

REVIEW

Mission Manifest: American Evangelicals and Iran in the Twentieth Century. Matthew K. Shannon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2024). Pp. 330. Hardcover \$54.95. ISBN 9781501775949

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The American Presbyterian mission to Iran opened offices in Tehran in 1872. It formally closed them in 1965, as Western Christian organizations, established during the late nineteenth-century heyday of Protestant and Catholic missions, ceded authority to national churches amid worldwide decolonization. In Iran, however, the end of the mission did not end involvement. Former missionaries and their associates remained actively engaged with the country, especially in education and health care, while supporting institutions and programs that persisted until the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79. Even after the revolution and the collapse of US–Iranian government relations, these individuals keenly followed Iranian affairs and professed a deep love for the country. So argues Matthew K. Shannon in this carefully researched book, *Mission Manifest*, which considers how American Presbyterian “Persophiles” supported initiatives in Iran, advocated for Iranian interests, or cooperated with the US government and its agencies in ways that did not “aim to influence US foreign policy,” but rather “US foreign relations” (224).

Shannon studies the period after 1939, when missionaries entered a phase of close cooperation with the US government, for example, by allowing its use of the mission hospital during World War II. He focuses primarily on the years from 1965 to 1979—again, from the formal end of the mission to the Islamic Revolution. At the center of his story stands a group of American missionaries and friends, many connected to Presbyterian colleges or churches in states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, and California, whom he calls the Del Be Del (Heart to Heart) network or “family” (84). Until 2016, this group published a newsletter under this name, which took inspiration from the Persian proverb, “*Del be del rah dare*” (There is a road which leads from heart to heart; 21, 276, n. 36). In fact, not everyone within this Del Be Del circle was American; some Iranian graduates of American mission schools belonged to it, too. Among these was a cohort of women whom Shannon describes as “professional feminists” (116): figures like Dr. Soqra Azarmi, who established the Iranian Cancer Institute, and Sattareh Farmanfarmaian, who founded the Tehran School of Social Work in 1958.

Mission Manifest is a work of US transnational history rather than of Iranian history per se. Shannon draws on an extensive base of American publications and records, especially archival materials from the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia and other mission archives and colleges that preserve private papers. He also draws on memoirs, interviews, and US government archives.

Shannon does not aim to cover Iranian “evangelicals,” as local Presbyterians (converts to Protestant Christianity and their descendants) were known. But for readers interested in the Iranian side of the story, he notes that the local Protestant community was tiny. In the mid-1950s in Tehran, active church members comprised only 547 Persian, 475 Assyrian,

and 225 Armenian people (p. 40). Shannon alludes to tensions that marked relations between the American missionaries and these Iranians, who by the 1960s were eager to see what he calls “Presbyterian decolonization” (57) and the devolution of authority over local institutions and properties. In other words, in Iran as in other countries where foreign Christian missions had been active (such as Uganda, India, and South Korea, among others), the views and goals of American Christians and their local affiliates did not necessarily align, reflecting cultural and political differences in opinion and practice, as well as diverging national interests.

Despite the miniscule size of the local Protestant community, the American missionaries exerted a strong impact through their institutions, which reached Christians, Muslims, and others. Shannon examines several programs and institutions that American and Iranian members of the Del Be Del network established or continued to run in the post-World War II period and until 1979. For example, in the 1950s, they pursued Cold War era development programs in collaboration with the American humanitarian organization called the Near East Foundation, to breed livestock and poultry, dig wells, and combat malaria. After 1965, they maintained institutions such as the Clinic of Hope maternity health center in South Tehran; the English-language Community School, which initially catered to children of missionaries, then after 1965 to expatriates and Iranian elites; and the Iran Bethel School (founded in 1874), which in 1968 evolved into Damavand College, a four-year liberal arts college for women.

Shannon’s study of the Community School in Tehran, which enrolled children of many nationalities and religions, vividly illustrates the ethos and worldview that these Americans promoted. By the 1970s, he notes, its students recited a version of the “Pledge of Allegiance,” modeled on the oath which students in US public schools collectively performed each day. Instead of pledging to the American flag, however, Community School students pledged to three flags, the flags of Imperial Iran, the United States, and the United Nations. “I pledge allegiance to my own country, and to the United Nations, of which it is a part,” it began. “One world brotherhood of peaceful nations, with freedom and justice for all” (99). The historian Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, who attended this school as a child, later described it as a “site where girls and boys, Americans and Iranians, Jews and Muslims, once sat in class together and shared snacks during recess” (quoted, 108). The school was American, but it was also universalist, cosmopolitan, and progressive.

How close were these American ventures to the US government and to the Pahlavi regime—and how complicit in their political, cultural, and economic agendas? American members of this Bel De Bel network supported the anticommunist, Cold War era prerogatives of the US government, as well as the social reforms of Mohammad Reza Shah. Like other Presbyterian groups and organizations of the postcolonial period, they enthusiastically backed a “mission for development” (74), as opposed to a mission for religious conversion, and this also coincided with Iranian and American government priorities. It helped, in relations with the Pahlavi regime, that some leaders of White Revolution programs in the 1960s were graduates of the American schools, such as Amir Birjandi, who headed the Literacy Corps. But occasionally their views diverged. T. Cuyler Young, for example, who briefly worked as a missionary teacher in Rasht in the 1930s and later became a professor at Princeton University (where he helped to establish Persian studies), “was unique in the Del Be Del network in openly opposing the Pahlavi government during the 1960s” (179).

Shannon devotes a chapter to American missionaries who went on to pursue dynamic careers in US academic and intelligence communities (often after a stint of service in World War II). Besides T. Cuyler Young at Princeton (who was a particularly prominent example), there was, for example, Edwin Wright, who spent a long career in the US State Department and cofounded the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC. A couple of men remained committed to a conversion-centered form of Christian activism (although not in Iran itself) and to late twentieth-century American “neo-evangelicalism” (see 169, 195), but these appear to have been outliers. A striking thing about Shannon’s examples is that

all of them are men. Although certain women succeeded in pursuing careers in Iran, such as the missionary Jane Doolittle who led the Iran Bethel School for many years, they did not seem to achieve much prominence professionally within the United States, a point that hints to the persistence of patriarchal structures within American religious, academic, and government establishments.

Shannon assumes that readers will approach the book with a firm grasp of Iranian history, although this may not always be the case. It would have been helpful to provide more background on the history of Iranian nationalization measures vis-à-vis American and other foreign schools and institutions, especially given that he refers to the “quarter-century estrangement” between the American mission and the Iranian government by 1965 (101). Similarly, he mentions “Reza Shah’s nationalization decree” (111) without explaining it and how it affected the mission’s institutions. Although the pressures of global decolonization would have contributed to the decision of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) to close the mission in 1965, the author implies that there were local, Iranian factors as well.

With *Mission Manifest*, Matthew K. Shannon succeeds in appealing to multiple constituencies: scholars interested in the history of the United States and its global engagements in the Cold War era, as well as those interested in US–Iranian relations and in Christian missions as they evolved in the postcolonial period into development-oriented and largely nonsectarian (secular) nongovernmental organizations. He shows how the Del Be Del network—bound by both an earlier history of American evangelical activism and a simple newsletter—stood “on the front lines of an encounter between people of different faiths and nationalities” (228). Shannon’s fine book testifies to the influence and appeal of American soft power, as well as to the intimate but vexed relationship that has prevailed between Iran and the United States.