

*Khezri et al., 2017*

*Volume 3 Issue 3, pp.66-75*

*Date of Publication: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2017*

*DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2017.33.6675>*

*This paper can be cited as: Khezri, S., Fooladi-Panah, A., & Alvandi, F. (2017). Interaction and Contradiction between Carmelite Missionaries and Shiite Clerics in Iran during Safavid Dynasty.*

*PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 3(3), 66-75.*

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## **INTERACTION AND CONTRADICTION BETWEEN CARMELITE MISSIONARIES AND SHIITE CLERICS IN IRAN DURING SAFAVID DYNASTY**

***Seyed Ahmad Reza Khezri***

*University of Tehran, faculty of theology, Department of History and Civilization of Islamic Nations,  
Tehran, Iran  
[akhezri@ut.ac.ir](mailto:akhezri@ut.ac.ir)*

***Azam Fooladi-Panah***

*University of Tehran, faculty of theology, Department of History and Civilization of Islamic Nations,  
Tehran, Iran  
[afooladi1984@gmail.com](mailto:afooladi1984@gmail.com)*

***Fatemeh Alvandi***

*Ministry of Education, Region 2 of Tehran Ramsheh, Tehran, Iran  
[falvandi@yahoo.com](mailto:falvandi@yahoo.com)*

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### **Abstract**

*After the beginning of the Safavid State and expansion of the Ottoman Empire in Europe, the presence of European states citizens and evangelistic missionary associations in Iran highly intensified. These associations who mostly were entering Iran for political and religious purposes, in some periods like Shah Abbas I reign could establish bases for themselves in Iran and could work there for long whiles. Among these missionary associations, the Carmelite missionaries who in the beginning entered Iran as Pope`s ambassadors are very significant. The*

*Carmelites had a continuous presence in the Iran's Shi'ite community for about 160 years (1608-1768 AD / 1018-1182 AH) and performed various religious, political and cultural activities. They converted some Shi'ites of Iran into Christianity during 1618-1621 AD/ 1027-1030 AH that this their attempt faced the intense reaction of Shia scholars. The authors in this study at the first order attend to discuss the contexts and the quality of the presence of the Carmelite missionaries in Iran, then analyze the interaction and opposition between them and the Shi'ite clerics as well as people's masses and explain its consequences by noting some evidence.*

**Keywords**

Carmelite Missionaries, Shia Clerics, Shi'ites of Iran, Safavids, Shah Abbas I, Conversion, Christianity, Interaction, Contradiction

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**1. Introduction**

Following the increasing attacks of the Ottoman Empire on the central Europe, which were coincided with the time that Shah Abbas of the Safavid dynasty took the throne, the European governments began to expand their relations with Iran. The reason was that the Safavid kings were at odds with the Ottoman rulers from the early days of rising to power and had fought several wars to control Iran's western and northwestern border areas, like Caucasus and Iraq. These wars with Iran had weakened the Ottoman monarchs in the face of Europe. The expression of willingness from Shah Abbas to establish broad ties with the European governments and various promises in order to gain support from the Europeans boosted these relations (Figueroa, 1984, 219-220).

As a result, a number of Christian Catholic missionaries were dispatched to Iran in that era under the auspices of European states such as France, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Poland and the Vatican. The missionaries often enjoyed the backing of the Safavid kings, particularly Shah Abbas I (Matthee, 2008, 17; Borumand, 2002, 65-69; Bradley, 2008, 144). After the Augustinian clerics settled in Isfahan and permitted by Shah Abbas to open a church in the city, Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605) also dispatched a mission of Carmelite fathers to Iran in 1604 to propagate Catholicism. To that end, Pope Clement VIII picked three Italian Discalced Carmelites

and dispatched them to Iran, namely Jean-Thaddée<sup>1</sup>, Vincent<sup>2</sup>, and Paul Simon<sup>3</sup>, who were tasked by the Pope with promoting Christianity in Iran (A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 920).

In a letter<sup>4</sup> to Shah Abbas, Pope Clement VIII introduced the Carmelite envoys to Iran, saying the three were followers of the Virgin Mary's creed and based in Mount Carmel. The Pope also noted that among the deans of the order were Elijah and Elisha<sup>5</sup>, and the Carmelites adopted rules of their order from Saint Albert, the bishop of Jerusalem. He also explained that since the Carmelites were regularly performing acts of worship, were praying and living an ascetic life, they were sent to distant lands for religious missions, and a number of them have so far been deployed to Spain and other parts of the world for missionary activities. They have very few of this world's goods and make ends meet by living on charity and salary from the church. They are called Discalced (barefoot) because of wearing sandals to follow Jesus Christ's example. They also abstain from eating meat, are bodily weak because of sleeplessness and asceticism, and are used to living a primitive life with hardship. The Pope had also expressed the hope at the end of his letter that the Carmelites' affection and fondness for the king of Iran would be proved soon (Carmelites Documents, 2004, 31-32; Kavoosi Araqi, 2000, 190-191).

## **2. Carmelites Presence in Iran**

Thanks to the appropriate conditions under Shah Abbas I, the Carmelite fathers could take part in various religious, political, cultural, social, and to some extent economic activities, which were part of the Pope's plans to infiltrate into Shah Abbas' court circle, to encourage Shah Abbas to join an alliance with the Christian European governments against the Ottoman Empire, and to propagate Catholicism in Iran. The Carmelites began their mission in Iran under the rules and instructions received from the Pope. The regulations, set out in a manifesto for the Carmelite missionaries, included a range of instructions in various fields, some of which were as follow (Richard, 1990, IV/832-834). Learning Persian language and teaching it to others; refraining from arbitrary meetings with the king and the courtiers; caring for cleanliness and hygiene;

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<sup>1</sup> John Thaddeus of S. Elisaeus, his real name was Jaun Roldan yIbanez. **A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia**, vol.2, p.920.

<sup>2</sup> Fr. Vincent Mary of S. Catherine of Sienna.

<sup>3</sup> Fr. Paul Simon of Jesus Mary.

<sup>4</sup> In the archive of Shah Abbas' correspondence, the document was dated December 1607, but the letter was written in June 1604.

<sup>5</sup> It probably refers to Elisha, a prophet in ancient times.

refraining from keeping the objects unseen; prohibition of the purchase of buildings and real estate; rejection of worldliness; and refusing to get food from Muslims or giving food to them, etc. (A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 2/739-741).

### **3. Propagation of Christianity among Iranians**

One of the main objectives of the Carmelites was to promote Catholicism in Iran, so they were engaged in a series of activities to serve such purpose. After a decade of presence in Iran and propagation of Catholicism, Carmelite missionaries converted a number of Iranian Muslims to Christianity in the Shah Abbas I era. One of the cases was conversion of a gardener of the Carmelite convent in Isfahan, named Hussein, who was baptized as “Elias Cainoni”<sup>6</sup> by Fr. John Thaddeus on December 21, 1618 (A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 1/259). Later, John Thaddeus also converted Elias sister, wife, and grandchild, as well as a person from Luristan, to Christianity (Della Valle, 2001, 2/948-949). Moreover, on September 14, 1619, Fr. John Thaddeus converted an Iranian young man, named Jalal, to Christianity. Jalal, baptized in the Carmelite church, was a servant of Pietro della Valle, so della Valle became his godparent, and named him Khatchatur<sup>7</sup>, because he was baptized on the day of the Cross. Later, in December 28, 1621, three other Muslims from Isfahan were converted to Christianity by John Thaddeus. Ibrahim, Yusuf, and Iskandar (Carmelites Documents, 2004, 220; Della Valle, 2001, 2/928; A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 1/259) were renamed Abraham, Joseph, and Alexander after baptism, the latter was a Kurd (A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 1/259).

Conversion of the Muslims was conducted in secret and the king and the state administration were unaware of the issue (Della Valle, 2001, 2/950-951). The Carmelite fathers had definitely converted a number of other Muslims to Christianity as well, but since the conversions took place secretly and the number of the converts was low, they were unreported in sources. In late 1621, John Thaddeus dispatched five new converts to the Christian area of Hormuz to provide them with more security and to make them learn more about Catholic teachings (Carmelites Documents, 2004, 227-228; A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 1/259). However, they were arrested on their way to Hormuz Island by the agents of Imam Quli Khan,

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<sup>6</sup> Elias Cainoni served the Carmelite fathers for seven years, working at the vineyard of the convent in Isfahan. **Carmelites Documents**, p.219

<sup>7</sup> A common Armenian name that means 'The Cross gave'. Della Valle, **Pietro Della Valle's Travelogue**, vol.2, p.928; **Carmelites Documents**, p.220; **A Chronicle of the Carmelites**, vol.1, p.259.

governor of Fars, on a charge of espionage for the Portuguese. They were then executed for espionage and conversion from Islam (Carmelites Documents, 2004, 248-249; Della Valle, 2001, 2/1199; A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 1/259-260).

## **4. Iranians' Reaction to Carmelite Missions**

### **4.1 The King**

Shah Abbas was informed about propagation of Christianity in Iran by the Carmelites on February 13, 1622 and was outraged by the news. The king ordered the ruler of Isfahan to castigate John Thaddeus for converting five Muslims to Christianity and for sending letters to Portuguese officials on Hormuz (Carmelites Documents, 2004, 230-231; Della Valle, 2001, 2/1199; Falsafi, 1996, 3/964; A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 1/260-262). Nevertheless, John Thaddeus denied the charges, saying that the Carmelite fathers, known as representatives of Jesus, were duty bound to propagate and promote Christianity, and it was the same as what the Iranian king and officials did to promote Islam among Armenians and Georgians (Carmelites Documents, 2004, 223-227; Della Valle, 2001, 2/1199).

### **4.2 The Masses**

The news of conversion of Muslims to Christianity at the hands of the Carmelite fathers infuriated the masses, as the ordinary Muslim people of that time were always opposed to interaction with Christians. Paul Simon has cited many reports about Iranian discontent at interaction with Christians in 1608. According to Simon, the situation changed when Shah Abbas ascended the throne, and since the king paid much attention to Christians and began to interact with them, people behaved in the same manner as well (A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 1/157). John Thaddeus has also cited reports on this case (Ibid, 1/165).

However, the situation in some other areas, such as the city of Shiraz, was somehow different. According to the reports by the Carmelites, a number of prominent Iranian figures paid regular visits to the residence of the Carmelite fathers (Ibid, 1/278), so the Carmelite convent became a place where educated Iranians and those interested in the religious books and the latest news from Europe could visit freely. Although the Carmelite missionaries were infidels in the eyes of the Iranian Muslims, they were deemed better than Armenians were (Richard, 1989, 167-182). That is why Imam Quli Khan asked Fr. Dimas to bring some Latin scientific and religious scriptures from Rome to Shiraz (A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 1/279). Moreover, some

needy families in Shiraz took their sick children to the Carmelite fathers for healing<sup>8</sup>, letting the missionaries pray for them and read the bible. However, the Carmelites used the opportunity to baptize the sick children cunningly and convert them to Christianity supposedly. Of course, the Carmelite missionaries with some knowledge of medicine had a better chance of success (Chardin, 1995, 4/1481-1482; *A Chronicle of the Carmelites*, 1939, 1/395-396, 2/859).

The garment of the Carmelite fathers also provided an opportunity for them. Their costume served as a reminder of the clothes worn by Muslim Dervishes, making part of the Carmelite missionaries' success a result of the theosophist and spiritual qualities people attributed to them (Richard, 1989, 170-171). Nonetheless, people adopted a very harsh attitude towards the Carmelite fathers and other Catholic missionaries in Iran under Shah Suleiman (1077-1105), in such a way that the fathers had to live an isolated life (*A Chronicle of the Carmelites*, 1939, 1/406, 446-447) instead of doing missionary activities, as cited by Kaempfer (Kaempfer, 1981, 173-174).

### **4.3 Shiite Clerics**

The Carmelite missionaries' push to promote Catholicism among Muslims, restrain the Armenians, Georgians and Assyrians of Iran from converting to Islam, and their attempts to fuel antagonism between two Muslim governments –the Ottoman and the Safavid- provoked an angry reaction from the Shiite clerics. Despite the close cooperation between the Shiite clerics and the government under Shah Abbas I, the Shiite clerics, led by shaykh al-Islam, were always opposed to the Carmelite missions and warned the king for it (*Carmelites Documents*, 2004, 71; Adelfar, 1991, 157). In that era, a number of Shiite clerics were also dissatisfied with Shah Abbas' policy of enmity towards the Ottoman Muslims, which was an overt and covert goal of the Carmelites. The clerics accused the king of injustice and believed that overthrow of the Ottoman Empire by the king of Iran would break a strong wall protecting the Islamic territories against Christian military attacks.

The contradiction between the Shiite clerics and the Carmelite missionaries flared up when Carmelite fathers began to convert Muslims to Christianity openly and even took advantage of the new converts to pursue their political and religious objectives. As mentioned above, the conversion of five Muslims to Christianity by the Carmelite fathers drew a harsh

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<sup>8</sup> It is noteworthy that even Sheikh Ali Khan Zangeneh, the highest-ranking vizier during the reign of Shah Suleiman in Isfahan, had taken his sick child to the Catholic fathers for prayers. **A Chronicle of the Carmelites**, vol.2,p.905.

reaction from the clerics, particularly because the controversy coincided with an anti-Islamic article Pietro della Valle wrote in 1622 (Della Valle, 2001, 2/1066-1069; Vasfi, 2004, 318). The set of events infuriated the clerics, making them complain to the king. Some of them even testified that the Carmelite missionaries had converted thousands of Muslims to Christianity. Shah Abbas attempted to downplay the controversy and claimed that the clerics were seeking to provoke hostility between Iran and the Christian governments (Carmelites Documents, 2004, 234-235), but a delegation of 200 Shiite clerics made a complaint to the royal court and drew up a petition claiming that the Carmelite missionaries had created thousands of heretics and had dispatched them to Christian lands. The clerics called for execution of the priests and the new converts (Shah Abbas' correspondence, 3/261). So Shah Abbas was obligated to issue a death warrant against the new Christians to soothe the Shiite clerics (Carmelites Documents, 2004, 235).

One of the main reasons behind the friction between Shiite clerics and the Christian Carmelite missionaries was the anti-Islamic pro-Christian books written by Carmelites. For instance, when Jeronim Xavier<sup>9</sup>, a Portuguese Christian missionary in the court of Shah Jahangir of the Mughal Empire in India, published a book in disapproval of Islam in 1605, titled "*Mirror Displaying Truth*" (Jafarian, 2009, 2/977; Vasfi, 2004, 339), the Carmelite missionaries who had established a base in India's port of Goa (A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 2/1245), republished a summary of the book in Isfahan in 1622 and gave an essay to the Iranian Shiite clerics (Jafarian, 2009, 2/978). The Carmelites wanted to get feedback on the controversial book from the Shiite clerics (Vasfi, 2004, 339). In the same year, Seyed Ahmad Alawi Isfahani,<sup>10</sup> a cleric during the reign of Shah Abbas I and Shah Safi, wrote a comprehensive article in response to the second volume of the book *Mirror Displaying Truth*, titled "*Mesqal al-Safa in the Rejection of Christian Allegations*" (Abisaab, 2004, 79; Alawi Ameli, 1994, 116). Following the publication of *Mesqal al-Safa* by Seyed Ahmad Alawi, the Carmelite missionaries tried to defend their faith and sent a copy of the book to Rome for an appropriate reply (Aryan, 1990, 158; Azimzadeh, 1997, 159-179). In general, the Carmelite fathers did not personally publish any

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<sup>9</sup> Jeronim Xavier (1549-1617) was a Christian missionary who traveled to India from Portugal in 1571 and lived in peace in the court of Jalal-ul-din Akbar of the Mughal Empire and his son Shah Jahangir. Haeri, **The first encounters between Iranian thinkers and two sides of the Western Bourgeoisie**, p.472.

<sup>10</sup> For more information about Seyed Ahmad bin Zain al Abedin Alawi Ameli Isfahani : al-Amin, **A'ayan Al-Shi'a**, vol.2,pp.593-594; Tehrani, **Al-Dari'e Elā Taṣānif –e- Alṣi'e**, vol. 14,p.255.

book against Islam in order to protect their position in the Safavid governments, but played a major role in the publication of such books by the other followers of Catholicism. They were indirectly involved in the authorship of anti-Islamic books, let the West and the Islamic world know about the publication of such books, and caused friction between the Shiite and Christian clerics.

It is noteworthy that in the wake of severe reaction from the Iranian kings, the masses, and the Shiite clerics, from the reign of Shah Safi to decline of the Safavid dynasty, the Carmelites focused their efforts on propagating Catholicism among non-Muslims, including Mandaeans, Assyrians and Armenians (A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 1/439), so they faced less direct reactions from clerics in the Safavid era. In addition, the Safavid kings dismissed proposals by the Carmelite and other Catholic missionaries for a war against the Ottoman Muslim Turks (Kaempfer, 1981, 85; A Chronicle of the Carmelites, 1939, 1/356-357, 408-409, 420), so there was no confrontation between the clerics and the Carmelite missionaries in this regard. Moreover, in this era, particularly during the reign of Shah Suleiman, the Iranian clerics developed a deeper distrust towards Christians and Catholic missionaries and encouraged people to avoid Christians (Sefatgol, 2002, 563-566; Aqajari, 2010, 435-436) because of the Catholic priests' missionary activities, the blatant attacks on Islamic beliefs and sanctities, and the publication of books by Christians that disapproved Islam. However, the Islamic-Iranian society's harsh attitude towards the Catholic missionaries was a general fact and not confined to the Carmelite missionaries alone.

## **5. Conclusion**

The interaction and contradiction between Carmelites and Iranian Shiites, including the masses and the Shiite clerics, have always had ups and downs, because such interactions and frictions depended upon the government and the clergy, two powerful actors with great influence during the Safavid era in Iran. On the other hand, the Carmelite fathers' activities and propagation of Christianity among a group of Iranians, particularly during the reign of Shah Abbas I, had an effect on a severe friction between Iranian Shiites and the Carmelite missionaries, a sign of which is that they stopped such activities afterwards. Considering the reaction from Iranian Shiites and the Safavid kings, the Carmelite fathers concentrated their efforts on creating disputes between Muslims and Christians, which helped them, remain in Iran for 160 years (1608-1768) and engage in various activities. Meanwhile Shiite clerics' reactions



were important because they did not silence against missionary activities of Christians and defended religion of Islam.

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