

The Protestant missionary hospitals in Iran (1880-1941): medical care, religion, and modernity

The project is devoted to the study of the Protestant missionary hospitals in Iran during the years 1880-1941. It insists on the necessity to redefine the role, importance, and activity of the missionary hospitals in relation to the rapid social and cultural changes. Such changes were a result of the monarchs' reforms and the policy of centralization, statist economy, and social uniformity. The reforms were associated with the improvement of communication and transport networks with the concurrent opening of the country to cultural, social, and technological influences from the West. The changes were manifested in intensive urbanization and – which is highly related to the research topic – implementation of the state projects focused on facilitation of medical care.

Taking into account the complexity of social, political, and religious processes and changes occurring in Iran the researched tasks are focused on analyzing and rethinking several problems corresponding to 1) the situation of the missionary hospitals, 2) the ways and forms of their operation in Iranian society, and 3) the potential impact on the various Muslim communities. By analyzing the functions and activity of the missionary hospitals with the study of reactions and receptions of medical care provided by the Protestant missionaries the data possessed in the project allow to describe in detail the local Muslim communities which have not been sufficiently studied so far, including in particular men, women, children, representatives of the various ethnic and social group (Kurds, Persian, Turks, city and village dwellers, nomads) as hospital patients. They make possible the explanation of the processes of locating the global (as it was seen at least in naming diseases and illnesses) and mechanism of introducing modernity in local communities, as well as the register of attitudes, judgments, stereotypes regarding medicine and hospital treatment, and in the meantime, the register of the variability of medical practices coexisting by side (modern, traditional, folk medicine).

What makes that project of great scientific importance are predominantly approaches and categorizations. Firstly, the complementary analysis of the Protestant missions in Iran in reference to medicine and medical care. Through detailed studies, the project is expected to show the complexity, diversity as well as similarities in the initiatives undertaken by the Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Lutherans. As immensely important we consider the analysis of connections between the religious ideas and the design of the medical care in the hospitals affiliated with certain missions. Subsequently, the contextual approach toward the activity and function of missionary hospitals. By defining the types of connections and relations, dependencies, and developments in which the hospitals were involved we strive to show the variabilities of reactions and reception of the missionaries' enterprises in the local context. No of less importance is the categorization of a hospital as a place "in-between", situated at the same time in the center and on the peripheries, as space strongly connected to the global flows of ideas and in the meantime recognized locally.

The research tasks are grouped into several stages preceded by collecting the data from various archives and institutions (the archives in the United States, Great Britain, and Iran) related to the Protestant missions and the Protestant hospitals in Iran, namely the hospitals run by the American Presbyterian Mission in Urmia, Rasht, Tehran, Mashhad, the hospitals run by the Anglican organization called Church Missionary Society in Isfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, Kerman, and the hospital run by the missionaries from the Lutheran Orient Mission in Mahabad.

The project research is being placed within the area of research on the social and cultural history of medicine and as well as the history of the Protestant missions and one should be convinced that the data collected during the research would be used as an excellent source for comparative analysis on missionary hospitals in other parts of the world.