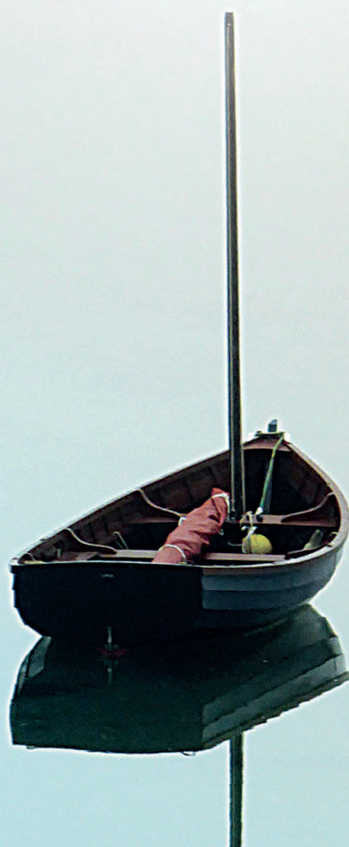


Naomi Reed

finding faith

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from around the world**

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You are not alone

Michael – Iran and India

I began with Michael. He and his wife are currently living in a capital city in Australia; however, Michael grew up in Iran, and he studied in India. Mutual friends suggested that I meet him. ‘He has a really good story,’ they said. ‘He grew up as a Muslim in Iran, and then he became a believer in India, through listening to Christian radio.’ Fair enough, I thought. That sounds good. So I met Michael at a coffee shop near a train station, in the capital city. It was a bright, sunshiny day outside. We ordered drinks and sat down. The first thing he told me was that there was so much about his life that he couldn’t tell me, or that he couldn’t tell anyone. Michael’s family is still in Iran. He himself has been in Australia for twenty-six years and he shares his life and faith openly now, but carefully.

Back in the 1960s, said Michael, Iran was a good place to grow up. His father was in the army, so their family moved around a lot, but they were always comfortable. Michael said that he himself was born in Ahvaz, in the south of Iran, and then grew up in Isfahan, where the family lived in a house with a large garden and lots of fruit trees. The children were always playing soccer outside, or *biaoboro*, a form of cricket. When Michael was 13, they moved north to the capital city, Tehran.

‘My parents were nominal Muslims,’ he said. ‘They didn’t attend the mosque regularly because, as Shi-ites, attendance wasn’t compulsory and they could pray at home. My father would occasionally open

the Quran and read it out loud to the family in Arabic. When I was in primary school, I studied the Quran as part of the primary school curriculum. I remember sitting in class and practising correct pronunciation for every word and sentence. If we didn't do it correctly, it would be sinful. But the meaning of the words was not explained to us – it was reading and memorising that was important, not understanding. Then when I was in high school, I studied Arabic, mainly from stories and poems, because the Arabic used in the Quran was too hard to understand. It was classical.'

'Do you remember praying, as a child?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said. 'It was compulsory, at school. I went to a private school from year 1 to 3. There was no prayer in public schools but, at my school, everybody would be lined up, kneeling in a row, with our hands washed . . . and the leader would stand in front of us, reciting prayers, by rote, always without mistake. We listened. But I only prayed at home when I needed to, when required, or before exams. For me, belief in Islam was never enforced, but I did believe in it, sometimes out of fear, and sometimes because I wanted to get something good out of it. I thought that if I did good things, I would get what I wanted.'

'And Ramadan?'

'Everybody celebrated Ramadan,' smiled Michael. 'Even if we didn't fast during the day, we still celebrated in the evenings. I remember the sweets – *zoolbia* and *bamieh*, in particular – special kinds of Persian doughnuts. The dough is deep-fried and then soaked in a saffron sauce. We'd eat really large naan with meat stew. Rice was expensive then. And someone would have to go and kill the chicken. But that was when I was in primary school, a long time before the Iranian revolution. After the revolution, if you didn't fast during Ramadan, you would be punished. If you ate in public during Ramadan, the revolutionary guards could arrest you. Or if you were a shopkeeper and you had food available, uncovered, the same thing could happen. You could be arrested and go to jail.'

'Did you have questions about God?' I asked.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I did, but I was told not to ask them, because I could lose my faith.’ Then he paused. ‘I was mostly thinking about eternity. In our language that means the end. But I wanted to know about the beginning, about the time before creation. What was it like then? The Muslim faith talks about Adam and Eve, but it says nothing about the time before Adam, and I wanted to know what it was like when there was nothing. So I used to close my eyes and go back in time, in my mind. Sometimes I would worry that I’d go too far back in time and never be able to return.’

‘Were you ever afraid?’

‘No, I wasn’t afraid of God. I thought God was good. But we were all afraid of the jinns, the bad spirits. We wouldn’t want to go out at night, or anywhere where it was dark, because that’s where the jinns were.’

‘Had you heard of Jesus back then?’

‘Yes, we had. We thought Jesus was a special prophet – one of the five special prophets in Islam. Altogether, there are 124,000 prophets in Islam and five of them are special – Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Muhammad is the final messenger and prophet. So I thought that Jesus was a good prophet. He did good things. I didn’t know anything else about him. I didn’t know that he died and rose again.’

In 1975 Michael finished high school and left for military training in a town one hour away from Tehran. While he was there, he also trained as a sports coach and he was sent to a village to teach sport. Through all that time, though, Michael’s main aim was to leave Iran. He explained that it was becoming more difficult to live there and he wanted to experience other places. Also, Michael’s friend had recently emigrated to the US, and Michael wanted to join him. Unfortunately, by then it was 1978, the middle of the Iranian revolution, and the US closed its borders to Iranian citizens. In Iran the Pahlavi dynasty was overthrown and later replaced by the Islamic Republic, under Ayatollah Khomeini. Michael couldn’t go to the US. At about the same time, another friend told Michael that if he learned English before he went to the US, he would spend less money once he got

there. So Michael went to India to learn English, and he still planned on going to the US, if he could.

In India, Michael said, he travelled to Chandigarh, in the northern Punjab state. It was a new, modern city, 260 kilometres north of New Delhi, and the city itself was very well organised, with the streets running in parallel. Michael enrolled in and studied for a Bachelor of Arts degree at the Chandigarh University, majoring in economics, English and Persian. 'It was very hard, though,' he said. 'I found it very hot and we only had water in the taps in the early mornings and for a few hours in the evening. Then I ran out of money.'

Michael explained that in the beginning the exchange rate between Iran and India had been good – the Iranian currency was strong. But then the Iran-Iraq war began and Iran needed all its funds within the country, so the government put restrictions on how much money their citizens could send out of the country. Michael soon realised that he needed to be very careful with money, only buying bread and vegetables when necessary. 'Later,' he said, 'I started asking my parents to send me goods instead of money. I could sell the goods in India, and buy food with the profit. So they sent me pistachio nuts – 5 and 10 kilogram bags. I sold the pistachio nuts and it worked well for a while, until the Iranian government put restrictions on the amount of goods that citizens could send out of the country. Then, my parents only sent me one 3 kilogram bag of pistachio nuts, once a year. The money didn't last long.'

After three years, though, he said that he completed his BA, and decided to move south to the city of Kurukshetra, in the state of Haryana, closer to Delhi, to study his Masters in linguistics. It was the only course available to him at the time, and he knew that he needed to keep studying in order to stay in India. He certainly didn't want to go back to Iran, especially during the war, and with the changes in the country, post-revolution.

'The religious leaders back in Iran seemed to be against everything,' he explained. 'They were against television. At the time, the television was in black and white and had nothing on it . . . but they were against it. I started to wonder why Muslims fought so much against themselves,

and against others. The war between Iran and Iraq went on for eight years, and India was mostly peaceful back then. Before I lived in India, I had been told that only Muslims were good people. But in India, I had friends who were Hindus and Sikhs and Christians. I knew them all. I played soccer with them all, and I was the captain of the college team. That meant that lots of people knew me . . . and they were all my friends. So I started asking more questions. As Muslims, why are we fighting so much? Can we ever do enough good to outweigh the wrong? Can any of us? Can I? Usually, if I did something wrong, I tried to do something good. I gave money to the poor. It's called *zakat* – the third pillar of Islam, and a duty. But I would never give *zakat* to non-Muslims. I wouldn't want to help the infidel.'

It was while studying his Masters in linguistics that everything changed for Michael. One day in 1984, Michael got a letter from a friend who was living in another state of India. The friend was also from Iran and had become a Christian. The letter explained how it had happened. The friend had also been a nominal Muslim, like Michael. Michael read the letter and was not very interested. He wrote back to his friend and asked questions, but only to increase his knowledge, generally. He didn't want to become a Christian.

'At the time,' Michael explained, 'I didn't realise that the Christian and Muslim views were so different. We had heard of Jesus as a prophet. In Persian poetry, Jesus is spoken of highly. But then after a while, I started to listen to Christian radio, mainly because the station also played Hindi music, from the Hindi films, which I liked. And there were a couple of Christian programmes being broadcast at the time. One of them was called *Back to the Bible*.'

One day, Michael said, he heard the broadcaster offer listeners a correspondence course if they wanted to know more about the Bible. Michael wrote to the programme and asked for the material, because he wanted to increase his knowledge generally. He didn't want to become a Christian. He remembers the day he received the booklets. He read one in particular. It was about the character of God. It said that God was unchangeable, omniscient, omnipresent, just, merciful, compassionate . . .

Michael smiled. 'As Muslims,' he said, 'we were discouraged from talking about God. We never talked about what he was like, or about his character or attributes. Now, by myself, in India, I was reading about God, about his character. All I wanted to do was to read more.'

In the city of Kurukshetra at the time – 1984 – there were no public churches and no Christian bookshops. But somehow, Michael found a King James Version of the Bible and he began reading it from the beginning. 'I only read three chapters of Genesis,' he said. 'And I decided that the Bible was logical. In the Bible it says the devil became the devil because he wanted to be like God, and that made sense to me. In the Quran, the devil became the devil because he didn't bow down to Adam, which doesn't make sense to me. In the Bible, Adam and Eve were in the garden, which also makes sense to me. In the Quran, they were in heaven, which doesn't make sense to me because there could be no sin there. The Bible seemed logical from the beginning.'

But then after Genesis, Michael started on the New Testament. 'That's when it happened,' he said. 'I read the Gospels and I just fell in love with Jesus.' Michael smiled, remembering. 'I saw that Jesus was someone who practised what he told other people to do. I'd never seen that before. I didn't know anyone else who did that. I loved him. There was no fault with him, at all. In John 14:6, it says that Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the way . . . the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." And I knew if Jesus is a prophet, and prophets never lie, then Jesus must be the only way to God, so I kept reading the Bible and I came to John 8:31,32, where Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." And that's exactly what happened to me, in that moment. The truth set me free. I became a Christian. I just knew. I believed in Jesus. I prayed to God in that city of Kurukshetra. I kept praying.'

At the time, Michael explained, there were no public churches, so he found a house church, and he met with other Indian Christians and was later baptised. Sometime afterwards, he moved to Delhi. He remembers praying to God and asking for help, talking to him all the

time, and going to all-night prayer meetings and seeing answers to prayer. He began to read more of the Bible and he understood that salvation was by faith in Jesus and the grace of God, not by the good things he could do, or not do . . . and that a relationship with God was like nothing he had ever experienced before.

‘What did your parents think?’ I asked.

‘Well,’ said Michael, ‘I was sure I had found the truth, and I assumed that other people, including my parents, would be happy for me. I hadn’t heard of any other stories of trouble. So the following year, at the end of 1985, I decided to go back to Iran to tell my family.’

Before Michael left India, he told a friend that he might need a Christian contact in Iran. The friend in India passed on the need to a friend in the UK. The friend in the UK knew of an Assemblies of God (AOG) church in Tehran, and passed on the information to Michael, saying that the church held worship in his language, Farsi. Some weeks later, Michael arrived in Tehran, and he visited the church. In those days, the government did not want Muslims going inside churches, or potentially converting. Michael went inside and once he was inside, he saw a few hundred Armenian Christians, as well as some Muslim-background believers. It was the first time Michael had heard the gospel in Farsi. He was given a Farsi Bible. ‘It changed me,’ he said. ‘Sometimes, in English, it’s hard to read and I forget it. But in Farsi, I found I could remember it. I wanted to share it in Farsi. I *wanted* to explain it.’

Back at Michael’s family home, though, it was not easy. That night, Michael told his parents and siblings that he loved Jesus. They were not happy at all. His father immediately worried about their reputation, saying, ‘What will people think of us? Who will want to marry your sisters? What will they say about us? They will say that we have not brought up our family well. We will have a bad name.’

There was an argument. Michael went out to the front courtyard area, where he often slept. ‘But I couldn’t sleep,’ he said. ‘I was distressed and crying. I complained to Jesus. I wanted to know why he’d sent me here on my own. In the Gospels, he sent his disciples out two by two, and there I was on my own and I didn’t understand it.

But just then, as I was complaining and crying, I saw Jesus. It wasn't a dream. I saw Jesus standing there. He was a man in light, walking towards me. I could not see his face but he took me by the hand. Then Jesus said to me, "You are not alone. I am with you, always, until the end of the age." And then I stopped crying.'

Michael told me how comforted he felt. It was amazing – he wasn't alone! He continued to pray, and he spent time with his family, but he also knew that it would be difficult to be a believer in Iran. So after three months, Michael decided to return to India. But there was a problem with that. If anyone had seen him at the AOG church, or spied on him reading the Bible, he might not be allowed to leave Iran. There were consequences for leaving the Muslim faith. Three days before he was due to fly to India, Michael was asked to submit his passport to the authorities, as part of normal practice. In most cases, travellers got their passports back on the day that they flew, if they were permitted to leave. But Michael was worried that he might not be allowed to fly. He had written his Muslim name on the form he had to fill out. Then there was a question. 'What is your religion?' Michael had stopped. If he wrote 'Muslim', it would be a lie. If he wrote 'Christian', he would be in trouble and would not be allowed to leave the country. It would be obvious to the authorities that he had converted from Islam. So he prayed for guidance. He didn't know what to do. He left the question blank. He didn't answer it.

Three days later, at the airport, Michael received his passport back and he was allowed to leave Iran. He said he didn't fully relax until the plane was in the air.

Michael explained that, back in India, he got a scholarship to do his PhD in linguistics at Kurukshetra University and, at the same time, he applied to the UNHCR and received refugee status. At first, the authorities didn't believe that he was a Christian. What if he was claiming persecution to get a visa? So Michael produced all the Bible correspondence course literature that he had completed in India, and he asked the man in the office, 'Do you think anyone would waste their time reading all of this if they didn't believe it?' The authorities took the material, looked at the extent of it, and agreed with him.

Receiving refugee status meant that Michael didn't have to go back to Iran. However, he did have to keep applying for refugee status every six months, to stay in India. After his PhD, Michael worked for the UNHCR, teaching English to refugees, and then he worked with Operation Mobilisation (OM), with Iranians and Afghans in India. It was going well but, by 1990, Michael realised that he couldn't stay long-term in India. It was very difficult to keep reapplying for refugee status every six months. So at the end of that year, Michael applied for a visa to Australia as an Iranian refugee. He was accepted and arrived in Australia in 1991.

At this point in the story Michael paused and asked me whether I'd like to walk to their church nearby, where Michael now pastors a Farsi congregation. I said that I would. It was mid-week and almost lunchtime. The street was busy. Inside their church hall it was also busy – it was full of whiteboards and coffee urns and chairs and about sixty Iranians and Afghans, all sitting down, learning English as a second language. As we walked in, Michael's wife was pouring the coffee. She looked up and greeted us.

'We've been at this church for nearly thirteen years, now,' Michael explained. 'And it's growing. It's one of a growing number of Farsi churches in this city in Australia. We have about a hundred people every Sunday. They come from every part of the city and we run TESOL¹ classes through the week. Sometimes up to 150 people come to the English classes, when there are lots of refugees. Many of them have come to Australia by boat. On Sundays they like to hear the Bible in their own language. They love to sing, especially fast, happy songs, with lots of clapping, so if we don't have a musician, we sing anyway. And we share about Jesus.'

'When you share Jesus with Iranians and Afghans, where do you begin?' I asked.

'I always start with Genesis,' said Michael. 'I always start with the story in the garden. We have all sinned, I say. And if salvation was by good works, God would have told Adam and Eve to do good works, to stay in the garden and do lots of good works to repair it. But he didn't. He banished them. So salvation is not by good works. I think,

in the back of our minds, we all know that we can't do enough good works. Who would decide how much good works we need to do? And how can we do enough? We can't. We need forgiveness. I do. We all do. That's why God sent his Son, Jesus. And a Muslim needs to recognise who Jesus really is – his character, and that he is God himself. Jesus has saved us. But Iranian Muslims can be very difficult to reach. Evangelism can be very hard and discipleship can be even harder. But the important thing is to know them and to love them, to be friends with them, to be wise about where to start, to find out what is his or her real need or question . . . because everybody has a real need or a real question.'

I agreed with Michael, and then he showed me a video of their congregation singing and clapping, as well as baptisms and weddings and other celebrations. He pointed out the children in the video who had recently come to Australia by boat. Michael's wife finished pouring coffee and she came over to say hello, joining the conversation, and offering cheese and grapes. She explained to me that she and Michael met while he was in India, and they married twenty-four years ago, not long after he arrived in Australia. They now live near the church, and their two sons are at university. They are both busy pastorally, and in the future Michael would love to have more time to write – especially Bible commentaries for Iranians, in Farsi, and devotions for Christian radio in Iran.

'Would you ever go back to Iran?' I asked.

'We would love to,' they both said. 'Our sons have never been to Iran and they don't really know their grandparents. They have met them once, but naturally they can't develop a deeper relationship.'

'But Michael can't go back,' said his wife. 'If he was a nominal Christian, it might be OK, but he is a pastor and he is known to be a pastor. Recently we heard of two other Iranian Christians who went back and they were both detained. One of them is still in jail and we don't know what happened to the other one. In Tehran, the AOG church in Farsi has been closed down. The bishop was murdered. The remaining believers are being spied on. It's very difficult.'

I listened to her and began to understand why Michael couldn't tell me the rest of his story. Apparently, Michael's family members think that he is teaching at a university in Australia.

'What keeps you going when it's hard?' I asked.

Michael paused. 'I'd give anything to follow Jesus,' he said. 'When I saw him that time in our front courtyard, I knew that he loved me. It started like that. He loved me. Then he called me. And he told me that he'd be with me, always. So now if I'm having troubles in my ministry, or if I'm missing my home in Iran, I just remember that Jesus has called me, and he has told me, "I am with you, always, until the end of the age." And back in the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus said that to his disciples, the context was mission. Jesus said he'd be with his disciples as he *sent* them, to the ends of the earth. It's the same for us, today. Sometimes it will be very difficult, for all of us, I know, and it has been difficult for me. It is difficult back in Iran, but every day Jesus is with us. That's what keeps me going.'

I had one last question: 'How are your parents, now, today?'

'They're OK,' said Michael, smiling. 'My father has been listening to Christian radio.'



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