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**THE ROLE OF HENRY MARTYN, A CHRISTIAN PRIEST,  
IN CONFRONTING IRANIAN SHIITE CLERICS\***

Henry Martyn (1781—1812), an English priest, during his tenure in India, decided to introduce Christianity not only among the Hinduists, but also among the Arabs and Persians, so he began translating the New Testament into Arabic and Persian to this end. In 1811, being a little familiar with Persian language and literature, he came to Iran and showed his translation to Iranian scholars who found it rather childish. Martyn resumed translating and had another trip to Shiraz to improve his Persian language skills. While in Shiraz, he confronted and challenged the Shiite clerics. His intention was to propagate Christianity, and he thus aimed more to invite and challenge the youth. Meanwhile, several treatises were written in response to his questions and doubts about Islam, and he also tried to refute these treatises in due course. The research was based on the archival record, and its main goal was to reveal and interpret the content of the messages of the Shiite clerics in response to Martyn's judgments as well as the content of Martyn's own responses to them. It turns out that during these religious debates and the opinion exchange between Islamic treatises and Martyn's writings, the missionary's utterances became less and less valuable to the Iranians, and especially to those who accepted his views, but he did not give up until Mohammad Reza Ibn Mohammad Amin Hamedani wrote the treatise "Guidance of the Misguided" to dispel Martyn's doubts. This treatise was the culmination of Martyn's anti-Islamic rhetoric in Iran. Failing to fulfill his religious mission, he left Iran without achieving his main goal of meeting Fath Ali Shah and Abbas Mirza to present the Persian version of the New Testament to them with his own hands, and soon after, on his way back home, he died in Turkey.

**Key words:** Henry Martyn, Christianity, Shia, Iran, Missionary.

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**РОЛЬ ГЕНРИ МАРТИНА, ХРИСТИАНСКОГО СВЯЩЕННИКА,  
В ПРОТИВОСТОЯНИИ ИРАНСКИМ ШИИТСКИМ СВЯЩЕННОСЛУЖИТЕЛЯМ**

Английский священник Генри Мартин (1781—1812), в ходе своей деятельности в Индии, решил знакомить с христианством не одних индуистов, но также арабский и персидский народы, а потому, будучи немного знакомым с персидским языком и литературой, принялся переводить Новый Завет на арабский и персидский языки. Прибыв в Иран в 1811 году, он показал текст иранским учёным, которые, однако, сочли перевод весьма примитивным. Мартин же продолжил трудиться над ним и вновь отправился в Шираз пополнять знания фарси. Там он столкнулся с шиитским духовенством и бросил ему вызов с намерением пропагандировать христианство, стремясь при этом воздействовать прежде всего на молодёжь. Находясь в Иране, он непрестанно полемизировал с авторами нескольких трактатов, написанных в ответ на его вопросы и сомнения об исламе. Цель предпринятого исследования состояла в том, чтобы на основе архивных источников установить содержание посланий шиитских священнослужителей по поводу суждений Мартина, а также ответов на них

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самого миссионера. Установлено, что в религиозных дебатах вокруг исламских трактатов и сочинений Мартина высказывания последнего становились все менее и менее ценными для иранцев, и особенно для тех, кто принимал его слова, но он не сдавался до тех пор, пока Мохаммад Реза Ибн Мохаммад Амин Хамедани не написал трактат «Путеводитель заблудших», чтобы развеять его сомнения. Этот трактат стал кульминацией антиисламской риторики Мартина в Иране. Не выполнив свою религиозную миссию, он покинул Иран, не достигнув своей главной цели — встретиться с Фатх Али Шахом и Аббасом Мирзой и вручить им Новый Завет на фарси. Вскоре, по пути на родину, он умер в Турции.

**Ключевые слова:** Генри Мартин, христианство, шииты, Иран, миссионер.

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## Introduction

Henry Martyn is a nineteenth-century English priest who made many efforts to spread Christianity, especially in British-influenced countries. He first began his mission in India and focused most of his work on helping the destitute as well as translating the New Testament. During Martyn's tenure in India, he thought of in addition to introducing Christianity to Hindu pagans, set out to introduce the Arab and Persian peoples to the religion of Christ. To this end, he translated the New Testament into Persian and Arabic, accompanied by an Arab named Stabat, who claimed to be fluent in Persian. Stabat was an aggressive person and caused a lot of problems for Martyn and, moreover, contrary to what he said, did not help much in the development of the Persian translation of the New Testament. This made Martyn, who was a little familiar with the Persian language, think of doing something about it. For this purpose, he decided to travel to Iran to complete his knowledge of Persian. Before traveling, he met with Sir John Malcolm, who had just returned from a trip to Iran, and consulted with him about Iran. In response to his request, Sir John Malcolm wrote a number of letters of recommendation in the name of Martyn to people in Bushehr, Shiraz and Isfahan, and also gave him a book of prayers and guidance. In response to these orders, Martyn also had to provide Malcolm with the news and information he needed, which he later referred to in some of his letters and memoirs after arriving in Iran. After meeting with Sir John Malcolm, Martyn began his voyage to Iran and arrived in Bushehr via the southern Iranian sea some time later. After arriving in Iran, he met with Arab and Iranian scholars and showed them the result of his translation into these two languages. Although the reaction of the Arab scholars to his translation was good and his translation was called Comprehensible, but as expected, his Persian translation was not accepted by the Iranian scholars and for this reason he was forced to repeat it. Lack of fluency in Persian prepared him for his next trip and this time he went to Shiraz to learn Persian. His stay in Shiraz led to his direct acquaintance with the Shiite clerics of Iran. Although Martyn's opposition to Islam had begun since his time in India, his presence in Iran and his debates with Iranian Muslim clerics took the opposition to a new level. In his memoirs, Martyn divided the people of India into four groups: 1. Idolaters, 2. Muslims, 3. Roman Catholics, 4. Infidels. And he called them all the four faces of the devil, and elsewhere he says, "I still believe that human nature is a Muslim in its lowest form".

One of Martyn's main activities against Islam and the spread of Christianity was to debate and challenge Muslim youth. In his view, the minds of young people were better prepared to accept Christianity and be persuaded than older mullahs. He always expressed hatred for Muslims, especially Iranian Muslims, and used every opportunity to challenge the religion of Islam

(Martyn 1837: 366). In his debates and propaganda, he always created doubts and suspicions about the Qur'an, the Prophet of Islam and his miracles for the youth and the people he addressed, and made their minds tremble. During his stay in Shiraz, Martyn met with many prominent Iranian scholars and mujtahids. In one of these discussions, which took place in the house of a famous cleric in Shiraz, God and the miracle of the Prophet of Islam were discussed. Many religious treatises have survived during Martyn's stay in Iran, one of which is a treatise written by Mirza Ibrahim in Arabic on the reasons and proofs of the Prophet's prophethood, and at the beginning of it, it's mentioned that a Christian priest asked him to write arguments to prove the Prophet of Islam. But this treatise could not give a complete answer to Martyn's question and prepared the space for the progress of his propaganda, and Martyn also wrote two answers in Persian in rejection of this treatise. From then on, the movement of rejecting and responding to Martyn's statements, which was more in rejecting Islam than preaching Christ, began in Iran, a movement that continued for years even after his death.

### **Research background**

In terms of research background in Iran, several articles have been written on Henry Martyn's theories about Islam and especially the miracles of the Prophet. Some have examined his influence on Christianity as well as his life. In addition, Veru Eaudley has written a book about Martyn's life that covers various parts of his life from childhood to death. Despite research on Henry Martyn's views on Islam and the denials he has written against this religion, the present article seeks to refute his views against the Shiite treatises and analyze his comments about religion of Islam and Shiism and the principles of Islam.

### **Travel to Iran (1811 AD / 1226 AH)**

The main reason for Martyn's visit to Iran was to improve the translation of the New Testament into Persian. During his stay in India, he met a person called "Stabat". It was the Arabic-speaking Muslim who became acquainted with and interested in Christianity through a friend. Stabat's interest in Christianity led him to meet Martyn in India. Martyn, who had always dreamed of translating the New Testament into Persian and Arabic, enlisted his help. Stabat lived in Bukhara for some time before traveling to India and was somewhat familiar with the Persian language. For this reason, he decided to help Martyn translate the Bible into Persian and Arabic. Stabat completed the Arabic translation of the New Testament well, but was not very successful in translating it into Persian. The delay in the Persian translation made Martyn think about doing this himself, and he thought of traveling to Iran to do the translation better. He packed his bags and set off for the Iranian ships. Prior to the trip, he met with Sir John Malcolm, who had just returned from a mission in Iran, and received information and guidance about Iran.

In response to Martyn receiving some of the information he needed in Iran from Sir John Malcolm, he wrote several letters of recommendation to his trustees in the cities of Bushehr, Shiraz and Isfahan, which paved the way for him after Martyn arrived in Iran and also gave him a Chaldean prayer book as a gift (Haeri 2001: 509). After a long journey, Henry entered Iran and the city of Bushehr through the waters of the Persian Gulf on May 21, and then met with some of the city's ulema and clerics and showed them his translation. The Persian version of Martyn's New Testament was widely criticized by Iranians for his help from his Arab aide Stabat, and many of its phrases were Arabic. Martyn wrote in his memoirs that the Iranians told him that even if an Arab lived in Iran for twenty years, he still could not speak Persian properly. This sent Henry to Shiraz.

He hoped to be able to leave a fluent translation of the New Testament into Persian in this city. After crossing the deserts and mountains, he reached Shiraz on June 9 and went to the house of Jafar Ali Khan, one of the famous people of Shiraz, by order of Sir Jan Malcolm. It was at his house that Martyn met Sayyid Ali, the man who was to help him translate (Eaudley 1962: 34—40).

### **Confrontation with Iranian Shiite clerics and scholars**

During Martyn's stay in Shiraz, Seyyed Ali<sup>1</sup> introduced him to many of the city's ulema, clerics and celebrities. This acquaintance was the starting point of his religious debates with Iranian Muslims. In the first meetings, Martyn met two mullahs who were students of Sayyid Ali's uncle, Mirza Ibrahim. In arguing with them, Martyn realized that the greatest obstacle to Muslims' conversion to Christ was their Christian belief in his divinity. At first and before the beginning of his religious debates, he showed his interest in Islam for a while and studied in the schools of religious sciences in Shiraz and called himself Yusuf, but some time later, his meetings with the youth of Shiraz continued. In his memoirs, he states that every day a number of students and young people in the city come to see him and test him by asking religious questions. Many students in the city shunned Martyn after seeing him and reading some of his writings and translations. One of the students mocked him when he saw Martyn translating God's name to his father. Day after day passed and the conflict between Christianity and Islam became more serious every day. Seeing the debate as fruitless, Martyn translated the Bible and moved away from the city. After a while away from the city, when he returned, the great mujtahid of Shiraz invited him. In his house, the debate between Islam and Christianity resurfaced. For Martyn, the mujtahid's words were weak and baseless. In response to Martyn's request, the mujtahid began to speak about the sayings of Islam. The Mujtahid stated that “the Christian whom we call the Prophet and the servant of God foretold the advent of Muhammad, but not the Christian whom you call God”. This debate also had no result and Martyn could not influence the Mujtahid and the audience.

Shortly afterwards, Ibrahim Ibn al-Hussein, Sayyid Ali's uncle, began a new quarrel with Martyn. He wrote a treatise in defense of Islam addressed to Martyn, inviting him to a face-to-face debate. Mirza Ibrahim declared that whoever could convince Martyn would convert to Christianity. He considered the main reason for the superiority of Islam as the miracle of the Qur'an and called it higher than the miracles of Jesus and Moses. At the end of his treatise, he invited thinkers to read the Qur'an and pay attention to it, which is the highest and most immortal miracle of God. After reading Mirza's treatise, Martyn wrote three treatises in response to it. He wrote in his treatises on miracles, the mission of Muhammad, and the divinity of Christ. There are two different views on this debate. The first view concerns Muslims and is derived from the writings of Mirza Ibrahim, which shows Martyn's defeat in this debate. But the second view is derived from Martyn's writings. According to Martyn, his treatises and reply to Mirza made him hesitant and close to Christ, but he still believed in Islam. According to Martyn, the first part of his answer to the miracle affected Ibrahim a little and made him curious about Christ. With a little attention to the writings left by Martyn, it can be seen that the first view is closer to reality because in another part of Martyn's memoirs and writings, he calls Mirza Ibrahim a Muslim and a staunch enemy of himself and his beliefs.

After a while, the news of Martyn's discussions with the ulema, as well as his activities to invite the youth to Christianity, reached the courtiers by the king's agents and the city rulers. But they were not as gentle as Mirza Ibrahim. The courtiers believed that the only proper answer to Martyn's divisiveness

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<sup>1</sup> He was the son-in-law of Jafar Ali Khan, Martyn's host in Shiraz, and through this relationship he became acquainted with many Iranian scholars and celebrities, especially Shiraz.

was the sword. But Martyn went on to complete the translation of the New Testament. Anti-Martyn and Christian treatises were gradually published during this time. One of the Sufis of Shiraz asked him if you claim that the Spirit of God has dissolved in you. Henry answered this question in the affirmative. His response provoked the clergy to revolt against him again. The city's clergy and scholars believed that the teachings of Christ were no longer new and had existed in Hindu religious books before Christ. The next controversy between Islam and Christianity arose again over the issue of the divinity of Christ. In Kermanshah, in a meeting with the scholars of the city, he was asked to state explicitly whether Christ is the Creator or a creature? And he called Christ the Creator. Martyn's response to the mullahs greatly aggravated the atmosphere. Unlike Shiraz, which welcomed him well, with his departure from the city and the beginning of his trip to Tabriz, in other cities the controversy between Islam and Christianity increased and also the number of transcripts. (Martyn 1837: 50).

### **Treatises and Rejections**

Henry Martyn made great efforts to write denials against Islam, but Muslim clerics were not mere spectators. One of these scholars was Mirza Sayyid Mohammad Ibrahim Shirazi, who in his repeated conversations with Martyn promised him to write a treatise in response to the priest's questions about Islam. In several treatises, Martyn also prepared answers in Persian for him, one of which was called "Mizan al-Haqq" in rejecting the miracle of the Qur'an and the prophethood of Muhammad. In this treatise, he tried to reject Islam and prove the legitimacy of Christianity and its superiority over Islam. After many debates and meetings with Henry Martyn, Shiite scholars, who had heard his other claims and knew his main problem with Islam, repeatedly wrote treatises and rebuttals in response to his claims. Among those who have denied the extent of Martyn's right are Mirza Qomi, Karim Khan Qajar, Mirza Issa Ghaem Magham Farahani (Mirza Naib Al-Saltanah), Agha Mohammad Reza Hamedani (Kowsar Ali Shah), Akhund Mullah Ali Nouri, Sayyid Mohammad Hussein Sultan Al-Ama Khatoon Abadi, Sheikh Zayn al-Din Isfahani (Hussein Ali Shah), Mullah Ahmad Naraqi, Mirza Mohammad Akhbari and ... mentioned (Amin 2004: 184).

One of the most important works written in response to Martyn's suspicions is the treatise "Rejection of a Father" which was written by the great scholar and jurist of Isfahan Zayn al-Din Mohammad Hossein Isfahani (Hussein Ali Shah). Nayeb al-Sadr Shirazi considers this treatise as a reference and source for two other treatises that were written after him (the treatises of Mullah Ahmad Naraqi and Kowsar Ali Shah Hamedani) against Martyn (Shirazi 1972: 227). As mentioned earlier, one of Martyn's main doubts was about the miracle of the Qur'an. Hussein Ali Shah also paid more attention to this section in his treatise. In this treatise, he did not equate miracles with magic, and he considered the place of miracles to be much higher than what Martyn referred to. In addition to the miracles of the Qur'an, Martyn also had problems with the prophethood of the Prophet and his miracles. This issue was also addressed in this dissertation. Hussein Ali Shah in defense of the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad and also the miracle of the Qur'an in his treatise stated the following reasons:

1. The inability of mankind to make a single sentence like the verses of the Qur'an;
2. Defending the mention of the name of the Prophet in the books of the previous prophets;
3. Removing the slander of ignorance and following the Prophet of Islam;
4. The existence of abrogated and obsolete in the Qur'an.

He also denied Martyn's claims in the following cases:

1. Rejecting Henry Martyn's objections to the inadequacy of repentance in the forgiveness of sins and Martyn emphasizing the sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of the sins of the servants and the atonement for the murder of Jesus;
2. Rejection of the theory of the finality of Jesus;
3. The Trinity and Deity of Jesus.

Another cleric who wrote a denial of “Mizan al-Haqq” is Mullah Ahmad Naraqi. He also wrote the book “Saif al-Ummah” in response to Martyn's suspicions. To do this, he asked ten rabbis in Kashan to translate Old Testament phrases and works related to Judaism into Persian, and with their help, he wrote the book in rejection of Henry Martyn's ideas (Naraqi 2006: 40—41; Tonekaboni 2007: 129—130). Agha Mohammad Reza Hamedani was also one of the Iranian clerics during the reign of Fath Ali Shah Qajar, who wrote two treatises rejecting Martyn's statements. “Guidance of the misguided in proving the prophethood of the Last Prophet” and “the key of the prophecy” are two denials of Hamedani. In these two treatises he tried to refute Martyn's claims about the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad and his miracle of the Qur'an. Naraghi and Hamedani used the arguments of Hussein Ali Shah in many parts of their treatise to prove their claims (Shirazi 1972: 73).

Opposition to Martyn was not only very popular among the ulema, but also spread to the court. Fath Ali Shah was one of those who encouraged scholars to write strong rebuttals to Martyn's theories and claims. Mirza Issa Ghaem Magham Farhani, was one of the politicians who, on the orders of the Shah, wrote the treatise “Proof of Prophethood” in refuting Martyn's claims and against his ideas, and in proving the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad. He also tried to show the legitimacy of Islam and its prophet by relying on many reasons. At the beginning, he researched the Old and New Testaments with the help of Christian scholars and understood the basis of Christianity. He then declared that this religion is basically a very good religion, but Martyn's view on this religion is very wrong (Beg Donboli 2007: 146).

Mullah Ali Nouri Esfahani was another person who, with the encouragement of Fath Ali Shah and other courtiers, compiled the treatise “Hajj al-Islam fi Rad Mizan al-Haqq” entitled Burhan al-Mullah. In this treatise, he rejected the third chapter of Mizan al-Haqq, which was written in order to deny the legitimacy of Islam and the miracle of the Qur'an. Mullah Ali did not consider some of the answers given to Martyn complete and strong and was harsh on them. The lack of strong essays in response to Martyn was one of the reasons that led him to write his rejections. According to Nouri, Henry chose only weak opponents who were unable to present solid reasons, and if he had faced a wise world from the beginning, he would not have exceeded his limits to such an extent (Haeri 2001: 536).

In addition to opposing Islam, Martyn also tried to incite various groups in the country against the ulema. One of his activities in this regard was to confront the Iranian Sufis, to understand their principles and also their differences with the Shiites. During this time he had many debates with the Sufis of Iran and questioned their beliefs. He tried to use the differences between the Shiites and the Sufis to his advantage and his propaganda goals (Haeri 2001: 525), but after a while the Sufis also confronted Martyn and joined the denial movement against him. Sheikh Zayn al-Din Isfahani (Hussein Ali Shah) (Sheikh Zayn al-Din Isfahani) and Agha Mohammad Reza Hamedani (Kowsar Ali Shah), mentioned earlier, were Sufis who wrote the most important references to Martyn's artistic speeches.

In response to these scholars and Sufis, Henry Martyn wrote two denials about Islam as well as Sufism, adding to his first treatise, which rejected the Qur'an, prophecy, and miracles. Although all these denials were answered by Islamic scholars, in the end the scholars and Martyn could not

convince each other. However, suspicions about Islam and Shiism seem to have created religious doubts and protests. After failing to persuade the Shah and Crown Prince of Iran of his views, he left Iran to travel to England, but in mid-October 1812 died in Tokat, Turkey.

### Conclusion

Martyn takes the front against Muslims and Shiite clerics of Iran and always made great efforts to confront them. One of his main efforts was to write three treatises rejecting Islam, the Qur'an and the Prophet, which met with a strong response from Iranian clerics. These responses were given not only during his stay in Iran, but also for a long time after Martyn left the country and even after his death. Henry Martyn can be considered one of the most influential Christian priests in Iran, especially in Fars province. In addition to the almost strong opposition of Muslim clerics, he also had a great impact on the Iranian youth, especially the youth of Shiraz, by giving speeches, and was able to invite a number of them to Christianity. He tried hard to change the religion of Iran and convert the Iranians to Christianity, but the opposition of the clergy, which was extended to the Qajar court, deprived him of the opportunity to advance and eventually his efforts failed.

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