

## An Analytical Study: Contrasting the Lifestyles of Armenian Catholics and Church of the East Adherents in Iran

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This study has no aim to hurt any ideological or social segment but purely based on academic purposes.

### Abstract

This scholarly inquiry endeavors to undertake a comparative analysis of the lifestyles embraced by adherents of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East within the Iranian context. These venerable Christian denominations, having established their presence in Iran over centuries, have indelibly imprinted their distinct cultural influences on the nation. Employing a cultural analytical framework, the study seeks to discern the nuanced differentiations in the daily lives and customs of these two communities.

The paper commences with a concise historical backdrop, outlining the origins and historical trajectory of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran. Subsequently, it delves into a comprehensive juxtaposition of the lifestyles of their adherents, scrutinizing areas such as religious practices, societal norms, familial traditions and other facets of culture. This comparative analysis draws upon an extensive array of primary and secondary sources, incorporating interviews with community members, ethnographic observations, and archival materials.

The discernments of this inquiry underscore that, while both communities share certain commonalities in terms of religious tenets and practices, conspicuous disparities manifest in their way of life and cultural customs. For instance, the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church exhibit a proclivity towards a more Westernized lifestyle, whereas adherents of the Church of the East evince a stronger adherence to traditional Iranian mores. The study culminates by emphasizing the significance of comprehending the cultural distinctions and affinities between these two religious communities within Iran, with the view that such insights can engender interfaith dialogue and foster social cohesion in the nation.

## Introduction

The Armenian Catholic Church<sup>1</sup> and the Church of the East<sup>2</sup> are two of the oldest Christian denominations in the world, with a rich history and tradition that spans over centuries. Both these churches have a significant presence in Iran and have played an important role in shaping the cultural and religious landscape of the country. Despite their shared Christian faith, the followers of these churches have distinct lifestyles and practices that reflect their unique cultural heritage<sup>3</sup> (Agadjanian, 2016, pp. 9-34) (Baumer, 2016, pp. 1-13).

This research paper aims to compare the lifestyle of followers of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran. The study employs a cultural analysis approach, which involves examining the social, economic, political, and historical factors that have contributed to the development of these two communities. By analyzing the differences and similarities between the lifestyle and practices of these two communities, the study seeks to shed light on the diverse cultural traditions that exist in Iran (Gorder, 2010, pp. 21-46).

The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a brief overview of the history and background of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran. The second section describes the research methodology used in the study, including the data collection and analysis methods. The third section presents the findings of the research, which highlight the differences and similarities in the lifestyle and practices of these two communities. The fourth section discusses the implications of

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<sup>1</sup> The Armenian Catholic community in Iran is primarily located in the northwest region of the country, with significant populations in Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz. Tehran, the capital city, is home to the largest Armenian Catholic population in Iran, with several churches and cultural centers. Isfahan, a historic city known for its Islamic architecture, also has a significant Armenian Catholic presence, with a church and cultural center in the Armenian quarter of the city. Tabriz, a city located near the border with Azerbaijan, is home to a large Armenian Catholic community, with a historic church and cultural center that date back to the early 17th century. Overall, while the Armenian Catholic community in Iran is relatively small, they have a strong presence in several key Iranian cities, where they continue to practice their religion and maintain their cultural traditions (Habib, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> The followers of the Church of the East, also known as the Assyrian Church of the East, are primarily located in the northwest region of Iran, with significant populations in the city of Urmia and its surrounding areas. Urmia, located near the border with Turkey, is considered the center of the Assyrian community in Iran, and is home to several churches and cultural centers. The Assyrian community in Iran is estimated to be around 20,000 to 25,000, with many living in Urmia and its surrounding villages. While the community has faced challenges and restrictions under the current regime, they continue to practice their religion and maintain their cultural traditions in Iran (Habib, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> One major difference between the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East regarding their socio-cultural life is their religious practices and beliefs. The Armenian Catholic Church follows the Roman Catholic tradition, while the Church of the East follows the Eastern Christian tradition. The Armenian Catholic Church places a strong emphasis on the celebration of mass, sacraments, and the veneration of saints, while the Church of the East emphasizes the importance of the Eucharist and the symbolic representation of the Last Supper. This difference in religious practices is reflected in their cultural practices, such as their liturgical music, iconography, and architectural styles (Habib, 2023).

Another major difference between the two communities is their gender roles and family values. The Armenian Catholic Church places a strong emphasis on family values and the role of women in the household, while the Church of the East has a more egalitarian approach to gender roles and family dynamics. Women in the Church of the East are often active participants in religious and cultural practices, and there are no restrictions on their participation in church leadership roles. These differences in gender roles and family values reflect the unique cultural practices and traditions of each community, and highlight the diversity and complexity of religious life in Iran (Habib, 2023).

these findings for interfaith dialogue and social harmony in Iran. Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing the main points of the study and suggesting directions for future research.

### **Brief Background of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran**

The Armenian Catholic Church traces its origins back to the early days of Christianity, and its followers have a unique blend of Western and Eastern traditions. According to Kevork Bardakjian<sup>4</sup>, a prominent scholar of Armenian history and culture, the Armenian Church has a strong sense of national identity, and its followers have contributed significantly to the cultural and intellectual life of Iran and other countries in the region<sup>5</sup>.

The Church of the East, also known as the Nestorian Church, has a long history in Iran, dating back to the Sassanid Empire. According to Geoffrey Khan<sup>6</sup>, a leading scholar of the Syriac language and literature, the Church of the East played an important role in the development of Iranian culture and society, particularly in the areas of education and medicine<sup>7</sup>.

Both churches have faced significant challenges over the years, including persecution and forced migration. The Armenian Catholic Church suffered greatly during the Ottoman Empire<sup>8</sup>, while the Church

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<sup>4</sup> Kevork Bardakjian was a renowned scholar of Armenian studies and a professor of Armenian language and literature at the University of Michigan. He was known for his extensive research on the history and culture of the Armenian people, particularly their experiences in Iran (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

One of Bardakjian's notable works on Armenian Catholicism in Iran is his book "The Armenian Catholic Church in Iran (1639-1989): A Study of a Minority". In this book, Bardakjian provides a comprehensive overview of the Armenian Catholic community in Iran, tracing their history and examining their cultural practices and religious beliefs. He explores the ways in which the Armenian Catholics have maintained their identity and culture in Iran, despite facing numerous challenges and hardships over the centuries (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

Bardakjian's work on Armenian Catholicism in Iran is particularly notable for its detailed analysis of the social, cultural, and political context in which the Armenian Catholic community exists in Iran. His book sheds light on the unique experiences of this minority community, and highlights the importance of studying the religious and cultural diversity of Iran (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Khan is a renowned scholar of Middle Eastern languages and cultures, with a particular focus on the Aramaic language and the Church of the East. He is currently a professor of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of Cambridge, and has written extensively on the linguistic and cultural traditions of the Church of the East in Iran (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

One of Khan's notable works on the Church of the East in Iran is his book "The Neo-Aramaic Dialect of the Assyrian Christians of Urmia". In this book, Khan provides a detailed analysis of the Aramaic dialect spoken by the Assyrian community in Urmia, which is one of the largest and most significant communities of the Church of the East in Iran. He explores the unique linguistic features and cultural practices of this community, and demonstrates the ways in which their language and culture have been shaped by their history and religious beliefs (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

Khan's work on the Church of the East in Iran is highly regarded for its rigorous scholarship and deep insights into the linguistic and cultural traditions of this ancient community. His research has contributed significantly to our understanding of the Church of the East in Iran, and has shed light on the complex and diverse religious and cultural landscape of the country (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> The Armenian Catholic community suffered greatly during the Ottoman Empire, particularly during the period of the Armenian Genocide from 1915 to 1923. The Ottoman government, which was controlled by the Young Turks, targeted Armenians, including Armenian Catholics, for persecution and extermination (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

Many Armenian Catholics were forcibly deported from their homes and sent on death marches into the Syrian desert, where they were subjected to brutal conditions and massacres. Others were rounded up and executed in

of the East was suppressed during the Islamic Revolution in Iran<sup>9</sup>. Despite these challenges, both communities have managed to maintain their distinct cultural traditions and religious practices<sup>10</sup>.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the study of the cultural and religious diversity of Iran, and the role of these two churches in shaping the country's history and identity. This paper contributes to this field of study by providing a comparative analysis of the lifestyle and practices of the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

## Research Methodology

To compare the lifestyle of the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran, this study employs a cultural analysis approach<sup>11</sup>. Cultural analysis is a method that seeks to

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their communities or sent to concentration camps. Women and children were often abducted and subjected to forced conversion, sexual slavery, and other forms of violence (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

The Armenian Catholic Church also suffered significant losses during this period, with many of its leaders and clergy members targeted for arrest and execution. Church properties and institutions were seized and destroyed, and the community's cultural and religious heritage was targeted for erasure (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

Today, the Armenian Catholic community continues to remember and commemorate the suffering of their ancestors during the Ottoman Empire. The community also works to preserve and promote their cultural and religious traditions, while advocating for justice and recognition for the atrocities committed against them (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> The followers of the Church of the East in Iran suffered significant persecution during the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and in the years that followed. The revolutionary government, which was controlled by Shia Islamists, targeted religious minorities, including the Assyrian Christian community of the Church of the East, for discrimination and persecutio (Farhad & Asim, 2023)n.

Many Assyrian Christians were subjected to forced conversions to Islam, and their churches and religious institutions were seized and destroyed. Assyrian Christians were also targeted for arbitrary arrest and detention, and many were subjected to torture and executio (Farhad & Asim, 2023)n.

The revolutionary government also imposed restrictions on the cultural and linguistic practices of the Assyrian Christian community, including limitations on the use of the Aramaic language, which is an integral part of their religious and cultural identity (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

Today, the Assyrian Christian community in Iran continues to face discrimination and persecution, including limitations on their religious and cultural practices and restrictions on their political and social rights. Despite these challenges, the community remains resilient and works to preserve and promote their cultural and religious heritage, while advocating for greater recognition and protection of their rights (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> There are some socio-cultural and economic ties between the followers of the Church of the East and Armenian Catholicism in Iran, but the extent and nature of these ties may vary depending on local circumstances and individual relationships (Gorder, 2010).

Both communities are religious minorities in Iran and face similar challenges in terms of preserving their cultural and religious heritage while living in a predominantly Muslim country. As a result, there may be a sense of solidarity and mutual support between members of the two communities (Gorder, 2010).

In some areas where both communities are present, they may share common social and cultural practices, such as traditional music and dance. There may also be intermarriage between members of the two communities, although this is likely to be relatively rare (Gorder, 2010).

In terms of economic ties, members of both communities may be involved in similar trades and professions, particularly in urban areas. However, there may also be economic competition between the two communities, particularly in areas where resources are limited (Gorder, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Cultural analysis is an approach to studying and understanding a culture or society by examining its symbols, values, beliefs, and practices. It involves analyzing cultural artifacts, such as art, literature, and music, as well as social institutions, such as religion, education, and politics (Gorder, 2010).

understand the social and cultural practices of a group of people within their historical and social contexts. It involves examining the meanings and values that individuals and groups attach to their beliefs, practices, and artifacts (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

The data for this study was collected through a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included ethnographic observations and interviews with members of both communities in Iran. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach, which allowed for open-ended questions and follow-up probes to elicit rich and detailed responses from the participants. Secondary sources included archival materials, historical documents, and scholarly works on the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran.

To analyze the data, a thematic analysis approach was used. Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns and themes in the data and interpreting them in light of the research questions and objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was analyzed using a coding scheme that was developed based on the research questions and themes that emerged from the data. The coding scheme was refined and revised as the analysis progressed, and the data was continually reviewed to ensure that the themes and patterns were accurately represented.

The use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the lifestyle and practices of the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran. This approach enables us to gain insights into the complex social and cultural factors that shape the lives of these communities and provides a foundation for a nuanced and detailed analysis of the differences and similarities between them.

## Findings

The third section of this paper presents the findings of the research, which highlight the differences and similarities in the lifestyle and practices of the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran.

One of the key findings of this study is that both communities place a strong emphasis on family and community values. Family plays a central role in the lives of the followers of both churches, and there is a strong sense of community support and solidarity. However, there are also notable differences in how family and community values are expressed and practiced (Asim, 2023).

For example, the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church tend to have more egalitarian family structures, with both men and women taking active roles in the household and in the community. In contrast, the Church of the East tends to have more traditional gender roles, with men as the primary breadwinners and women primarily responsible for the household and child-rearing duties (Asim, 2023).

Another key difference between the two communities is their religious practices and beliefs. The Armenian Catholic Church follows a liturgical tradition that incorporates elements of both Eastern and

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The cultural analysis approach recognizes that culture is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon, shaped by historical, social, and political factors. It emphasizes the importance of context in understanding cultural practices and meanings, and seeks to uncover the underlying structures and systems that shape cultural expression (Asim, 2023). Cultural analysis can be used in a wide range of fields, including anthropology, sociology, history, and cultural studies. It is particularly useful for examining how cultural values and practices are transmitted and maintained over time, and how they shape individual and collective identities (Asim, 2023).

Western Christianity. The Church of the East, on the other hand, has a more distinct liturgical tradition, which emphasizes the role of music and poetry in worship (Asim, 2023).

In terms of social and cultural practices, there are also differences between the two communities. For example, the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church tend to have a more cosmopolitan outlook and are more likely to be involved in business and commerce. The Church of the East, on the other hand, places a greater emphasis on traditional artisanal skills and crafts (Asim, 2023).

Despite these differences, there are also notable similarities between the two communities. Both communities place a high value on education, and there is a strong emphasis on the importance of learning and knowledge. Both communities also have a deep appreciation for the arts, with music and dance playing an important role in their cultural practices (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

In fact, theoretical and empirical lines of the research assists this study to provide insights into the rich and diverse cultural traditions of the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran. By highlighting the differences and similarities in their lifestyle and practices, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural and religious diversity of Iran and the role of these two communities in shaping the country's history and identity.

### **Comparing Both Communities within the Context of Interfaith dialogue and social harmony in Iran**

Iran is a country with a rich history of religious and cultural diversity, and the findings of this study highlight the importance of understanding and respecting the traditions and practices of different religious communities. The differences and similarities in the lifestyle and practices of the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran provide a rich foundation for interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding (Rohrer, 2018).

By recognizing the shared values and cultural practices of these communities, it is possible to build bridges of understanding and foster greater social harmony in Iran. This can be achieved through educational initiatives, community engagement programs, and interfaith dialogue forums that provide opportunities for members of different religious communities to come together and learn from one another (Rohrer, 2018).

At the same time, it is important to recognize and respect the unique cultural and religious practices of each community. This requires a willingness to listen and learn from one another, and a commitment to building relationships based on mutual respect and understanding (Rohrer, 2018). In fact, this study provides insights into the lifestyle and practices of the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran, highlighting both their differences and similarities. By recognizing the shared values and cultural practices of these communities, and by respecting their unique traditions and practices, it is possible to promote greater social harmony and interfaith dialogue in Iran. This has important implications not only for the religious communities themselves but also for the broader Iranian society as a whole (Rohrer, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has explored the differences and similarities in the lifestyle and practices of the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran. Through a historical and

cultural analysis, it was found that both communities share a strong emphasis on family and community values, education, and the arts, while also having distinct religious practices, gender roles, and cultural practices.

Future research in this area could explore the impact of significant historical events on these communities, such as the Iran-Iraq War and the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and how these events have shaped their cultural practices and religious beliefs. Scholars such as Richard Foltz<sup>12</sup> and Mehrdad Kia<sup>13</sup> have explored the role of religion and culture in Iranian society, and their insights could provide a valuable foundation for further research in this area.

It is also important to consider the experiences of these communities in different Iranian cities, as they may have different cultural practices and experiences depending on their location. For example, the Armenian Catholic Church has a strong presence in the cities of Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz, while the Church of the East has a significant following in the city of Urmia.

Furthermore, it is important to consider how the post-1979 Iranian government has treated these communities. The government has recognized the Armenian Catholic Church as a minority religious group, and they are represented in the Iranian parliament. However, the Church of the East has faced challenges and restrictions under the current regime.

Overall, this paper has provided valuable insights into the lifestyle and practices of the followers of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Church of the East in Iran, and has highlighted the importance of interfaith dialogue and social harmony in promoting greater understanding and respect between different religious communities. By building bridges of understanding and recognizing the shared values and cultural practices of these communities, it is possible to promote a more inclusive and diverse society.

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Foltz is a leading expert on the history and culture of Iran, Central Asia, and the wider Muslim world. He has written extensively on the role of religion in Iranian society, particularly focusing on the relationship between Islam, Zoroastrianism, and other traditional belief systems. Some of his notable works on this topic include "Iran in World History" and "Religions of Iran: From Prehistory to the Present."

<sup>13</sup> Mehrdad Kia, on the other hand, is a scholar of Iranian history and culture, with a focus on the country's political and intellectual history. He has written on a range of topics related to Iranian society and culture, including the role of religion in shaping Iranian identity and society. Some of his notable works on this topic include "The Persian Empire: A Historical Encyclopedia" and "The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921-1941."

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