

Another factor contributing to the considerable rise in the number of students was the rather liberal atmosphere created in the wake of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran. Taking advantage of the new-found opening in the political situation of the day and receiving the support of the French embassy in Tehran, Demuth opened Setare-i Subh school outside Julfia, in Chahar Bagh Street, without having to ask Iranian government's permission.⁴² Having Iranian teachers as its staff, this school started its activities with 50 students with the goal of attracting many more Muslim students.⁴³

Demuth was also active in publication and promotion of religious beliefs. The Lazarists had their most important publication house in Uromiyeh, one of the cities of Azerbaijan, and started their second important publication house in Isfahan. In 1908, Demuth travelled to France to order all the necessary equipment for the publication house.⁴⁴ He had previously made the necessary characters on his own and, thanks to his command of most Eastern languages, he had published a magazine on science and morality in Armenian language.⁴⁵

However, the outbreak of World War I slowed down the Lazarists and Daughters of Charity's activities; it would only take the Russian occupation of Isfahan to bring all their activities to a complete halt. In 1914, Daughters of Charity were called up to serve war casualties in Paris.⁴⁶ Demuth also had to leave Isfahan the following year. As the Russian army was approaching Isfahan, Setare-i Subh school closed down and did not open for the following few years.⁴⁷

2- The problems the French Lazarists and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul had to grapple with in conducting their activities

Arguably the most important problem the French Catholics had to deal with in Isfahan was the opposition of the majority of Armenian population in Julfa, who were Gregorian and were vehemently opposing the Armenian Catholic minority since their immigration to Isfahan from Armenia in 1605.⁴⁸

Moreover, from a political point of view, due to the influence of Russia and Britain in Iran and their support of Orthodox and Protestant missionaries, the Lazarists and Daughters of Charity's activities suggested the influence of the French government and Catholicism, which was giving Russia and Britain serious cause for concern. Therefore, Muhammad Shah's decrees in support of Catholics incurred the wrath of Gregorian Armenians, other missionaries, and the Muslim clergy in Isfahan, as well.⁴⁹

The Lazarists' activities in Isfahan met with the fierce opposition of official Armenians' church in Julfa, especially in view of the fact that an Armenian priest had converted to Catholicism. Consequently, an Armenian priest was seen brandishing a sword on a horse, asking the Lazarists to leave Isfahan.⁵⁰ Bore's school also met with Armenians' implacable opposition, because it was considered as Bore's efforts to convert Armenian children to Catholicism. Muslims also claimed that Bore was trying to convert their children to Christianity.⁵¹ As his life was in danger, Bore had to leave Iran despite Muhammad Shah's support.⁵²

As a result of the religious conflicts, which had also made the Lazarists react to their opponents' opposition,⁵³ and the pressure of the Russian government,⁵⁴ Muhammad Shah issued a decree in 1842 which prohibited preaching religion and conversion to faiths among Iranian Christians. The decree had also stipulated punishment for its breach.⁵⁵

Under Naser al-Din Shah's rule, as the competition between Britain and Russia over Iran intensified, Isfahan came under the influence of Britain. Therefore, the influence of English Protestant missionaries and their churches posed a challenge to the Lazarists' activities.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the conflict between Julfa's Gregorian Armenians and the Catholics escalated to the point that sometimes Catholic priests would take refuge in Muslims' homes.⁵⁷ Even French ambassador to Iran, Count de Gobineuu, had to put Julfa's Catholics under the protection of Muslims' religious leader in Isfahan, Imam Jum'a.⁵⁸ Under the influence of the Lazarists' opponents, Shah also saw the French schools as a means to disseminate revolutionary ideologies, which could prove dangerous for the government; as a result, he would stop their activities once in a while.⁵⁹

After Naser al-Din Shah, as the political atmosphere became more propitious for cultural activities, different missionaries, including Russian, English, and American ones, jockeyed for attracting Armenian children to their respective schools.⁶⁰ Now having an influence in Iran, German missionaries also entered this competition.⁶¹ Therefore, Demuth's school met with the bitter opposition of Gregorian Armenians and other rival missionaries.⁶²

Internecine struggles posed another challenge to the Lazarists' activities. As a case in point, when Demuth came to Isfahan, a bitter conflict arose between him and Father Pascal.⁶³ On the other hand, Shiite clerics in Isfahan also saw foreign schools and their education as a threat to Iran and Islam and would ask people refrain from sending their children to these schools.⁶⁴ However, what dealt a death blow to the Lazarists and Daughters of Charity's activities in Iran at the time was the way political events unfolded in the international scene and the outbreak of World War I.

3- The French Lazarists and Daughters of Charity's achievements in Isfahan

The results of the presence of the French Lazarists' missionaries and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Isfahan can be classified into three different categories: education, health, and dissemination of religious beliefs.

From an educational point of view, their emphasis on education as a means to disseminate their religious beliefs helped them lead the way in popularizing modern sciences and Western education in Isfahan. Moreover, the instruction of the French language in their schools came to become a magnet to attract students to French schools.⁶⁵

In this era (1840-1914), French was the dominant language in international affairs and the foreign language of choice for the Qajar court and bureaucrats.⁶⁶ Knowledge of the French language would not only facilitate Western education and bring a high

social status for the person, but it would also stand the person in good stead when it came to finding a job.⁶⁷ Therefore, the Lazarists' presence in different cities of Iran, including Isfahan, went a long way towards the development of this language among Iranians, including Armenians of Julfa and Muslims of the city. Of course, some institutes like Alliance schools also contributed to its popularity in Isfahan, but the Lazarists were pioneers.

Regarding the health level of the society, contagious diseases would take a heavy toll on people, with many ending up dead due to the abysmal hygiene conditions. Therefore, the Lazarists' contribution to people's health benefited some, in particular the poor.⁶⁸ Compared to Iran's traditional doctors, Daughters of St. Vincent de Paul were more skillful doctors, who would even occasionally serve as dentists, midwives, and surgeons.⁶⁹

In terms of spreading their religious beliefs, as the majority of Julfa's Armenian population was poor, the Lazarists and Daughters of Charity managed to attract some of them to their religious beliefs by offering money and granting them some privileges.⁷⁰ However, they failed to convert the Muslims, living in the city and even its outskirts.⁷¹

Conclusion

The Catholics' activities in Iran in the Qajar era (1789-1925) were started under Muhammad Shah's rule (1834-1848), with the arrival of the French Lazarists. Supported by the Pope and the French government, Lazarists and then Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul embarked on cultural activities in line with the French government's political and economic goals in competition with American and English Protestant and Russian Orthodox missionaries.

Thanks to Julfa's Christian population, Isfahan city attracted their attention. However, as the majority of Julfa's Christians were Orthodox Armenians supported by the Russian government and were opposing the Catholics, the Lazarists' activities were hampered by their bitter opposition. Other missionaries, especially English Protestant missionaries who had an advantage over their rivals because of Isfahan being under Britain's influence, were in stiff competition with them. Naser al-Din Shah's worries about the dissemination of revolutionary and republican ideologies posed another threat to their activities.

Despite all these problems, it seems that the French Lazarists' personality traits, as compared to non-French Catholics like Armenians, were a determining factor in the progress of their activities. Because, when persistent and knowledgeable Lazarists like Bore and Demuth were in charge of Catholics in Isfahan, Lazarists' activities got in full swing. The role of Daughters of Charity in these activities was also noticeable. From the mid-19th century onward, they went on to found a school for girls, a clinic, and a charity in Isfahan. Their contribution to the health and wellbeing of the community on the whole, however much less than that of English missionaries, was also affective.

However, the schools, founded by the Lazarists and the Daughters of Charity, can be seen as the crowning achievement of their activities. Although they turned to education as a means to promote their religious beliefs, they failed to convert any Muslim to Christianity. Despite this failure, their schools in Isfahan led the way in modernity and, like other schools founded by foreign missionaries, set an example for other new schools to follow in Isfahan, both among Armenian locals of Julfa and Muslims in the city. Furthermore, instruction of the French language, as the international language of the day, and popularization of modern sciences contributed to the rise of an intellectual minority in Isfahan. This intellectual minority eventually either landed an administrative job or initiated cultural activities of their own not only in Isfahan but also across the whole country.

Notes

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- ⁴ - Count de Sercey, *Iran in 1839-1840*, translated into Persian by Ihsan Ishraghi, Markaz-i nashre-i daneshgahi, Tehran, 1362, p. 198; Homa Nategh, *Iran dar rahyabi-yi farhangi*, Intisharat-i Khavaran & Pegah, Paris, 1368, pp. 192-193; Count de Gobineuu, *Les Depeches Diplomatiques*, translated into Persian by A'bdulreza Hushang-i Mahdavi, Intisharat-i Joya, Tehran, 1370, p. 303.
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- ¹⁷ - Ghaemmaghami, pp. 244 -273
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- ²³ - de Gobineuu, pp. 303- 304.

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- ⁵³ - Nategh, 1380, p. 183.
- ⁵⁴ - Ghaemmaghani, pp. 238- 239.
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⁶⁹- Mme Carla Serena, *Hommes et Choses en Perse*, translated into Persian (Safarnameh) by A'liasghar Sa'eidi, Intisharat-i Zavvar, Tehran, 1362, p. 187.

⁷⁰- Ibid, p. 185.

⁷¹- Arnold Talbot Wilson, *S. W Persia: Letters and Diary of a Young Political Officer 1907–1914*, translated into Persian (Safarnam-i Wilson dar junub-i gharbe-yi Iran) by A'li Muhammad Saki, Intisharat-i shapoorkhast, Khorramabad, 1394, p. 34; Charles James Wills, *In the Land of the Lion and Sun or Modern Persia*, translated into Persian (Safarnameh) by Gholamhossein Gharaguzlu, Intisharat-i Ighbal, Tehran, 1368, pp. 188 & 204.