12.5 The Safavid Shi‘ite Empire of Persia

The Safavid state in Persia had been built upon a fervent commitment to the Shi‘ite sect of Islam. The greatest Safavid ruler, Shah Abbas I (r. 1588–1629) had inherited his throne at a difficult time. His father had been forced to abdicate and much of his empire was on the brink of disintegration. Ottoman invaders from the west and Uzbeks from the east had placed tremendous pressure on the new monarch. But within fifteen years, Abbas I had defeated both groups and the Mughals in India as well by 1621, securing more territory and trading posts in the Persian Gulf. He then focused on international trade and manufacturing and on protecting his territories through diplomatic contacts.

In executing this strategy, Shah Abbas I cultivated relations with several European countries whose skills in war and technology were of the highest importance. Abbas was more interested in European gunsmiths than in the vagaries of Muslim doctrine. As a result, he allowed European missionaries to visit his realm and openly seek converts among his Muslim population. The following accounts are from Fathers Simon and Vincent, Carmelite friars dispatched to Abbas’s capital at Isfahan in 1605. They spent six months gathering information and then made their report to Pope Paul V.


SHAH ABBAS I
FATHER SIMON

Keep in Mind . . .

- What qualities made Shah Abbas I an effective leader?

The king, Shah Abbas . . . is [43] years old . . . of medium height, rather thin than fat, his face round and small, tanned by the sun, with hardly any beard; very vivacious and alert, so that he is always doing something or other. He is sturdy and healthy, accustomed to much exercise and toil: many times he goes about on foot, and recently he had been forty days on pilgrimage, which he made on foot the whole time. He has extraordinary strength, and with his scimitar can cut a man in two and a sheep with its wool on at a single blow—and the Persian sheep are of large size. He has done many other feats and has found no one to come up to him in them. In his food he is frugal, as also in his dress, and this to set an example to his subjects; and so in public he eats little else than rice, and that cooked in water only. His usual dress is of linen, and very plain: similarly the nobles and others in his realm follow suit, whereas formerly they used to go out dressed in brocade with jewels and other fopperies: and if he sees anyone who is overdressed, he takes him to task, especially if it be a soldier. But in private, he eats what he likes.

He is sagacious in mind, likes fame and to be esteemed: he is courteous in dealing with everyone and at the same time very serious. For he will go through the public streets, eat from what they are selling there and other things, speak at ease freely with the lower classes, cause his subjects to remain sitting while he himself is standing, or will sit down beside this man and that. He says that is how to be a king, and that the king of Spain and other Christians do not get any pleasure out of ruling, because they are obliged to comport themselves with so much pomp and majesty.

He causes foreigners to sit down beside him and to eat at his table. With that and accompanying all such informality he requires that people shall not [lack] respect toward him and, should anyone fail in this regard, he will punish the individual severely. So the more he demonstrates kindliness to his subjects and the more familiarly he talks with them, they tremble before him, even the greatest among them, for, while joking, he will have their heads cut off. He is very strict in executing justice and pays no regard to his own favorites in this respect; but rather is the stricter with them in order to serve an example to others. So he has no private friends, nor anyone who has influence with him . . . While we were at Court, he caused the bellies of two of his favorites to be ripped open, because they behaved improperly to an ordinary woman. From this it comes about that there are so very few murderers and robbers. In all the time I was at Isfahan, there was never a case of homicide.

He is very speedy in dispatching business: when he gives audience, which he does at the gate of his palace, . . . he finishes off all the cases that are brought to him. The parties stand present before him, the officers of justice, and his own council, with whom he consults when it pleases him. The sentence which he gives is final and is immediately executed. If the guilty party deserves death, they kill him at once. . . .
Part 12: Islamic Empires

Because of the great obedience [the nobles] pay the Shah, when he wills to have one of the nobles killed, he dispatches one of his men to fetch the noble’s head: the man goes off to the grandee, and says to him: “The Shah wants your head.” The noble replies: “Very well,” and lets himself be decapitated—otherwise he would lose it and with it, all his family would become extinct. But, when [the nobles] allow themselves to be decapitated, [the Shah] aggrandizes the children.

Regarding the religion of the king, I think that no one knows what he believes: he does not observe the Muslim law in many things, nor is he a Christian. Six or seven years ago he displayed many signs of not being averse to our Faith: God knows whether they were feigned, or came from his heart. In his [harem] he has many Christian Armenian, Georgian, and Circassian women. I think that he lets them live as they wish, because when I enquired what the Shah did with so many [holy] pictures that were presented to him as gifts and some relics of the Saints, for which he asked, the answer was made to me that he used to give them to the women in his harem. Besides that he is well informed regarding the mysteries of our holy Faith and discourses on the mystery of the most holy Trinity: he knows many examples and allusions which the Saints give in order to prove it, and discourses about the other mysteries—which we know from a man who had the opportunity of hearing him—if he does not talk about the women in his harem or about some demon or other. On account of the many disappointments which he asserts the Christians have caused him all this fervor has cooled. With all that he does not detest them. For he converses and eats with them, he suffers us to say frankly what we believe about our Faith and his own: sometimes he asks us about this. To us he has given a house: he knows that we say Mass publicly, he allows whoever may wish among the Persians to come to it, and we can teach them freely regarding our holy Faith, whenever they make inquiries about it. I believe that the king realizes the objective with which our friars go out there. Till now none of them has been converted: I think they are waiting for one of the nobles or of their [religious leaders] to break the ice.

Compare and Contrast:
• According to Father Simon, why was Shah Abbas I both loved and feared?
• Father Simon noted that “no one knows what [Shah Abbas I] believes.” Was the Shah a devout Muslim? Why did he provide Christian churchmen with such flexibility in trying to convert Muslims in his realm? What does this say about Shah Abbas I as a political and religious leader?

THE WORSHIP OF IDOLS
FATHER VINCENT

Keep in Mind . . .
• What was Father Vincent’s argument in rejecting the charge that Catholics were idolaters?

Two days previously the English had been with the king and discoursed at great length on the matter of religion and spoken ill of the Catholics saying that they were idolaters, who adored pictures and images, and made the sign of the cross, etc. The Shah had said that he would bring the Fathers together with them, so that they might hold a disputation on these matters.

This was the motive why the king of Persia asked the Fathers about the difference there is between Catholics and English. The Father Visitor answered that the English are heretics and false Christians and that Roman Catholics are the true Christians.

In order to convince him, the Fathers put the question to the king: “Because your Highness and your people prostrate yourselves and worship seals and beads made of earth, would it be right for us to call your Highness and your people idolaters? Certainly not, because we know that, when you perform that act of adoration, you do not mean by it that the seal and stone are God, but do it out of piety and reverence for that soil, as it comes from the places of sepulture of your ancestors and that great men whom you consider saints.” The Shah answered: “That is not the chief reason and intention we have for worshipping on earthen seals and beads, but rather in that act of veneration we make an act of recognizing that we are clay, and that from earth God created us, and we adore the Creator of this: and the reason why in the mosques and in our houses while we say our prayers on matting and carpets, our prayers would not be lawful and acceptable, unless we said them [touching] the earth. With this in view, for more convenience and cleanliness we use the earthen medallions [to touch with our foreheads during prayer] and beads: and that they are of this or that soil is an accidental matter: it suffices that it be earth. And so, when we have any other sort of stone, even if it be a piece of rock, we have no need of a seal. It is also true that we venerate it (the seal) as a memorial and a pious object, as you say, but no mainly for that reason.”

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To this the Fathers replied: “Very good! And thus our Christian religion does not adore nor serve images, as if they were gods, nor does it expect from them the future judgment (God preserve us from such a thing!), but it venerates images for the things they represent. They serve us also as memorials to remind us of the virtues of those saints they represent, in order that we may imitate them and beg them to intercede by their prayers with our Lord God, that He will grant us what we ask and that we may be good and his servants, as they have been, so that we may attain the glory which they now enjoy. So that, just as your Highness and your people do not say that the earthen medallion is God, no more do we say that the statues of the saints are gods, nor do we adore them as such.” With these reasonings the Shah and his courtiers remained content.

Question:
1. Father Vincent stated that “the English are heretics and false Christians and that Roman Catholics are the true Christians.” Compare this with Sultan Selim I’s argument in rejecting the Shi’ite sect that Sunni Muslims were the “true religion.” What does this tell you about sectarian disputes within a religion? Which is the “true religion”? 

Part 12: Islamic Empires
12.6 Shah Abbas the Great: The Resurgence of the Persian Empire

Persia, under the remarkable Safavid Dynasty, was the sole Middle Eastern power able to meet the Ottomans on equal terms—and the two great Islamic states were often in conflict. Persia was Shiite in its religious orientation while the Ottomans adhered to the Sunni variety of Islam. The most outstanding Safavid Emperor was Shah Abbas the Great (1587–1629), whose capital at Isfahan was fabled to be one of the wealthiest and most beautiful cities of the East. A portrait of Shah Abbas has been bequeathed to us through the biography written by his secretary, Eskander Bey Monshi (1560–1632?).


**DISCOURSE 5**

**On Shah ‘Abbas’s Justice, Concern for the Security of the Roads, and Concern for the Welfare of His Subjects**

The greater part of governing is the preservation of stability within the kingdom and security on the roads. Prior to the accession of Shah ‘abbas, this peace and security had disappeared in Iran, and it had become extremely difficult for people to travel about the country. As soon as he came to the throne, Shah ‘abbas turned his attention to this problem. He called for the principal highway robbers in each province to be identified, and he then set about eliminating this class of people. Within a short space of time, most of their leaders had been arrested. Some of them, who had been driven by misfortune to adopt this way of life, were pardoned by Shah ‘abbas and their troubles solved by various forms of royal favor. Overwhelmed by this display of royal clemency, these men swore to serve the king and to behave as law-abiding citizens. Others, however, were handed over to the sahna (a police official) for punishment, and society was rid of this scourge. With security restored to the roads, merchants and tradesmen traveled to and from the Safavid empire.

The welfare of his people was always a prime concern of the Shah, and he was at pains to see that the people enjoyed peace and security, and that oppression by officialdom, the major cause of anxiety on the part of the common man, was totally stamped out in his kingdom. Substantial reductions were made in the taxes due to the dīvān: first, the tax on flocks in Iraq, amounting to nearly fifteen thousand Iraqi toman, was remitted to the people of that province, and the population of Iraq, which is the flourishing heart of Iran and the seat of government, by this gift was preferred above the other provinces. Second, all dīvān levies were waived for all Shi`ites throughout the empire during the month of Ramazān. The total revenues for one month, which according to the computation of the dīvān officials amounted to some twenty thousand toman, were given to the people as alms. The object was that they should be free from demands for taxes during this blessed month, which is a time to be devoted to the service and worship of God.

**DISCOURSE 7**

**On Shah ‘Abbas’s Policy-making and Administration**

If scholars consider Sha ‘Abbas to be the founder of the laws of the realm and an example in this regard to the princes of the world, they have justification for this opinion, for he has been responsible for some weighty legislation in the field of administration.

One of his principal pieces of legislation has been his reform of the army. Because the rivalries of the qezelbās tribes had led them to commit all sorts of enormities, and because their devotion to the Safavid royal house had been weakened by dissension, Shah ‘Abbas decided (as the result of divine inspiration, which is vouchsafed to kings but not to ordinary mortals), to admit into the armed forces groups other than the qezelbās. He enrolled in the armed forces large numbers of Georgian, Circassian, and other gölams, and created the office of qollar-āqāsi commander-in-chief of the gölām regiments), which had not previously existed under the Safavid regime. Several thousand men were drafted into regiments of musketeers from the Câgatây tribe, and from various Arab and Persian tribes in Khorasan, Azerbaijan, and Tabarestān. Into the regiments of musketeers, too, were drafted all the riff-fall from every province—sturdy, serviceable men who were unemployed and preyed on the lower classes of society. By this means the lower classes were given relief from their lawless activities, and the recruits made amends for their past sins by performing useful service in the army. All these men were placed on the gölām muster rolls. Without question, they were an essential element in ‘Abbas’s conquests, and their employment had many advantages.
Shah ‘Abbas tightened up provincial administration. Any emir or noble who was awarded a provincial governorship, or who was charged with the security of the highways, received his office on the understanding that he discharge his duties in a proper manner. If any merchant or traveler or resident were robbed, it was the duty of the governor to recover his money for him or replace it out of his own funds. This rule was enforced throughout the Safavid empire. As a result, property was secure, and people could travel without hindrance to and from Iran.

Another of Shah ‘Abbas’s policies has been to demand a truthful reply whenever he asked anyone for information. Lying, he said, is forbidden and considered a sin by God, so why should it not be a sin to lie to him who is one’s king, one’s spiritual director, and one’s benefactor? Is not falsehood to such a one ingratitude? In the opinion of Shah ‘Abbas, lying to one’s benefactor constituted the rankest ingratitude. If he detected anyone in a lie, he visited punishment upon him. The effects of this policy have been felt at all levels of society. For example, if someone has committed various acts that merit the death penalty and the king questions him on his conduct, the poor wretch has no option but to tell the truth. In fact, the opinion is commonly held that, if a person tells a lie to the Shah, the latter intuitively knows he is lying. The result is that the biggest scoundrel alive hesitates to allow even a small element of falsehood to creep into any story he is telling the Shah. The beneficial effects of this on government and the administration of justice need no elaboration.

DISCOURSE 8
On His Simplicity of Life, Lack of Ceremony, and Some Contrary Qualities

The character of the Shah contains some contradictions; for instance, his fiery temper, his imperiousness, his majesty, and regal splendor are matched by his mildness, leniency, his ascetic way of life, and his immortality. His is equally at home on the dervish’s mat and the royal throne. When he is in good temper, he mixes with the greatest informality with the members of his household, his close friends and retainers with others, and treats them like brothers. In contrast, when he is in a towering rage, his aspect is so terrifying that the same man who, shortly before, was his boon companion and was treated with all the informality of a close friend, dares not to speak a word out of turn for fear of being accused of insolence or discourtesy. At such times, the emirs, sultans, and even the court wits and his boon companions keep silent, for fear of the consequences. The Shah, then, posesses these two contrasting natures, each of which is developed to the last degree.

DISCOURSE 9
On Shah ‘Abbas’s Concern for the Rights of His Servants and His Avoiding Laying Hands on Their Possessions

One of the most agreeable qualities of this monarch is his compassionate treatment of his servants, which is coupled with a concern that faithful service should receive its just reward. His record in this regard is so outstanding that it is not matched by that of any other chivalrous prince. As long as his servants are constant in their loyalty, the royal favor is lavished upon them, nor is it withdrawn for any trifling offense committed out of ignorance or from negligence. If any of his servants dies from natural causes, or gives his life in battle in the defense of the faith and the state, the Shah is generous in his treatment of their dependents. In the case of officeholders, even if their sons are too young at the time of their father’s death to be fit for office, nevertheless, in order to resuscitate their families, he confers the same office on the sons out of his natural generosity and magnanimity.

Moreover, since the Shah considers the possessions and treasures of this world of little value, even if the deceased has left substantial sums of money, such is the Shah’s magnanimity and concern to follow the prescripts of canon law that he (unlike the majority of princes) does not lay covetous eyes on the inheritance, but divides it among the heirs in the proportions ordained by God. This is regarded by some as his most praiseworthy characteristic, for most of the princes of the world consider it impossible for them to show greater appreciation for their servants than by following this practice, which brings with it heavenly rewards.
DISCOURSE 10

On Shah ‘Abbas’s Breadth of Vision, and His Knowledge of World Affairs and of the Classes of Society

After he has dealt with the affairs of state, Shah ‘Abbas habitually relaxes. He has always been fond of conviviality and, since he is still a young man, he enjoys wine and the company of women. But this does not affect the scrupulous discharge of his duties, and he knows in minute detail what is going on in Iran and also in the world outside. He has a well-developed intelligence system, with the result that no one, even if he is sitting at home with his family, can express opinions which should not be expressed without running the risk of their being reported to the Shah. This has actually happened on numerous occasions.

As regards his knowledge of the outside world, he possesses information about the rulers (both Muslim and non-Muslim) of other countries, about the size and composition of their armies, about their religious faith and the organization of their kingdoms, about their highway systems, and about the prosperity or otherwise of their realms. He has cultivated diplomatic relations with most of the princes of the world, and the rulers of the most distant parts of Europe, Russia, and India are on friendly terms with him. Foreign ambassadors bearing gifts are never absent from his court, and the Shah’s achievements in the field of foreign relations exceed those of his predecessors.

Shah ‘Abbas mixes freely with all classes of society, and in most cases is able to converse with people in their own particular idiom. He is well versed in Persian poetry; he understands it well, indulges in poetic license, and sometimes utters verses himself. He is a skilled musician, an outstanding composer of rounds, rhapsodies, and part-songs; some of his compositions are famous. As a conversationalist, he is capable of elegant and witty speech.

Questions:
1. To what extent was clemency a part of Shah Abbas’ policy? To what degree was severity employed? Which predominated?
2. What novelties in policy does Eskander seem to indicate derived their inspiration from the Shah?
3. What does Eskander indicate about the Shah’s personality?
4. Reading between the lines of Eskander’s biography of the Shah, what would it be like to live in the state administered by Shah Abbas? Do the positives outweigh the negatives, or vice-versa? Explain.