

Fathers Simon and Vincent Report on Shah Abbas I, the Safavid Ruler 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 CE) 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.

Source: Robert Simon, "Shah Abbas I," *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia and the Papal Mission of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1939), pp. 158–161.

Focus Questions:

1. What qualities made Shah Abbas I an effective leader?
2. According to Father Simon, why was Shah Abbas I both loved and feared?
3. 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?
4. What was Father Vincent's argument in rejecting the charge that Catholics were idolators?
5. 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"?

SHAH ABBAS I

FATHER SIMON

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 kindness 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...

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...

THE WORSHIP OF IDOLS

FATHER VINCENT

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 worshiping 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 not mainly for that reason."

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.