

The Politics of Protection. Iberian Missionaries in Safavid Iran under Shāh ʿAbbās I (1587-1629)

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Introduction

Although it is often thought that the presence of Western missionaries in Iran goes back no further than the early nineteenth century, the country was a destination and a work area for European men of the cloth from multiple religious orders from the mid-sixteenth century onward.¹ Catholic missionaries stayed in Iran following the demise of the Safavid state, epitomized by the fall of Isfahan to Afghan invaders in 1722, and with the exception of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when chaos and insecurity engulfed the country, would continue to reside and operate among Iranians until in the late 1930s the nationalist fervor of the Reza Shāh regime put an end to their activities.

This study will examine the role and status of these foreign residents during the reign of Shāh ʿAbbās I (1587-1629), the period when they were first allowed to settle on the Iranian mainland and, more specifically, in the shāh's newly created capital, Isfahan. The role the missionaries played in the orbit of the Safavid court and in wider Isfahani society went far beyond their small numbers. They served as political intermediaries with the outside world; they were a constituency among many in court politics; and their presence and activities created serious tensions among various religious groups with ties to the royal court—most notably the Shīʿī clerics and the members of the Armenian community of New Julfa, the suburb of Isfahan that was created to accommodate them after their deportation from Armenia proper in 1604-05. I will explore the complex interaction of these European friars with the shāh as part of a wider set of relationships involving these two domestic groups, looking at their interests and the influence they wielded at the court. My main aim in examining the ways the shāh dealt with the missionaries as one constituency among many in his realm is to make sense of the seemingly contradictory nature of the relationship.

¹ This leaves out the presence of Dominicans and the existence of a Dominican archbishopric in Sultaniyah in the early fourteenth century.

Beginnings

Following the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, which gave the Iberian powers the right to organize missionary work in the Indies without any interference from the Holy See, Spanish and Portuguese missionaries initially had a monopoly on activities in Iran. The first to enter the country, or rather the Persian Gulf, were the Fathers of the Society of Jesus. The Dutch Jesuit Caspar Barzaeus (Barze or Berzé), who was selected by the well known Franciscus Xavier for this task, arrived in Hormuz in 1548.² Faced with an inhospitable climate and numerous other problems, among them the habitual difficulty of converting Muslims, the Jesuits left the island after two decades. The Christian victory over the Ottomans at the battle of Lepanto of 1571 and the subsequent European interest in reviving contacts with the Islamic world beyond Istanbul led to a short-lived new initiative in the form of an Augustinian mission consisting of twelve friars who in 1573 arrived in Hormuz, now bereft of apostolic assistance. Its leader, P. Simon de Moraes, established a convent on the island as well as a school for converted youth, most of them Indian boys who had been brought to Hormuz as slaves.³

It would take another twenty years for representatives of various orders, beginning with the Portuguese Augustinians, to gain a new foothold in Iran by establishing a lasting presence on the mainland. Renewed missionary interest in the Safavid state was linked to its projected status as an ally in Europe's struggle against the Ottomans, but also followed the news, conveyed by an ex-Jesuit monk by the name of Francisco da Costa who had visited Iran in 1599 on his way back from India, that Shāh 'Abbās was ready to convert to Christianity and willing to allow Christian friars into his realm. This prompted Pope Clement VIII, obsessed with the anti-Ottoman struggle for the duration of his tenure (1592-1605), to take various initiatives.⁴ One was to send a diplomatic mission to Iran in response to the delegation led by the English adventurer-cum-diplomat Robert Sherley that Shāh 'Abbās had dispatched to Europe in 1598. The papal mission combined religious and political motives. Its members, Francisco da Costa, an ex-Jesuit, and his companion Diego de Miranda, a layperson and a soldier, arrived in Iran in 1602, instructed to try and convert Shāh 'Abbās with the promise of Western military assistance against the Ottomans. They failed on both counts. The two men were mired in mutual conflict from beginning to end, and the shāh's initially friendly treatment of them changed abruptly when the news broke that the Portuguese were preparing an attack on Iranian-held Bahrain.

² See Joseph Wicki (ed.), *Documenta Indica* 1-18, Rome 1948-88, vol. 1, pp. 595-698.

³ Carlos Alonso, "El P. Simon de Moraes, pionero de las misiones augustinias en Persia († 1585)," *Analecta Augustiniana* 42 (1979), pp. 353-54.

⁴ As early as 1593 the pope had sent a mission to Iran urging its ruler to take up arms against the Ottomans. See Peter Bartl, "Marciare verso Costantinopoli?—Zur Türkenpolitik Klemens' VIII," *Saeculum* 20 i (1969), pp. 44-56.

Without any concrete information about Shāh ‘Abbās’s 1598 mission but worried about the English presence in Iran, the Spanish-Portuguese King Philip III in the same period decided to write a letter to the Safavid ruler warning him about the English as enemies of the Catholic church and urging him to side with Europe’s Catholic nations. The pope, swayed by the argument that, owing to their previous experience in Hormuz, no one was as familiar with the region as the Jesuits, would have liked to see a Jesuit delegation establish contact with Iran via Goa, and made efforts to that effect. Yet when the letter from the Spanish King arrived in Goa it was not accompanied by the requisite recommendations. Thus the Portuguese viceroy of India, lured by a generous offer of Goa’s Augustinian archbishop, Dom Aleixo de Meneses, who suggested paying for the journey out of his own pocket, chose to send an Augustinian mission instead.⁵

The result was the Augustinian delegation of Jerónimo da Cruz, António de Gouveia, its chronicler, and Christóbal del Espíritu Santo, who set out from Goa in early 1602. Landing in Hormuz, these men traveled to Khurāsān where they met the shāh in the early fall of the same year, after which they accompanied the royal suite back to Isfahan. Their mission laid the groundwork for a lasting Augustinian presence in Iran. Shāh ‘Abbās sent the envoys back to Spain with a letter in which he expressed his sympathy for Christianity, solicited the Portuguese to visit his realm in great numbers, and pledged to support them in all respects.⁶ Heartened by this reaction, Philip III dispatched a new mission to Iran, led by the Portuguese Luis Pereira de Lacerda. With him were three Augustinians, Belchior dos Anjos, Guilherme de Santo Agostinho, and Diogo de Santa Anna, who became the first long-time missionary residents in Isfahan, helping to secure a lasting presence for their order in the Safavid realm.⁷

Bitter rivalry between the various orders marked subsequent missionary initiatives and operations—beginning with the arrival of the Carmelites in Isfahan, sent to Iran in defiance of the Iberian monopoly on missions in Asia. Clement VIII, furious about Goa’s viceroy’s decision to send an Augustinian delegation and the way Da Costa and De Miranda had soiled the reputation of the Holy See with their conduct, in 1604 decided to dispatch the first mission of Discalced Carme-

⁵ Carlos Alonso, “Nuevas aportaciones para la historia del primer viaje misional de los Carmelitas Descalzos a Persia (1603-1608),” *Missionalia Hispanica* 19 (1958), pp. 249-50; idem, “Una embajada de Clemente VIII a Persia (1600-1609),” *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 34 (1996), pp. 18-19.

⁶ António de Gouveia, *Relaçam em que se tratam as guerras e grandes victorias que alcançou o grã-de-rey da Persia Xá Abbas do grão Turco Mahometto, & seu filho Amethe, as quais resultarão das embaixadas q̃ por mandado del rey D. Felipe II de Portugal fizerao algũs religiosos da ordem dos Eremitaas de Santo Agostinho a Persia*, Lisbon 1611, pp. 71-72.

⁷ For this mission, see Roberto Gulbenkian, *L’ambassade en Perse de Luis Pereira de Lacerda et des Pères Portugais de l’Ordre de Saint-Augustin Belchior dos Anjos et Guilherme de Santo Agostinho*, Lisbon 1972.

lites to Iran.⁸ Its members, Juan Tadeo di San Elisio and Paulo Simone were both Spaniards. They, too, were to exhort Shāh ‘Abbās to join an alliance with the pope and to offer military assistance in the form of engineers and artillerymen.⁹ When they finally arrived in Isfahan in 1607, the shāh, angry at the Augustinians, at first met them with suspicion, but ultimately gave them a cordial welcome. A year later the Carmelite Fathers were given a house and permission to build a church in Isfahan.¹⁰

By 1610 both the Augustinians and the Carmelites were represented in Isfahan, allowed to operate churches and convents and to engage in circumscribed proselytizing and educational activities. For nearly two decades, the Iberian fathers continued to enjoy a monopoly in the Safavid realm, owing to the distraction of the Wars of Religion in Central Europe as well as the absence of any notable (commercial) activity beyond the Cape on the part of other Catholic countries.¹¹

Hopes and Dreams

As was seen with the first Augustinian and Carmelite missions, from the outset two motives prevailed in the missionary endeavor in Iran. One was religious in nature. It involved the dream of converting the shāh and his entourage to the Christian faith as a first move toward the ultimate goal of bringing the population at large under the sign of the cross. When that dream proved unworkable, they focused on Iran’s Armenian population, trying to win them for the Roman Church and working to establish an Armenian seminary in Isfahan, similar to the schools they were operating in India, China and Japan.¹²

⁸ This in turn angered the Augustinians, who protested with the pope and the Spanish king arguing that the arrival in Iran of yet more missionaries, especially missionaries belonging to a different order, would make Muslims, known to be very curious, wonder about the differences in style, thus lowering the credibility of the fathers, as well as impede cooperation among the missionaries themselves. The Carmelites countered by arguing that little cooperation would be needed given the size of the field. The issue had national overtones as well. The Portuguese Augustinians disliked the mostly Spanish Carmelites, who in turn mistrusted the perceived efficacy of the Augustinians, members of a nation that, according to the Carmelites, had made itself hated in all of Asia with its pride and presumptuousness. See “Affari de Persia,” Biblioteca da Ajuda, Lisbon, Cod. 46-X-17, fols. 562ff; and Luis Gil Fernández, *El imperio luso-español y la Persia safávida* 1 (1582-1605), Madrid 2006, p. 54.

⁹ Anonymous (ed.), *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia and the Papal Mission of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries* 1-2, London 1939, p. 127.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 143.

¹¹ In 1616 the Italian Dominican Paul Cittadini arrived in Nachjavan, sent by the Vatican as the vicar of the Armenians. Otherwise, the Iberian monopoly would end with the arrival, in 1628, of the French Capuchins in Iran.

¹² Carlos Alonso, *Antonio de Gouvea, O.S.A. Diplomático y visitador apostólico en Persia* († 1628), Valladolid 2000, p. 78.

The other goal had a geopolitical character. Missionaries played a part in the grand European strategy of trying to lure the Safavid ruler into a projected anti-Ottoman alliance, with a promise of military assistance in the form of artillery specialists, engineers and ordnance, if he complied. The two objectives were related; by implication military assistance was contingent on the ruler's willingness to make concessions on the religious front.

Proselytizing and military assistance had long been connected. Missionary hopes of converting the populace by way of its leadership go back at least as far as the Mongol period—the thirteenth century. Christian Europe, informed about these far-away lands by Nestorian missionaries, saw the Mongol elite as favorably disposed to Christianity, one step away from converting. At the same time, Christian rulers approached the Mongols in hopes of joining forces with them against the Turks—in *casu* the Seljuks, the new threat to the Holy Land and its Christian shrines.

Although they never bore fruit, expectations of joint action survived the demise of the Mongols; all through the reign of the Timurids and the Aq-Quyunlu dynasty European kings and popes continued to probe Muslim rulers on their interest in cooperating with them against the Turks. The rise of the Safavids as a formidable political force in the early sixteenth century generated new enthusiasm for diplomatic initiatives around this theme, both on the part of the papacy and among emerging and increasingly assertive early modern European states. European opinion-makers hailed Shāh Ismā'il not just as the charismatic leader that he was, but as a visionary ruler sent by God, a savior who was ready to convert to the Christian faith and who might come to the rescue of the Christian West, now threatened by the Ottomans. As early as 1502, a year after the shāh's accession, the Venetians sent an exploratory mission to Tabriz. Once secure on the throne, Ismā'il reciprocated by dispatching envoys to various European courts.¹³ None of these contacts ever had any lasting impact; no Muslim ruler converted, and assistance remained desultory, mostly confined to the shipment of some artillery. The same is true for the reign of Ismā'il's successor, Shāh Ṭahmasb (1524-76), who continued to receive Western diplomats in an apparent willingness to join the European nations in a grand alliance against the Ottomans—his own main enemies, who invaded Iran three times during his reign—without ever coming to an agreement with any Western power.

Shāh Ṭahmasb's fervent devotion to the Shī'ī faith momentarily stymied any prospects for conversion.¹⁴ Christian proselytizing efforts resumed under Shāh

¹³ Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti (ed.), *Šāh Ismā'il I nei <<Diari>> di Marin Sanudo*, Rome 1979, pp. 32-39; and Barbara von Palombini, *Bündniswerben abendländischer Mächte um Persien 1453-1600*, Wiesbaden 1968, pp. 43ff.

¹⁴ Even Shāh Ṭahmasb, despite his image as a dour bigot deadly afraid of contamination by non-Shī'īs, in some ways lived up the traditional image of respect for people of the Book, in *casu* his Armenian subjects. As several royal decrees, farmans, confirm, he recognized

Khudābandah, who in 1578 succeeded the ephemeral Shāh Ismāʿīl II. Early reports about Khudābandah's Christian leanings came from an Armenian named Juan Bautista, who was sent to Iran by the viceroy of Naples. Shāh Khudābandah sent him back to Europe. Before going to Spain, Bautista first headed for Goa, where he spread a sensationalist account about the miraculous recuperation of Hamzah Mirza, the shāh's son who, substituting for his purblind father, at the time was Iran's effective ruler. Hamzah Mirza was said to been persuaded by his wife, the daughter of Alexander, the ruler of Kakheti, the eastern part of Georgia, to turn to the holy cross and to promise to convert upon recovery. Bautista made it sound as if the ruler and his son had sent him to Spain with gifts and a request for missionaries who would assist in the conversion of the country.¹⁵

Shāh ʿAbbās I and Christianity

The Christian notion that, eventually, Muslim rulers might convert to Christianity has old prophetic roots going back at least as far as the Mongols. In the sixteenth century this dream not just included the Safavids from Shāh Ismāʿīl onward and the Mughals under Sultan Akbar, but even the Ottoman sultan, who in Western Europe was commonly seen as the Anti-Christ. In Iran, such hopes remained alive into the reign of Nadir Shāh in the 1740s, more than a century after reaching a high point with Shāh ʿAbbās I (1587-1629).¹⁶ The sources offer abundant information about the latter's favorable treatment of Christian missionaries, his love of religious disputation, and his interest in Christianity, its symbols and its rituals. Hopes of conversion, raised by various early travelers returning from Iran, were fueled in particular by the high-profile apostasy of three members of a Safavid mission visiting Italy, followed by the conversion of another three from among the mission's remaining members once they had reached Spain in 1601.¹⁷ As had been the case with the Mongols, there was a strong Christian impulse at the Safavid court and the country at large, and women were an important factor in this. It is known that several Mongol rulers had Christian spouses, and even if

and sponsored Armenian monasteries and lay communities in places like Marand, Nakhjavan, Kachin, Tatev, and Agulis. See A.D. Papazian, *Persidskie dokumenty Matenadaran, Ukazy, vypusk 1*, Yerevan 1956, docs. 12-18; summaries in Renate Schimkoreit, *Regesten publizierter safawidischer Herrscherurkunden. Erlasse und Staatsschreiben der frühen Neuzeit Irans*, Berlin 1982, pp. 147-48, 150, 162.

¹⁵ Alonso, "El P. Simon de Moraes," p. 358.

¹⁶ For the belief that Nadir Shāh was ready to convert to Christianity, see Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, pp. 637, and 986-87.

¹⁷ Three members of the Iranian mission sent to Europe by Shāh ʿAbbās in 1599 converted to Christianity during their stay in Italy; another three, among them the well-known Uruch Beg, better known as Don Juan of Persia, converted and defected after arriving in Spain. See Angelo Michele Piemontese, "Les célébrités du Janicule et les diplomates safavides émigrés à Rome," *Eurasian Studies* 5 (2006), pp. 271-96.

it never led to the conversion of their husbands and the elite, the influence of several of these women on their husbands is well documented. The Safavids, in turn, recruited many of their wives and concubines from the Christian nobility of the Caucasus, and over time Georgian and Armenian women came to inhabit the harems of the elite in great numbers. One of Shāh ‘Abbās’s own wives was a Christian. She apparently worked hard to serve Isfahan’s Christian community, taking advantage of the services of Asad Beg, a favorite of the shāh who had direct access to the palace. Among the letters that Da Costa and De Miranda brought with them one was directed to her.¹⁸

All this was not lost on the missionaries. It is not for nothing that Diego da Miranda was instructed by his superiors to try and reach the shāh through the latter’s spouse.¹⁹ Robert Sherley, having returned from Iran and writing from Rome in 1609, opined that Shāh ‘Abbās was particularly friendly toward Christians since he had taken a Christian wife, the daughter of Simon Khan, one of the kings of Georgia. He called this spouse the reason why many highly placed functionaries were either Christian or favorably disposed toward Christianity. The message that Sherley had brought with him from Iran for Pope Paul V included a request for military experts and a proposal for the formation of a defensive league with Christian nations. It also spoke of the shāh’s desire for Christian missionaries who would be given full freedom to preach; and it contained a promise that ‘Abbās would make his Christian, Armenian and Georgian subjects conform to the Catholic rite.²⁰

Shāh ‘Abbās indeed appeared very sympathetic to the Christian faith. Gregarious and affable, he would sit with missionaries and query them on their faith and its tenets; witness reports have him ask the Fathers for saintly relics, make the sign of the cross over the wine cup of his European drinking partners, and drink to the health of the pope.²¹ Since the missionaries themselves are typically the source for this information, one should be cautious not to take everything they say at face value. Wishful thinking with regard to the shāh’s readiness to convert may have led them to exaggerate or misread signs. Intensely competitive, members of individual orders may also have been keen to demonstrate that the Safavid ruler was particularly friendly to them as individuals or to their particular order; and some stories may even be apocryphal. But collectively they do add up to a picture of a ruler who was extraordinarily eager to learn about Christianity and its sym-

¹⁸ It remains unclear if the letter reached its destination. See Alonso, “Una embajada de Clemente,” p. 9; Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, pp. 88-89.

¹⁹ Alonso, “Una embajada de Clemente,” p. 29.

²⁰ In Angelo Michele Piemontese, “I due ambasciatori di Persia ricevuti da Papa Paolo V al Quirinale,” *Miscellanea Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae* 12 (2005), pp. 396-97.

²¹ Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, pp. 93-94; Report by Fr. Paolo Maria on the state of Catholicism in Persia, 8 April 1616, in Biblioteca da Ajuda, Lisbon, Cod. 46-X-17, fol. 593v; Carlos Alonso, “El primer viaje desde Persia a Roma del P. Vicente de S. Francisco, OCD (1609-1611),” *Teresianum. Ephemerides Carmelitae* 40 (1989), p. 540.

bols and who showed great affection for some of its representatives. Father Juan Tadeo, for one, not just became Shāh ‘Abbās’s friend but his confidant, in addition to serving him as interpreter. De Gouveia—whom the shāh came to dislike over time—claims that ‘Abbās had asked him, in the company of Konstantin Mirza, a renegade Georgian prince and one of the shāh’s favorites who also served as *darughab*, mayor, of Isfahan, to teach him how to cross himself.²² The Portuguese envoy also recounts how the shāh, accompanied by his son Safi Mirzā, visited the Augustinian church in Isfahan, listened to chants and inquired about the meaning of the sign with the letters IHS that adorned the altar.²³ Diogo de Santa Anna, the first prior of the Augustinian convent in Isfahan, called ‘Abbās very much inclined, *inclinatissimo*, toward Christians. He added that the monarch had not just made the sign of the cross in front of Christian fathers, but at one point had taken a necklace with a wooden cross from one of them and put it around his own neck. The Augustinian also opined that, either because the shāh was little firm in his Muslim faith, or because of the influence his Georgian harem women, with whom he conversed more than with anyone else, had on him, had told him that he knew Mary had given birth to Christ while being a virgin. ‘Abbās, he said, had told him personally that he was a Christian at heart, to which Diogo de Santa Anna had replied that in that case one should also profess it by mouth.²⁴

The shāh showed an especially keen interest in the visual aspect of the Christian faith. He never went as far as the Mughal Sultan Akbar, who dressed “in the Portuguese manner, with a sword and dagger,”²⁵ but like the latter, he appeared fascinated by Christian imagery, especially in the form of illustrated Bible manuscripts and other religious works. Aleixo de Meneses, the Goan archbishop, sent a lavishly illustrated copy of a “Life of Jesus Christ,” which the Gouveia delegation took with it as a gift for the Safavid ruler, justifying this choice by referring to ‘Abbās’s well known interest in Christianity.²⁶ In 1608, during their first visit to Iran, the Carmelites presented the shāh with a richly bound and beautifully illustrated copy of the Old Testament, the so-called Morgan Bible. He expressed great curiosity about the volume, and in particular about the miniatures it contained, and ordered that the meaning of the text and the illustrations on each page be

²² Alonso, *Antonio de Gouveia*, p. 41.

²³ De Gouveia, *Relaçam*, p. 209.

²⁴ Carlos Alonso, “Due lettere riguardanti i primi tempi delle missioni agostiniane in Persia,” *Analecta Augustiniana* 24 (1961), pp. 156-7; Roberto Gulbenkian, “De ce qu’avec la grâce de Dieu, le Père ‘Servo sem proveito’ fit dans le royaume de Perse,” in *Estudos Históricos* 1-3, ed. idem, Lisbon 1995, vol. 2, pp. 145-6.

²⁵ Diogo de Couto, *Da Ásia, Década nona*, Lisbon 1974, pp. 66-67, quoted in Pedro de Moura Carvalho, “Goa’s Pioneering Role in Transmitting European Traditions to the Mughal and Safavid Courts,” in *Exotica: The Portuguese Discoveries and the Renaissance Kunstkammer*, eds. Helmut Trnek and Nuno Vasallo e Silva, Lisbon 2001, p. 75.

²⁶ Alonso, *Antonio de Gouveia*, p. 39.

explained in Persian in the margins. Two years later, while attending the Armenian Celebration of the Epiphany, ‘Abbās read a passage from an old copy of the Gospels. In 1616, he ordered Juan Tadeo to translate the Psalms and the Gospels into Persian.²⁷ In a report from Iran written in the same year, finally, F. Paulo Maria narrates how, during a dinner party, he presented the shāh with a work with the writings of Cardinal Belarminio, adding that the ruler had parts of the text read to him. The shāh told him that he often read the Gospels, referring to the copy that he had received from the Carmelite fathers. On the same occasion ‘Abbās indicated to this guest his great desire to travel to Rome and visit the pope.²⁸

In the letter Shāh ‘Abbās gave to De Gouveia to carry to King Philip III, the Safavid monarch assured the Spanish monarch that he favored the Christian faith in all respects and that he wished it would grow from day and to day, adding that he would welcome Christians and the Portuguese coming to his realm in great numbers and that he would do nothing to disturb them.²⁹ The shāh at times even appeared to reinforce the idea that he was but one step away from converting, and on several occasions even endorsed Christianity in front of his own officials. Handed a relic by De Gouveia’s companion, Fray Christóbal do Espírito Santo, he turned to his son Safi Mirzā and the court officials who were gathered around him asking them if they would join him if he became a Christian. Their response was that they were his majesty’s servants and would follow him wherever he went.³⁰ ‘Abbās made the same Safi Mirzā, the eldest of his sons and his heir-to-be (until he had him killed in 1615), promise to treat the missionaries as well as he did himself.³¹ At one point the Safavid ruler is said to have praised the rulers of Christian lands in front of his entourage, expressing his admiration for the fact that their subordinate officials rarely rebelled against them—to which the assembled Carmelite fathers judiciously responded that this was because Christianity teaches a king’s subjects to obey him unconditionally. In 1620, the shāh accepted

²⁷ Roberto Gulbenkian, *The Translation of the Four Gospels into Persian*, in *Estudos Históricos* 1-3, ed. idem, Lisbon 1995, vol. 3, pp. 81-82, 85-86; Marianna Shreve Simpson, “Shah ‘Abbas and His Picture Bible,” in *The Book of Kings. Art, War, and the Morgan Library’s Medieval Picture Bible*, eds. William Noel and Daniel Weiss, London 2002, pp. 121-41; and Alonso, “El primer viaje,” pp. 538-39. The rulers of Mughal India evinced a similar interest in Christian images. It is said that Akbar and Jahāngir were enthralled with the oil paintings filled with Christian themes presented to them as gifts by Jesuit fathers as of the 1580s. They ordered numerous copies to be made, including sensitive scenes such as the Crucifixion. See Heike Franke, “Herrscher zweier Welten. Selbstzensurierung der Mogulkaiser in Text und Bild,” *Asiatische Studien* 57 (2003), pp. 324-25.

²⁸ Report by Fr. Paolo Maria on the state of Catholicism in Persia, 8 April 1616, in *Biblioteca da Ajuda*, Lisbon, Cod. 46-X-17, fols. 593v-94.

²⁹ De Gouveia, *Relaçam*, p. 62.

³⁰ António de Gouveia, *Jornada do Arcebispo de Goa Dom Frey Aleixo de Menezes*, Lisbon 1606, p. 134; idem, *Relaçam*, p. 60.

³¹ Carlos Alonso, “El primer viaje,” p. 540.

a copy of the Book of Psalms and told the people seated around him that whoever did not believe in its contents was an infidel.³² In the same year, visiting the house of the late Khajah Safar, the first leader, *kalantar*, of the Armenian community of New Julfa, he similarly insisted that whoever did not believe in Jesus Christ and was not convinced that he was the spirit of God, should be considered an unbeliever, *kāfir*.³³ And in June 1621, ‘Abbās held an audience for a visiting Carmelite father and several representatives of the English East India Company, during which religious issues were discussed, in particular the doctrinal differences between Catholicism and Protestantism and the question of allegiance to the pope. The shāh ended the session by saying: “I love the Lord Jesus Christ and St Mary so much that, were anyone in my kingdom to speak ill of or blaspheme against them, I would have them burnt alive.”³⁴ Yet, for all his curiosity about Christianity, ‘Abbās never converted. His interest in the foreigners who visited his realm and the faith they brought with them was real, but all of it ultimately served a series of larger objectives and more pressing interests, his own as well as those of other forces in Safavid society.

Counter Forces:

A. Shāh ‘Abbās’s Motives

The general attitude of toleration for Christianity and its adherents should not be interpreted as inherent philo-Christianity on the part of the Safavid elite. It should not be forgotten that Jesus Christ is recognized as a prophet in Islam, and that both he and his mother Mary are referred to in the Qur’ān and that a positive attitude towards them was only to be expected. One detects little sympathy for Christians in the brutality of Shāh ‘Abbās’s campaigns into Georgia, which devastated large tracts of land, destroyed thousands of Armenian homes, and resulted in tens of thousands of casualties and the reported enslavement of anywhere between 130,000 and 300,000 people.³⁵ Nor did the shāh exhibit any pro-Christian feelings when he had Princess Ketevan, the mother of the renegade Georgian Prince Taymuraz, tortured to death for refusing to forsake the Christian faith, or when he ordered the execution of five of his tribal Lur subjects for con-

³² Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of Carmelites*, pp. 240, 250

³³ Ibid., p. 245.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 248-54.

³⁵ Iskandar Big Turkman, *Tārīkh-i ‘ālam-ārā-yi ‘Abbāsī* 1-2, ed. Īraj Afshār, Tehran 1350/1971, vol. 2, p. 875. Also see Lucien-Louis Bellan, *Chah ‘Abbas I. Sa vie, son histoire*, Paris 1932, pp. 224-26, 230; and Roberto Gulbenkian, “Relações religiosas entre os Arménios e os Agostinhos Portugueses na Pérsia no século XVII,” in *Estudos Históricos* 1-3, ed. idem, Lisbon 1995, vol. 1, p. 219.

verting to Christianity.³⁶ Even if the latter order had less to do with religion than with reasons of state—the people in question are said to have been caught as spies intent on assisting the Portuguese in Hormuz—the incident shows that the option of reneging on Islam was not available to everyone.³⁷

For all their rapturous reports about Shāh ‘Abbās’s Christian inclinations, the missionaries themselves were not necessarily fooled either. Diogo de Santa Anna opined that the signals of ‘Abbās’s sympathy for Christianity were fallacious, that the shāh did not speak from the heart but out of deception, as a false Moor representing a fraudulent faith.³⁸ A similar reaction comes from the Carmelite father who, in response to the shāh’s insistence that whoever did not believe in Jesus Christ as the spirit of God should be considered an unbeliever, exclaimed that the Safavid ruler was “either the most deceitful man in the world or else the man whom God has predestined to become a Christian.”³⁹

Shāh ‘Abbās was neither. He was primarily interested in the missionaries as a liaison with the European powers, the enemies of his own main enemy, who might join him in his struggle against the Ottomans. Even if he had no intention to convert, there is enough evidence to suggest that he did have a genuine interest in Christianity, its tenets, its emotive symbolism and its artistic expressions—in part, no doubt, because of the resemblance to Shī‘ī beliefs and practices some of these evince. But beginning with the letter he wrote to Philip III expressing his affection for Christianity, he clearly also manipulated missionaries and the Christian faith for political purposes, as he did with all groups and individuals in this orbit. ‘Abbās in fact owed a good deal of his success as a ruler over a fractious realm to a divide-and-rule strategy designed to balance constituencies. He practiced this strategy internally, in his dealings with the Qizilbash, the Turcoman warriors who provided the Safavids with tribal military support, and the *ghulams*, newly imported “royal slaves” of Armenian, Georgian and Circassian background who were given administrative and military rank and power precisely to outflank the Qizilbash. Keeping all of them on edge, he made sure that no single group or individual would gain the upper hand. Depending on his policy objectives of the moment, he now accommodated them, now kept them at arm’s length; he might extend favors and privileges to one group or another, to curtail their rights and even persecute them at a later point. Pietro della Valle’s sympathetic biography of ‘Abbās I, *Delle conditioni di Abbàs Rè di Persia*, brings out the complexity of the ruler and his ways by giving us a portrait of an Oriental despot driven to impul-

³⁶ Report by Tadeo di San Elisio, in Biblioteca da Ajuda, Lisbon, 46-IX-19, fol. 229. For the events preceding the death of Ketevan, see Roberto Gulbenkian, “Relation véritable du glorieux martyre de la Reine Kétévan de Géorgie,” in *Estudos Históricos* 1-3, ed. idem, vol. 2, pp. 245-324.

³⁷ See Pietro della Valle, *Delle conditioni di Abbàs Rè di Persia*, Venice 1628 [repr. Tehran 1976], pp. 54, 64.

³⁸ Alonso, “Due lettere,” pp. 156-57.

³⁹ Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of Carmelites*, pp. 240-41.

sive acts of boundless generosity or gratuitous cruelty who was also a clear-eyed politician determined to attain his objectives.

The shāh practiced the same type of strategy with foreigners. One of the reasons why he granted the English trading rights in Iran was to have a force at his disposal that could help him rein in the Portuguese, who had controlled the strategically located island of Hormuz since the early sixteenth century. Once the East India Company had begun operating in Iran, ‘Abbās warmed up to the Dutch, their main competitors who in 1623 joined the English in their search of Iranian silk, and turned them into a counterweight to the latter by giving them similar commercial privileges. The Westerners who came to Isfahan as agents of emperors, popes and commercial companies gave him ample opportunity to pursue this strategy. By quarreling along national lines, seeking to curry favor with the Safavid court for the purpose of gaining advantage over their competitors, they practically volunteered to be pawns in his divide-and-rule game.⁴⁰

In his encounters with Europeans the shāh might cajole, jest and banter, get angry, or he might play the role of referee, as he did in 1621 during the aforementioned gathering with the agents of the East India Company, who maligned Catholics in front of the shāh, accusing them of idolatry by worshiping images and by making the sign of the cross. Rising above the fray, the shāh judiciously responded by inviting both parties to a discussion about the issues at hand.⁴¹ ‘Abbās’s shrewdness in balancing parties comes through in particular during audiences and receptions bringing together missionaries and his own high-ranking officials, including clerical ones, of which we have eyewitness testimony. On such occasions the monarch employed his foreign visitors to emphasize the nature of the hierarchy in his domain, to make his subordinates understand in no uncertain terms that he, the country’s supreme ruler, was in charge, to the point of having the power to change religion if he so pleased.⁴²

An incident that took place in December of 1608, coinciding with Ramadan, epitomizes the awesomeness of such royal power, allowing the shāh not only to permit the consumption of alcohol at his court and not just to force his own clergy to drink wine, but to do so to the health of the head of the Christian church. During a meeting which included some Portuguese missionaries as well as Iranian clerics, including the *ṣadr*, the state’s highest religious official, Shāh ‘Abbās ordered that wine be brought for the Christian guests. He then invited everyone to drink a small amount. According to Antonio de Gouveia, the narrator of the story, the shāh whispered to him: “When you leave here and meet the

⁴⁰ For this, see Rudi Matthee, “A Sugar Banquet for the Shah: Anglo-Dutch Competition at the Iranian Court of Šāh Sultān Husayn (r. 1694-1722),” *Eurasian Studies* 5 (2007), pp. 195-218.

⁴¹ Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of Carmelites*, p. 249.

⁴² Alonso, “El primer viaje,” p. 541.

Pope, tell him how, during Ramadan, I ordered wine in the presence of all my judges and their chief, and made them all drink it. Tell him that, though I am not a Christian, I am worthy of his esteem.”⁴³

B. The Armenians: Divergence and Division

Shāh ‘Abbās’s approach to Western missionaries cannot be seen in isolation from the existence of a sizeable domestic community of Christians in Isfahan, the Armenians of New Julfa, whose had been transferred from their homeland in Armenia and settled in a newly built suburb just a few years prior to the establishment of the Augustinian mission in Isfahan. That move had taken place in the chaotic conditions of war, and no detailed information about the decision-making process leading up to it is available. Yet it is clear that the shāh decided to settle the Julfans near his capital in part because of their reputed entrepreneurial skills.⁴⁴ For decades to come, this perceived usefulness would remain an implicit rationale for allowing them to live in relative security even as conversion campaigns targeted their coreligionists elsewhere. In the later seventeenth century the New Julfans, like all other non-Shī‘ī groups in society, would suffer growing fiscal and religious pressure, yet they were never subjected to any outright religious persecution.⁴⁵

The missionaries, frustrated in their dream of converting Muslims, came to see in Iran’s non-Catholics an alternative and promising target. Long a priority for the papacy, the desire to unify the wayward eastern Christian community with the Church of Rome had gained in urgency following the Council of Trent (1545–63). The ultimate dream was articulated by Pietro della Valle, who, referring to Iran, spoke of the prospect of a “New Rome,” a “self-governing city of Oriental and Latin Christians.”⁴⁶

The desire for unification was not necessarily a one-way affair. Among the Armenians there was a long-standing prophetic tradition going back as far as the Crusades about the inevitability of rejoining the Church of Rome. This legend grew and acquired its full form with the increasing oppression the Armenians of eastern Anatolia suffered following the rise and eastward expansion of the Ottomans. In 1549 this had prompted their leaders to send a delegation to Rome with

⁴³ De Gouveia, *Relaçam*, p. 206v.

⁴⁴ See the discussion in Edmund Herzig, “The Deportation of the Armenians in 1604–1605 and Europe’s Myth of Shah ‘Abbas I,” in *Persian and Islamic Studies in Honour of P. W. Avery*, ed. Charles Melville, Cambridge 1990, pp. 59–71.

⁴⁵ For this, see Vazken Sarki Ghougassian, *The Emergence of the Armenian Diocese of New Julfa in the Seventeenth Century*, Atlanta 1998; and Rudi Matthee, “Christians in Safavid Iran: Hospitality and Harassment,” *Studies on Persianate Societies* 3 (2005), pp. 3–43.

⁴⁶ See Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625*, Cambridge 2000, p. 377, fn. 52.

an offer to submit to papal authority.⁴⁷ Ironically, at the turn of the seventeenth century, in the face of Turkish brutality during the Safavid-Ottoman wars, the Armenians of the Caucasus initially saw in Shāh ‘Abbās I their liberator on horseback, and people from many villages and towns beseeched the Safavid monarch to come to take control and reestablish justice. But with the deportation of 1604 the presumed savior turned into a tormentor, forcing the Armenians once again to redirect their hopes for salvation from the “Muslim yoke” to a Christian force arriving from the West.⁴⁸ Hence the enthusiasm with which some of them, longing for the fulfillment of their prophecies, welcomed the Iberian missionaries and became attached to them.⁴⁹

Amongst themselves, the Armenians were badly divided. The issue that tore them apart more than any other was that of conversion to Islam. Even before Shāh ‘Abbās instituted a rule whereby those who turned to the Muslim faith would automatically inherit all their relatives’ property, converts often managed to take advantage of their new status to abuse their former coreligionists. The Armenian chronicler Arak’el of Tabriz refers to Armenian apostates who “give bribes to Muslims and use them as witnesses against [other] Christians, dragging them in front of Muslim judges and demanding anything they can imagine.” The judges tended to side with the apostates, allowing the latter to extract money and property.⁵⁰

The Armenians were further divided between the majority, who followed the Gregorian rite (and who were called Schismatics by the missionaries), and the minority, Catholic Armenians. Dominican missionaries visiting Armenia in the fourteenth century had managed to convert a number of Armenians to the Catholic faith. The group deported to Isfahan by Shāh ‘Abbās may thus have included a (small) Catholic contingent.⁵¹ It remains unclear how many of New Julfa’s approximately 5,000 inhabitants in the first decade of the seventeenth century were affiliated with Rome.⁵² The number given by one missionary, who in 1608 estimated Iran’s total Armenian population to be 400,000 households, 10,000 of

⁴⁷ See Aschot Johannisjan, *Israel Ory und die Armenische Befreiungsidee*, Munich 1913, esp. pp. 24-31.

⁴⁸ The initially favorable reception of Shāh ‘Abbās among the Armenians suffering from Ottoman treatment is also noted by Arak’el of Tabriz, *The History of Vardapet Arak’el of Tabriz*, ed. and trans. George A. Bournoutian, Costa Mesa 2005, p. 18.

⁴⁹ For this, see Géraud Poumarède, *Pour en finir avec la Croisade. Mythes et réalités de la lutte contre les Turcs aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles*, Paris 2004, p. 130.

⁵⁰ Arak’el of Tabriz, *The History*, p. 56.

⁵¹ P. Sebastián de San Pedro, however, who had visited Armenia, in 1606 wrote that all the people deported by Shāh ‘Abbās were “Schismatics.” See Carlos Alonso, “Una relación de P. Sebastián de San Pedro,” *Archivo Agustiniiano* 81 (1999), pp. 149-66.

⁵² The number is given by De Gouveia, *Relaçam*, p. 139. Thomas Herbert in 1628 offers a number of 10,000, suggesting that, two decades later, the inhabitants had doubled in number. See Thomas Herbert, *Travels in Persia 1627-1629*, London 1928, p. 137.

whom observed the Latin rite, is clearly wildly exaggerated, even if it may be proportionally correct.⁵³

Regardless of absolute numbers, Catholics were and remained a relatively small minority among the Armenians of Isfahan. Just as their efforts to convert Muslims hardly had any results, the missionaries made only modest gains in their proselytizing activities among Iran's Armenians. The Carmelite Vicente de S. Francisco in 1610 claimed that some 300 Julfan Armenians had gone over to the Catholic faith.⁵⁴ De Gouveia mistakenly believed that Iran's Armenians were followers of the Patriarch of Constantinople. Others thought it would be easy to bring Isfahan's Armenian population under the control of Rome because the shāh, in his hatred of the Turks, would never allow them to turn to the Patriarch of Constantinople.⁵⁵ Yet in reality, the vast majority of the New Julfans obeyed the Holy See of Echmiadzin in Armenia proper.⁵⁶ And whereas the Augustinians may have taken the enthusiasm with which especially the Catholic Armenians welcomed them as a sign that all of them were willing to put themselves under papal authority, the Gregorian Armenians in fact greatly resented and resisted the foreign encroachment.⁵⁷ Just as the missionaries sought to enlist the shāh in their efforts to bring Isfahan's Armenian population under Vatican control, so the Gregorians tried to get the court behind their efforts to resist the missionaries. This question of denominational affiliation proved to be a very sensitive issue which 'Abbās used to his own advantage, now pretending that he was willing to concede on this point, now showing his anger at the very idea that his subjects would be brought under foreign control.

C. *Shī'ī Clerical Opposition*

Of the various reasons why 'Abbās never expelled the missionaries the most important may well be that they served as a useful counterweight to his own clerics. Pious Shī'īs and especially members of the religious establishment naturally were none too happy about the foreign intruders. They looked on warily as thousands of Armenians, having been moved to Isfahan, were allowed to profess their religion openly in the suburb that was especially built for them. They bitterly complained to the shāh about the privileges enjoyed by the Julfans, who are said to have celebrated their freedom by organizing processions through town, including

⁵³ Report by Paul Simon, in Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, p. 157. A total of 400,000 households would have given Iran an Armenian population of more than two million—out of an estimated total population of between six and nine million.

⁵⁴ Alonso, "El primer viaje," p. 537.

⁵⁵ Alonso, "Una relación de P. Sebastián," p. 165.

⁵⁶ Alonso, *Antonio de Gouveia*, p. 78.

⁵⁷ Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, p. 100; Roberto Gulbenkian, "Deux lettres surprenantes du Catholico arménien David IV à Philippe III d'Espagne, II de Portugal 1612-1614," in *Estudos Históricos* 1-3, ed. idem, vol. 1, p. 314.

the bazaar, while prominently displaying the cross.⁵⁸ From the moment the missionaries set foot on Iranian soil, people of influence, both members of the shāh's own entourage and high-ranking Shī'ī '*ulamā*', agitated against them, objecting in particular to their right to build churches and convents. In this context, De Gouveia tells an interesting story about Shāh 'Abbās's octogenarian *mihmandar*, royal host of official guests, 'Alī Bēg, who was said to be quite zealous in his Muslim faith. On one occasion this official told the Portuguese diplomat-cum-missionary: "If only a few years ago one would have told us about the existence of a Christian church in this city, we would have burned both you and the church. Now, by contrast, not only do you have a church, but the shāh enters it and even allows you to remove slaves from his own house to take them to Christian lands."⁵⁹

There is no doubt that the Shī'ī '*ulamā*' had a voice at Shāh 'Abbās's court. Their agitation played a role in the diminished warmth in the shāh's reception of De Gouveia and his men in 1602.⁶⁰ Yet the ability of Iran's clerics to influence state policy was limited. The shāh maintained good relations with the '*ulamā*', granting them positions and emoluments, but he did not let them set his political agenda. They thus failed to dissuade him from allowing the Western missionaries to operate in his lands. Instead, as he did with all others, the shāh used them for his own purposes. One observer, a missionary himself, insisted that the shāh would have wanted to engage the European powers in a military coalition against the Ottomans *before* granting the missionaries the right to build convents and churches. Alluding to the balancing act that 'Abbās was so good at playing, the same author claimed that the monarch's strategy was in part informed by his desire to "shut up," *tapar la boca*, Iran's clerics, who were keen on the destruction of the Ottomans, albeit for different reasons.⁶¹

Broken Promises; Growing Frustration

From the moment the missionaries entered Iran, fluctuations in political conditions had had a direct bearing on the way the shāh treated them. Politics had played a key role in the shāh's very decision to allow these men in black to operate in his realm. As said, while he traveled with De Gouveia and his companions from Khurasan to Isfahan, he treated the Portuguese envoys amicably. Shortly after the party reached the capital, however, the shāh's demeanor vis-à-vis the friars suddenly became markedly cooler. As De Gouveia tells it, one factor in this reversal may have been 'Abbās's annoyance with the constant quarreling between the two envoys. But the real reason for the ruler's unhappiness was that he had just

⁵⁸ Arak'el of Tabriz, *The History*, p. 55.

⁵⁹ De Gouveia, *Relaçam*, p. 70.

⁶⁰ Alonso, "Una embajada de Clemente," p. 51; and idem, *Antonio de Gouveia*, p. 46.

⁶¹ Alonso, "Una embajada de Clemente," p. 54.

received word from Allāh Virdi Khān, his commander-in-chief who also served as the governor of Fars, about a pending Portuguese attack on Bahrain, the island he had conquered just a few years earlier.⁶²

This pattern of treatment dictated by political circumstances and considerations comes into sharp focus in 1606-07, showing a ruler keen to exploit discord among his subjects, in this case personified by two rivals: Patriarch David IV, who had given up his position as head of the Holy See of Echmiadzin, near Yerevan, in order to accompany the Armenians to Isfahan during the deportation of 1604-05, and Melchisedek of Garni who, receiving David's title, had stayed behind in Echmiadzin. Once in Isfahan, David reclaimed the status of head of all Armenians, and was supported in this by the shāh and the clergy of New Julfa.⁶³ Upon their arrival in Isfahan in 1605, the bedraggled Armenians were assisted in various ways by the Augustinians, who helped them build their first church. A close relationship soon developed between Diogo de Santa Anna and David. During a meeting between the two in February 1607, a hopeful Diogo de Santa Anna urged David to pledge allegiance to the pope. When David accepted, Diogo de Santa Anna encouraged him to publicize the pledge. In May of the same year the same prelate, induced by the payment of 1,000 *cruzados* which Alejo de Meneses had sent from India for the purpose, David, with six bishops and more than 100 Armenian priests publicly proclaimed their allegiance to the Church of Rome. He also wrote a letter to the pope in which he declared his willingness to abandon those tenets of the Armenian faith that did not accord with the Catholic rite.⁶⁴

David had not consulted the Armenian notables, including the Bishop of New Julfa, on the matter, and controversy over the pledge soon erupted within the Armenian community. And it was not just the Gregorians who balked at the idea. Even David himself, mindful of its association with an age-old Armenian prophecy that foretold the subjugation of the Armenians to Christian princes, and worried about the shāh's reaction, had second thoughts. 'Abbās was fighting the Turks in far-away Shirvan, in the Caucasus, but rumor had it that his wrath would be terrible once the news would reach him. Diogo de Santa Anna and his companion, Bernardo de Azevedo, thus resolved to travel to Shamakhi, supposedly to offer the Safavid ruler their congratulations on his recent military victories, but really to plead their case with him.⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid., p. 51; and Alonso, *Antonio de Gouvea*, p. 46.

⁶³ Arak'el of Tabriz gives his own account of the circumstances in which David had been forced to consecrate Melchisedek katholikos, thus creating his own rival. See Arak'el of Tabriz, *The History*, p. 12. See also Gulbenkian, "Relações religiosas," p. 220.

⁶⁴ Gulbenkian, "De ce qu'avec la grâce de Dieu," pp. 134ff; De Gouvea, *Relaçam*, pp. 159v-63r.; Anon., *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, pp. 100-1. For the contents of the letters, see Carlos Alonso, "Cuatro cartas relacionadas con el acto de su misión dei [sic] patriarca arménio David IV ai [sic] Papa Paulo (1607)," [ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/2824.pdf].

⁶⁵ Gulbenkian, "De ce qu'avec la grâce de Dieu," 134ff; De Gouveia, *Relaçam*, fols. 159v-63r.; Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, pp. 100-1.

Shāh ‘Abbās, seemingly ready to appease the friars, at first reacted favorably to their request to have all Christians in his realm obey the pope as their supreme head. After consulting his officials, he expressed a willingness to grant this favor to the pope and the king of Spain, arguing that just as no one could be a good vassal without being loyal to his king, so no one could be a good Christian without obedience to the vicegerent of Christ.⁶⁶

Yet the ensuing about-face once again shows how granting religious concessions to outsiders was part of the shāh’s larger political strategy. The Safavid ruler abruptly changed mien when he received word from merchants arriving from Aleppo that the Austrian Emperor Rudolph II had concluded a peace treaty with the Ottoman Sultan Aḥmad. This accord—the Peace of Zsitva Torok of 1606—halted hostilities between the Ottomans and their main European adversary, obviating any Christian assistance to Iran. After hearing the news, the shāh flew into a terrible rage when asked by the Augustinians to affix his seal to the letter in which David pledged his allegiance to the pope, threatening to expel the missionaries from his realm. His anger was all the greater for being told by some Armenians that the Franks were really out to turn his Armenian subjects into Portuguese, a people he had come to dislike for their overbearing behavior in Hormuz.⁶⁷ ‘Abbās’s words to the friars left no doubt about his feelings at this point: “At a time when the Christian rulers betray me, both in words and deed, you want to own churches in my realm, you want the Armenians to be your subjects? You wish to ring church bells in public?”⁶⁸ Father Tadeo, who by this time had spent a year in Iran, wrote of Shāh ‘Abbās: “... As to the character of this king, he is at heart a Mohammedan, and all he has done in the past has been feigned; now that he has won so many victories over the Turks, he does not care (a jot) for all the Christian princes and publicly mocks at them because they had not made war on the Turks...”⁶⁹ When they heard about the shāh’s reaction, De Gouveia insists, the New Julfans avoided meeting with the missionaries and refrained from going to their convent for many days.⁷⁰

When after a four-year absence, ‘Abbās returned to Isfahan in November 1607, he initially refused to meet with the Augustinians and did not allow the Armenian clerics to visit them either. He similarly refused to receive the members of the Carmelite delegation who had just arrived, unless there would be an understanding that the topic of papal control would not be discussed. Yet, curious about the pope’s message and the letters from other European rulers brought by the Carmelites, he soon relented, judiciously deciding not to close the door on

⁶⁶ Gulbenkian, “Deux lettres surprenantes.”

⁶⁷ Gulbenkian, “De ce qu’avec la grâce de Dieu,” pp. 149-50; “Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, p. 101.

⁶⁸ De Gouveia, *Relaçam*, p. 168v.

⁶⁹ Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, p. 164.

⁷⁰ Gulbenkian, “Relações religiosas,” pp. 226-27.

European proposals and promises altogether. The message from the pope indeed made suggestions for a joint attack against the Ottomans. ‘Abbās, intent on marching against the Ottomans himself shortly, put his misgivings aside and wrote a letter to Pope Paul V agreeing to the proposal for joint action. He immediately followed up on the military project by preparing another campaign against the Ottomans. The letter Robert Sherley subsequently carried to Rome also contained ‘Abbās’s request for the Vatican to send a Frankish bishop as a supreme vicar for Iran’s Armenians. With this, Gulbenkian observes, the shāh killed two birds with one stone: he punished and humiliated Melchisedek, and he showed his displeasure with David for having volunteered to submit his congregation to papal jurisdiction.⁷¹

The Peace of Zsitva Torok, meanwhile, freeing up the Ottoman military in the Balkans, had led the sultan to turn down the conditions for peace Shāh ‘Abbās had sent to Istanbul with an envoy in 1607. This, in turn, prompted the Safavid ruler to prepare for a new round of war with his archenemies, which must have motivated him to maintain an amicable rapport with the newly arrived Carmelites.⁷² In the letter to Pope Paul V he sent with Father Vincente de S. Francisco upon the latter’s return to Europe in 1609, ‘Abbās boasted that at his orders Echmiadzin (Three Churches) at Yerevan, which had been destroyed by the Turks, had been rebuilt and restored to its former glory. He also whetted an age-old Christian appetite by pledging that, should he seize Jerusalem from the Ottomans, he would hand the city over to papal control.⁷³

Nor did the shāh completely snub De Gouveia when the latter returned to Iran in 1608, charged with the establishment of a lasting Augustinian mission and determined to pursue the idea of Iran’s Gregorian Armenians putting themselves under papal authority. Friction marked the early encounter with ‘Abbās, for De Gouveia carried a letter from the King of Spain that while lauding the Safavid monarch’s victories against the Turks and urging him to keep up the struggle, also criticized the shāh for taking of Bahrain from the khan of Hormuz, an ally of the Portuguese.⁷⁴ But still in need of European support, Shāh ‘Abbās sent De Gouveia back to Europe accompanied by an Iranian envoy named Jangīz Beg Rūmlū. In the letter the envoys carried with them, the Safavid ruler encouraged the Spanish-Portuguese king to keep fighting the Ottomans and reiterated the request for the sending of a prelate to serve as head of his Armenian subjects.⁷⁵ At this point, though, ‘Abbās probably had few illusions regarding Iberian promises conveyed via the Augustinians. His energetic foreign policy had done nothing to make the

⁷¹ Gulbenkian, “Deux lettres surprenantes,” pp. 316-17.

⁷² Niels Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade*, Chicago/London 1973, p. 267.

⁷³ Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, pp. 190-1.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 166.

⁷⁵ De Gouveia, *Relaçam*, pp. 177-83.

dream of forging a grand anti-Ottoman coalition come true. The level of his frustration comes through in a letter Juan Tadeo wrote from Isfahan in May 1609, reporting how the shāh had threatened the Augustinian fathers with expulsion if the Spanish king did not make war on the Turks forthwith.⁷⁶

Over time, the Safavid ruler only became more frustrated with the Christian inaction. The Frankish replacement for Melchisedek never arrived from Europe, even though the latter, worried that the pope might actually follow up, wrote several letters to Paul V expressing his own fealty to the Church of Rome.⁷⁷ Most importantly, Shāh ‘Abbās in 1612 did what Father Vincente had assured the pope he never would do: he concluded his own peace agreement with the Ottomans, reclaiming all the land that he had previously lost to them, and lessening his dependence on the Europeans.⁷⁸

The changed mood was fully revealed the following year, when De Gouveia returned to Iran for a third time, in possession of a mandate to bring the Armenians under papal jurisdiction. While sent as the Apostolic Vicar of Iran’s Armenians, he carried the official title of Bishop of Cyrene (North Africa), in an apparent effort to mask the true nature of his mission, which included a plan to exempt Iran’s Catholic Armenians from taxes levied at Hormuz.⁷⁹ His hosts were not fooled, however; the relationship with the shāh quickly soured, and De Gouveia’s third mission turned into a disaster. There were several reasons for the shāh’s anger. De Gouveia had not brought proper compensation for the consignment of silk that he and Jangīz Beg had taken to Spain, arguing that the Spanish king had considered the silk a gift rather than vendible commodity. Intensely suspicious about papal intentions with regard to the ecclesiastical status of his Armenian subjects, ‘Abbās also took offense at the high-handedness of his Portuguese guest. Especially De Gouveia’s cavalier remarks questioning the shāh’s jurisdiction over his own Armenian subjects—whom he called his flock—were a major source of irritation. Threatening to make peace with the Ottomans if the catholic powers did not come through with the oft-made promise to wage war against his archenemy, the shāh finally told De Gouveia to go to hell. The bishop next wisely slipped out of the country.⁸⁰ ‘Abbās then attacked and seized Bandar Gamru (Comorão), the

⁷⁶ Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, p. 169.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 210, 454-5

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 194-77. For Father Vicente’s remarks to the pope, see his report of 15 March 1610, in Alonso, “El primer viaje,” p. 541.

⁷⁹ António de Gouveia, “Memorial sobre las cosas de la Christianidad de la Persia,” in Carlos Alonso, “La embajada persa de Denguiz-Beg y Antonio de Gouveia, osa, a la luz de nuevos documentos,” *Archivo Agustiniiano* 64 (1980), pp. 63-66. De Gouveia in the same reports claims that the rulers of Georgia, Manūchīhr Khān, and Armenia, Alexander, had asked the Vatican to send missionaries for the education of their Christian subjects. The papal letter of appointment, dated 19 August 1611, appears in Carlos Alonso, “El P. Antonio de Gouveia O.S.A. y la embajada persa de Dengiz Beg (1609-1612),” *Analecta Augustiniana* 38 (1975), pp. 81-2.

⁸⁰ Alonso, *Antonio de Gouveia*, pp. 179, 181.

only Portuguese-held port on Iran's mainland, and in 1615 welcomed the English as a counterweight to the Portuguese. The one who suffered the most from this confrontation were the Julfan Armenians, however. 'Abbās temporarily banned Isfahan's Armenians from visiting the house of the Fathers and forced them to repay a loan that he had given them in 1608.⁸¹

In subsequent years the pressure on Christians continued to build up, to reach a high point in the early to mid 1620s. This was directly related to rising tensions with the Portuguese, culminating in their expulsion from Hormuz by way of a joint Anglo-Iranian expedition in 1622, and the military assistance Portuguese forces lent to Basra in its defense against Iranian aggression two years later. His anger with the Portuguese in 1626 finally impelled the shāh to make good on the oft-repeated threat to expel the Augustinian missionaries from Isfahan. They were not allowed to return until a year later, when it had become clear that they were innocent of "the troubles."⁸²

Yet the ones to bear the brunt of these tensions were, again, the Armenians, this time the non-Julfans. In 1621 the shāh ordered a campaign forcing the Christian inhabitants of villages around Isfahan to apostatize. For the next two years Armenian priests and lay people were forcibly circumcised, churches were turned into mosques, books and liturgical vessels were destroyed or confiscated.⁸³ Pietro della Valle, who was in Iran at the time, recounts instances of Christians who refused to convert being tortured and killed.⁸⁴ The persecution of Armenians soon extended far beyond the vicinity of Isfahan. Following the Anglo-Iranian attack on Hormuz, the shāh decreed that the Armenians and other Christians who had been settled on the border of Bakhtiari and Lur territory would have to convert to Islam and that their churches were to be turned into mosques. Rather than a precautionary measure designed to safeguard them against Lur attacks, as chronicler Iskandar Beg Munshi portrays the campaign, this conversion drive seems to have been part of a comprehensive offensive.⁸⁵ After he took Baghdad and a large part of Mesopotamia in late 1623, the shāh forced the region's Armenians to be circumcised.⁸⁶ Despite many petitions of mercy, the campaign continued until 1624, when the shāh

⁸¹ Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, pp. 206-7; Della Valle, *Delle conditioni*, p. 75; Arak'el, *The History*, p. 116.

⁸² Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, pp. 281-2. For the affairs of Basra in this period, see Rudi Matthee, "Between Arabs, Turks and Iranians: The Town of Basra, 1600-1700," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 69 (2006), pp. 53-78; and Willem Floor, *The Persian Gulf: A Political and Economic History of the Five Port Cities, 1500-1730*, Washington, D.C. 2006.

⁸³ Della Valle, *Delle conditioni*, pp. 53, 65-8. For an overview, see Ghougassian, *The Emergence of the Armenian Diocese*, pp. 4-75. The same author also offers a lengthy overview of the Armenian villages around Isfahan, see *ibid.*, pp. 38-42.

⁸⁴ Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire*, London/New York 2004, p. 79; Della Valle, *Delle conditioni*, p. 54.

⁸⁵ Iskandar Big Turkman, *Tarikh-i 'alam-ārā-yi 'Abbāsi*, vol. 2, p. 960.

⁸⁶ Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, p. 271.

halted it in exchange for a large sum of money.⁸⁷ The pressure on the Armenians did not end here, though, for shortly before his death the shāh issued his infamous decree giving any *dhimmī* apostate the right to inherit the “possession of the property of all his relatives, up to the seventh generation.”⁸⁸

Not coincidentally, the Shi‘ī *‘ulamā’* were involved—or perhaps better, were allowed to become involved—in these activities. Shaykh Bahā’ al-Dīn ‘Āmilī (Shaykh Bahā’ī), theologian, polymath, and the capital’s *shaykh al-islām*, is said to have played a role in instigating the conversion campaign targeting Armenians.⁸⁹ Hundreds of clerics participated in the terror accompanying the conversions. It is also surely no coincidence that in this same period, a prominent religious scholar like Aḥmad b. Zayn al-‘Ābidīn ‘Alavī wrote a number of anti-Christian (and anti-Jewish) treatises.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Missionaries from the Iberian peninsula, active in Hormuz from 1548, entered the Iranian mainland at the turn of the seventeenth century, when Shāh ‘Abbās allowed first the Augustinians and then the Carmelites to establish convents in Isfahan and to engage in (circumscribed) proselytizing. As elsewhere in Muslim Middle East, these European men of the cloth were generally well received in Iran. The level of toleration offered to them was indeed remarkable; it is unthinkable that in contemporary Europe any non-Christian group, let alone a group intent on proselytizing for a different faith, would have been treated in a similar manner.

There are several reasons why the European missionaries received a cordial reception in Isfahan—beyond the customary and celebrated hospitality of the Iranians. One is that, aside from serving as agents of Christianity, they were—and were seen as—diplomats who represented Catholic European rulers—the king of Spain and Portugal in the case of the Augustinians and the Papacy in the case of the Carmelites—and acted as a liaison between these and the Safavid court. Another is that the members of the political elite were intrigued by these men for their erudition and ability to engage in learned dispute about questions of shared interest. The ruling classes, the shāh in first place and members of the clergy not excepted, loved to sit the friars down in debate involving philosophical and religious issues,

⁸⁷ Abisaab, *Converting Persia*, p. 79; Della Valle, *Delle conditioni*, p. 54.

⁸⁸ Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, p. 288.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁹⁰ Abisaab, *Converting Persia*, pp. 79–80; Anonymous (ed.), *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, p. 255; Pietro della Valle, *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle Il pellegrino, descritti da lui medesimo in lettere familiari all’erudito suo amico Mario Schipano divisi in tre parti cioè: la Turchia, la Persia e l’India* 1–2, ed. D. Gancia, Brighton 1843, vol. 2, pp. 143–4. – See also Denis Halft’s contribution in this volume.

including the differences between Christian and Muslim beliefs, such as the Immaculate Conception and the Trinity. Iranians from the shāh down were also fascinated by Christian ritual and symbolism, represented by the cross and the Crucifixion, by relics and the rosary. There was a certain predisposition in this shared interest. Georgian and Armenian ghulams increasingly held top positions in the Safavid administration. The harems of the king and the elite meanwhile came to be filled with Georgian women, many of whom remained attached to their Christian identity and passed it on to their husbands and sons. A convergence of sensibility with regard to the iconography and narrative structure between Catholicism and Shī'ī Islam cannot be discounted as a factor either.

The interaction of the European friars with Iran's political and religious authorities took place in the context of the country's complex geopolitical relations with the West and its equally complex internal constellation of power. Several conclusions can be drawn from this.

Beyond the curiosity and interest he indisputably displayed vis-à-vis Christianity and its agents, Shāh 'Abbās approached the European men of the cloth with an eye to his geopolitical objectives beyond Iran and, to a lesser extent, his domestic concerns. The shāh's foreign policy centered on his neighbors, the Ottomans, and the need to curb the military threat they posed to his realm. Maintaining a balance between various internal constituencies topped his domestic agenda. The missionaries served him in both areas. They were useful as interlocutors in his attempt to find ways to join forces with European powers against the Turks. They also facilitated him in controlling various constituencies among his own subjects. This included the Shī'ī clergy, a rising interest group with their own preferences and priorities, as well as the Julfan Armenians, who were important beyond their numbers, as a community with ties to European Christianity and on account for their trading activities, which is precisely why Shāh 'Abbās had brought them to Isfahan. The fact that both groups had their own reasons to resent the presence and activities of the missionaries added more arrows to the shāh's quiver. 'Abbās used the Christian friars to keep his own clerics at bay. But he also maintained good relations with the ulama, allowing them to vilify non-Shī'ī minorities, including Christians, whenever it suited him. He manipulated the Armenian rift over possible allegiance to Rome to keep them divided. But just as he exploited their divisions, so he used the Armenians to keep the Frankish men of the cloth guessing about his true intentions with regard to his inner faith and his willingness to have Iran's Christians brought under papal authority.

Shāh 'Abbās had a way of obscuring his political objectives behind his seemingly contradictory behavior: in discussions with foreign Christians he seemed earnestly curious about their faith and ebullient in proclaiming that he was but one step away from becoming Christian himself. During a drinking session he might fly into a rage, threatening the missionaries with expulsion or ordering a conversion campaign against his own Armenian subjects, only to call it off the

next day, having sobered up, his anger subsided. All this bespeaks the potentate, the protean ruler with the mercurial temper—alternating between generosity and cruelty, jocularly and wrath—keen to impress his foreign guests, to intimidate his subordinates, and to keep his entire entourage in suspended animation.

When he learned that the Europeans were not just not about to wage war against the Ottomans but had made peace with Istanbul, the shāh turned on the Portuguese missionaries, eventually expelling the Augustinians from Isfahan. Still, now vulnerable to a new Ottoman offensive himself, he also kept the door open to European initiatives—all the while keeping in touch with the Ottomans. When ‘Abbās offered Jerusalem to the Christians in 1609, he not only blatantly pandered to a dream that they had harbored for centuries, but he did so at the very same time that he was discussing a peace agreement with the Ottomans.⁹¹ Yet the rising tensions with the Portuguese erupting into war in the 1620s were especially fateful for Iran’s domestic Christians. The state launched a large-scale conversion campaign, mobilizing the ulama in the effort, which lasted for at least two years. In the end pragmatism prevailed, though: peripheral, rural Armenians bore the brunt of the persecution; the New Julfans were spared from the forced conversion drive; and the Augustinians were allowed to return to Isfahan.

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⁹¹ Alonso, “El primer viaje,” pp. 525, 541.

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