

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Missionary Activities of Carmelites under Coverage of Medical Services in *Safavid* Period

Abstract

Carmelite missionaries as the Vatican's ambassadors and representatives arrived in Iran since the reign of Shah Abbas I. They were engaged in the extension of catholic Christianity in Iran in various political, religious, cultural, and social arenas.

Carmelite missionaries came to Iran in order to strengthen the relationship between European states and the *Safavids* to form a coalition against the Ottoman Empire. As one of the most active missionary groups in Iran, Carmelites were able to identify the needs and shortcomings of the country in that period and penetrated among different classes of Iranian society. Through meeting the requirements of different social groups, Carmelite missionaries were pursuing their own religious and cultural objectives. Medical activities were among the most effective and important activities of Carmelite priests in Iran during the *Safavid* Period. As the most active Christian missionaries in Iran, Carmelite Fathers endeavored to provide medical and health services for the *Safavid* Court, ruling classes, and people from different walks of life in order to develop and expand Christianity in the Iranian Society. During their residence in Iran, many Carmelite priests, including Fr. Angelus of St. Joseph, wrote different books in order to introduce Iranian medicine to Europe. Some of them even translated Iranian medical books into European languages and published them in Europe. By taking advantage of analytical methodologies, authors of the present article intend to analyze the medical activities of Carmelite priests in the *Safavid* Period and then elaborate

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on the repercussions of such activities.

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Introduction

Since almost the Mongol Era, the Catholic preachers were dispatched to Iran as political and religious representatives of European states and the Vatican Court. They were able to establish some bases for themselves and embark on their preaching activities. Nevertheless, the Catholic preachers' trend of activities underwent a shift because they had been able to expand the scope of their activities in the country. *Safavid* kings, especially Shah Abbas I, supported these preachers and issued numerous orders (or *farmans*) which provided further freedoms for them. Among the catholic preachers dispatched to the *Safavid* Iran, the Carmelite missionaries played more salient roles and were able to wield their influence in various political, religious, cultural, and social arenas. For the first time, they came to Iran in 1604. These catholic preachers and missionaries were mainly dispatched to Iran by the Vatican Court during the reign of Shah Abbas I (1588-1628 AD / 996-1038 AH). The main objective of their dispatch to Iran was the formation of an alliance between European states and the Iranian monarch. As a result of the support that they had received from the *Safavid* monarchs, the catholic missionaries succeeded in establishing a couple of preaching centers in different parts of Iran. In fact, they were able to continue their activities in Iran for almost 150 years. Like other catholic preachers, the Carmelites, too, embarked on providing some public service to Iranians in order to develop their religious agenda and increase their influence among the masses. In this regard, they provided medical services for Iranians. They even identified Iranian medical books and translated and published these books in Europe. The present article elaborates on some parts of medical activities of the Carmelite preachers in the *Safavid* period and their consequences.

Medical Services of Carmelites in order to promote Christianity

In their reports, the Carmelite preachers have indicated that people in Iran and Syria used to take their sick children to the Carmelite fathers and requested these priests to bless them and read the Bible for them. These reports also conveyed that the Carmelite preachers were used to baptizing the sick chil-



dren surreptitiously and had them converted into Christianity. As matter fact, the Iranian people, especially those from the lower classes, assuming that the Carmelite Fathers knew how to practice medicine and, therefore, took their sick children to these preachers in order to be cured. Thus, the Carmelites took advantage of such opportunities and had those sick children converted to Christianity. For this reason, those Carmelite Fathers who had expertise in medicine and medical practicing were more successful because not only people took their sick children to them for receiving medical services, but also other citizens became interested in referring to these priests in order to receive their services.¹ According to statistics published by the Carmelites, the Carmelites preachers baptized 120 people in 1648 AD / 1058 AH, 375 people in 1649 AD / 1059 AH, and 326 people in 1650 AD / 1060 AH.² It should be pointed out that the very appearance and clothes worn by the Carmelite preachers used to give them a special status among the masses and the Iranians used to respect them because their costumes resembled those of the Iranians of Muslim Dervishes. In fact, part of the success of the Carmelite Fathers was rooted in the mystic features associated with them.³ This reality was referred to in a correspondent from Pope Clemet VIII to Shah Abbas I. In his letter, the Pope introduced the Carmelite Fathers as follows: "They wear uniformed clothes. Since the Carmelite Fathers do not wear luxurious clothes, they should not be looked upon contemptibly ..."^{4,5} The Carmelite Fathers used to provide medical services for Iranian Muslims; however, they sometimes offered their services to the Zoroastrians and the Jews of the country and succeeded in baptizing several Zoroastrian and Jewish children who were severely sick.⁶ Some of the Carmelite Fathers, such as Bernard of St. Teresa, even acknowledged the lack of doctors and scarcity of medicines in Iran. They highlighted this issue in their correspondents with Rome and the Vatican.⁷

Shiraz was one of the major Iranian cities in which some of the poor people of the city took their sick children to the Carmelite Fathers to be treated. The Carmelite preachers read the Bible for these sick children and prayed for God's blessings for them. Nevertheless, the Carmelites took advantage of such opportunities and baptized the above-mentioned children surreptitiously and without their parents' knowledge. There is no doubt that those Carmelite preachers who knew medical sciences were more successful in developing their missionary objectives.^{8,9} The Carmelite Fathers established a preaching center or base in Shiraz in 1623 AD / 1032 AH.¹⁰ Nevertheless, they transformed this building into a center for

- 1- Chick, 1939, Vol. 1: 395-396.
- 2- Chick, 1939, Vol. 1: 393-394.
- 3- Richard, 1989: 167-182.
- 4- Sotudeh, 2004: 30-31.
- 5- Kavoosi Araqi, 2000: 190-191.
- 6- Chick, 1939, Vol. 1: 394.
- 7- Chick, 1939, Vol. 2: 822.
- 8- Chardin, 1995, Vol. 4: 1481-1482.
- 9- Chick, 1939, Vol. 1: 395-396.
- 10- Chick, 1939, Vol. 2: 1056-1059.



providing different medical services for the poor people.¹¹ Sometimes, the nationals of European states were stationed and accommodated in this center.^{12, 13}

It should be reminded that the poor were not the only clients of the Carmelite Fathers. Some members of the ruling elite families also used to refer to these priests in order to receive their medical services. For instance, *Sheikh Ali Khan Zanganeh (Itimad al-Daulah)*, the *Safavid* famous premier (*Sadr-e A'zam*) during the reign of Shah Suleiman, took his sick child to the catholic priests in Isfahan in order to have those priests read the Bible and pray for his child.¹⁴

Even during the rule of Shah Sultan Hussein (1694-1722 AD / 1105-1135 AD), when their activities fell into a gradual decline, the Carmelite preachers still practiced medicine and provided medical services to the people. According to reports by the Carmelite Fathers, there were 2 or 3 Carmelite priests in the Carmelite centers in Isfahan, Shiraz, and *Julfa*. These centers were mainly engaged in activities such as reading the Bible, performing the Catholic religious rituals, saying prayers, teaching the Catholic tenets to children, baptizing, and treatment of the sick.¹⁵

Introducing Some Carmelite Preachers in the field of medicine

1- Fr. Angelus of St. Joseph

Fr. Angelus of St. Joseph (1637-1697 AD) was a French Carmelite preacher who was considered as one of the most important figures acting as an intermediary between Iranian and European medicines. His real name was Joseph Labrosse. He was born in Toulouse, France. Joseph Labrosse grew up in Aquitaine region in France. In 1653 AD, he was accepted as a religious missionary in San Pancrazio Church in Rome. In 1662 AD / 1075 AH, he left France in order to prepare himself before going to Iran. First, he went to Rome and stayed there for 2 years. He learned Arabic language in Rome and went to Iran and established himself in Isfahan in 1664 AD / 1075 AH. He embarked on learning Farsi in Isfahan. Upon witnessing the successes of some Carmelite preachers in Isfahan who used their knowledge of medicine as a means for disseminating Christianity, Fr. Angelus of St. Joseph decided to study medicine. For this purpose, he studied numerous Farsi and Arabic books on medicine, especially *Zakhira-i-Khwarazmshahi*.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ He also attended the classes of scholars in Isfahan.¹⁹

Fr. Angelus of St. Joseph returned to France in 1678 AD/1089 AH. In 1680 Ad/1091 AH, he wrote and published a book entitled *Pharmacopae Persica* in Paris.²⁰ This book

11- Chick, 1939, Vol. 2: 1062, 1067.

12- Gemelli Careri, 1719: 266-267.

13- Tavernier, 1930: 310.

14- Chick, 1939, Vol. 2: 905.

15- Chick, 1939, Vol. 1: 517-518.

16- A medical encyclopedia in Farsi written by Ismaeil JorJani in 1110 AH, *Zakhira-i-Khwarazmshahi* not only was the most important textbook for medical students during the Safavid period, but also continued to be important until the arrival of modern medicine to Persia. see: Chardin, 1995, Vol. 3: 1123.

17- Elgood, 1970: introduction, P. ix.

18- Moosavi, 2006: 48-49.

19- Elgood, 1970: 93-94.

20- Elgood, 1951: 366-367.



was a translation of the *Qarabadin* by *Shifa'i* in Latin; *Shifai* was a physician of early *Safavid* period (9th and 10th centuries). Fr. Angelus of St. Joseph published *Pharmacopae Persica* with a detailed introduction about Persian medicine and his motivation for translating this book as an example of a Persian pharmacopoeia.²¹ The publication of this book in Paris was a step toward the introduction of Iranian medicine to Europe at that time.^{22, 23} According to Elgood, Fr. Angelus of St. Joseph went to Amsterdam as a Carmelite representative a few years after²⁴ publishing this book.²⁵ He purchased a printing machine in Amsterdam. While he was in Amsterdam, he wrote a book entitled *Gazophylacium Linguae Persarum*. This book was a Persian, Italian, French, and Turkish dictionary. It was published in Amsterdam in 1684 AD / a095 AH. Despite the fact that this book was not merely a scientific or medical dictionary, it attached great importance to medical terminologies.^{26, 27} Three years after the compilation of *Gazophylacium Linguae Persarum*, however, Fr. Angelus of St. Joseph embarked on translating *Tibb-i-Shifa'i*²⁸ and published it in Paris. *Tibb-i-Shifa'i* was written by Mohamamd Husseini Shifa'i (died in 1684 AD).²⁹

2- Fr. Alexander of Silvester (lay Brother)

Francesco Montalbano (Fr. Alexander of Silvester, 1611-1662 AD) was from Sicily, Italy. He was born in Calatabillotta (in Sicily). He was a Carmelite preacher who knew medicine. He came to Iran in 1653 AD and established himself in Isfahan. Through providing medical services for the sick people, Fr. Alexander of Silvester baptized the people and converted them to Christianity. People in Isfahan welcomed his medical activities and sent their young children to him in order to receive medical treatment. He remained in Isfahan up to the end of 1653. In addition to providing medical services for the sick people, Fr. Alexander of Silvester baptized 2916³⁰ children who were on the verge of death.³¹

3- Fr. Matthew of S. Joseph- Fr. Elias of S. Albert (Archbishop of Isfahan)

Laurent Mouton (Fr. Elias of S. Alber, 1643-1708 AD) was a Belgian Carmelite preacher. He entered Louvain University in 1660 AD and studied mathematics and medicine for 4 years. Then he joined the Carmelites and became a Carmelite priest in 1668. He was interested in being engaged in missionary activities and was, therefore, dispatched to Iran as a missionary in 1676. He established himself in Isfahan.³² In 1682, he was appointed as the head of the Carmelite monastery in Isfahan. In 1694, the Pope appointed Laurent Mouton

- 21- For more information see: Moosavi, 2006: 48-49.
 22- Richard, 1990: 83.
 23- Elgood, 1970: 93-94.
 24- Richard, 1990: 833.
 25- Elgood, 1951: 367.
 26- Elgood, 1970: 93-94.
 27- Chick, 1939, Vol. 1: 446.
 28- *Tibb-i-Shafa'i* or *Qarabadin* is a book written by by Mohamamd Husseini Shifa'i. He was one of the most famous pharmacists in Isfahan during the Safavid Period. This book was so important that Adolf Fonahn reproduced parts of it in his book entitled *Quellenknkunde*. For more information, see: Elgood, 1970: 34 and Fonahn, 1910: 81-82, 85 and Moosavi, 2006: 48-49.
 29- Richard, 1990: 833.
 30- This figure has been derived from reports by the Carmelite preachers. However, it seems impossible for Fr. Alexander of Silvester to have been able to baptize this amount of children during his short period of accommodation in Isfahan and have them converted to Christianity.
 31- Chick, 1939, Vol. 2: 789-791.
 32- Chick, 1939, Vol. 2: 859.



as the archbishop of Isfahan. During his presence in Isfahan and Hamadan from 1678 to 1699, he endeavored to promote Christianity and develop the Pope's objectives in Iran. Due to his expertise in medical sciences, Laurent Mouton provided some services in this regard as well.³³

Pietro Foglia (Fr. Matthew, 1617-1691) was from Naples. He started his career as a missionary preacher in 1644. It is likely that he was in Isfahan from 1644 up to 1648 and acted as the deputy to the head of the Carmelite monastery in Isfahan. During 1649-1652, he was in Basra and was mainly engaged in the promotion and development of Catholicism among the Mandaean, in that region. Before getting engaged in religious activities, Fr. Matthew had studied medicine. He usually recommended his fellow-Carmelite preachers to promote Christianity among Muslims through practicing medicine and providing medical services for them.³⁴ He also wrote a book about Indian herbal medicines entitled *Hortus Malabaricus* (Garden of Malabar) in Latin language. This book elaborated on all the medical uses of herbs and flowers growing in Malabar Region, India, along with pictures of these herbs and flowers.³⁵

Continuation of Medical Services by other Catholic and Protestant Preachers in Iran

The Carmelite preachers continued to provide their medical services to Iranians almost up to the end of their presence in Iran in the late 18th century. After the collapse of the *Safavid* Dynasty and the establishment of the Afghan's rule over Iran, the Carmelite preachers limited their activities to a great extent because there was no political stability and security in the country. However, the procedures for providing medical services for the public, presented and promoted by the Carmelite Fathers and other Catholic preachers, became an established tradition well after the *Safavid* Period and continued even during the rule of *Afsharieh*, *Zandieh*, and *Qajarieh* Dynasties. In fact, some Catholic priests, such as Fr. Damian from Lyons and Bazin, were employed as physicians in the Court of Nader Shah Afshar.^{36, 37} This tradition was greatly developed during the Qajarieh Period because, during this period, in addition to the Catholic preachers, the Protestant preachers, too, came to the scene and embarked on providing their medical and educational services in a concentrated and systematic manner. The Catholic preachers like Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul³⁸ were present in Tehran, Tabriz, and Isfahan and the Carmelite preachers concentrated their activities in southern parts of the country. American Protestant preachers and the British Protestant

33- Chick, 1939, Vol. 2: 862, 865.

34- Chick, 1939, Vol. 2: 960-961.

35- Chick, 1939, Vol. 2: 962

36- Bazin, 1961: 28-31.

37- Chick, 1939, Vol. 1: 608.

38- A congregation of women with simple vows founded in 1633 and devoted to corporal and spiritual works of mercy. For more information, see: Frazee, 1984: 1-42 and Jones, 2005: 8234.



preachers (C.M.S.) were also extensively present in different parts of Iran.³⁹⁻⁴²

Conclusion

The Carmelite preachers arrived in Iran in early 17th century in order to develop and materialize the religious and political objectives of the Pope and the Christian states of Europe in this country. Based on their circumstances, the Carmelite preachers were engaged in different kinds of activities: political, religious, cultural, social, etc. In order to further develop and promote the Catholic Christianity in Iran, these Carmelite preachers resorted to providing medical services for the sick people in the country. They realized that the *Safavid* Iran was suffering from the lack of physicians and medicine. Therefore, the Carmelite preachers tried to learn medical sciences and expertise in order to smooth the path for the further expansion of Christianity in Iran. They were mostly engaged in providing medical services and treatments for Iranian Muslims and Iranian minorities, such as the Jews and Zoroastrians, etc., in the cities of Isfahan and Shiraz. Centers established by the Carmelite preachers in these cities were recognized as medical treatment centers. Fr. Elias, Fr. Mathew, and Fr. Alexander were major Carmelite preachers in Iran who were also engaged in practicing medicine and providing medical services to the Iranians. The Carmelite fathers, as indicated in many oriental study discussions specifically focused on Iran, were amongst the forerunners of Christian preachers who also did a great job in introducing the Iranian medicine to Europe. The efforts made by Fr. Angelus of St. Joseph in this regard were particularly important because he was one of the main intermediaries who contributed to the introduction of Iranian medicine to Europe in the 17th century and translated *Tibb-i-Shifa'i*, one of the most famous medical books of the *Safavid* Era, into Latin. Through publishing different books on Iranian medicine and medical practices, Fr. Angelus of St. Joseph introduced Iranian medicine to Europe. However, one of the most important issues about the Carmelite medical activities in Iran was the consequences of such activities. In fact, Christian preachers continued their medical activities in Iran during next centuries in a more organized and systematic manner. As a result, a great portion of the Catholic and Protestant preachers' activities in the post-*Safavid* Iran, especially during the *Qajarieh* Period, was concentrated on providing medical services to the masses in Iran in order to promote and develop Christianity in the country. Thus, the Carmelite preachers, along with other Catholic preachers, such as Jesuits, were amongst the forerunners of

39- Qaem-Maqami, 1971: 1-51.

40- Ghafari, 1989: 133.

41- Borumand, 2001: 150.

42- Waterfield, 1973: 135-139, 158.



providing medical services to Iran, specifically and, in general, to the East.

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