

## DOMINICANS FOR PERSIA

THE news that Dominicans—and English Dominicans—are, under the active encouragement of the Holy See, to recommence work in Persia is calculated to stir our blood and turn our thoughts towards that ancient country, and Dominican connections with it.

‘Behold, I make all things new’—such is the glorious claim of Jesus Christ and, through Him, of the Church. In the fourteenth century Dominicans, encouraged by Pope John XXII, went out to Persia and did a great work there among the Armenians. So great, indeed, was the expansion of Dominican missionary work in the East, that a special congregation within the Order, named ‘Fratres Peregrinantes,’ was set up, and certain distinctive features in their costume—a red sash or cummerbund, and red socks—marked out its members from the rest. The story of the reunion, effected by our friars, of large bodies of Armenians together with their clergy, is a curious one. So great was the prestige of the Order among them that the Armenian liturgy was abandoned and the Dominican liturgy, translated into Armenian, put in its place. This step proved in the long run to have been imprudent. Those who, among the Armenians, had refused to join the movement protested loudly, and with some justification, against so unwise an abandonment of the ancient and beautiful Armenian rite, and this was, no doubt, among the causes which ultimately brought about the arrest and decline of a work so gallantly begun.

In the seventeenth century, amongst the numerous Catholic missionaries invited to Persia by Shah Abbas the Great, in his desire to placate the Holy See and win its support against those ancient foes of Persia,

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the Turks, Dominicans were not absent. Their work lay in the Armenian township of Julfa, close to Isfahan, and the Church now used by the Lazarist fathers was once Dominican. Behind the altar is a large picture representing St. Dominic receiving the Rosary from the hands of Our Lady. In the library I unearthed a number of copies of the *Summa* and other books which had once belonged to the Dominicans of Julfa, and memories of the Friars live on in the Parish. It was, I think, the French Revolution which put an end to this Mission, the last survival of Dominican activities in Persia.

These activities, however interesting and important, were in Persia without being for the Persians. Times were not ripe, perhaps, for taking contact with the Persian Shiahs, and those who now desire to turn their attention to these latter will find themselves on virgin soil.

The Dominicans who go to Persia will necessarily go to study: to study the situation, to study the Persian soul and its manifestations in prose and poetry and conversation. In a sense the whole work can be summed up as a study of the Persian language, since it is in the language and its literature that a people's characteristic outlook on life becomes crystallised. Like any study of a language worth its name, it will be at once philosophical and practical: the aim will be to master the spoken and written language, in order thus to be able to take part in discussion and to supply the crying defect of a Catholic literature in Persian.

If the Church has been called a 'city set on a hill,' then Persia might well be called a kingdom set on a mountain. When one approaches it, as I first did, from the Mesopotamian plain, the tremendous mountain ramparts of the 'Páy-takht,' planting huge paws in the plain below, leave no room for doubt that we have reached the Iranian plateau, and, after the climb,

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as the car advances, it becomes evident, from the long lines of snow-capped heights which flank the way, that we are on the Iranian plateau to stay. Not till the Elburz range, peaked by Demavend, rushes down to within a mile or two of the Caspian Sea, can we say that Persia ends.

Thus set, fortress-like and towering above sea and plain, Persia has always been a country apart. She had, first of all, her own national religion in Zoroastrianism, and when this gave way, before the onrush of Islam, it was not long before she created for herself a special form of Islam, the Shia or schism—as if the sheer outlines of her mountains must carve out lines of cleavage, likewise, in her outlook on life and destiny.

If Islam itself constitutes one huge problem of adaptation and approach for the European thinker and apostle, Persia is a highly specialised problem within that problem. The sixth 'Semaine de Missiologie' of Louvain summed up its conclusions on the subject of Islam by saying: 'Nowhere (more than in relation to Islam) will a greater need be felt for a thoroughly intellectual preparation'—by which, of course, was meant, not the normal and indispensable course of theological studies in a Catholic Seminary, but, this being presupposed, a special preparation for understanding and defining the doctrines and the spirit of Islam. If this is true of Islam, it is doubly true of Persia, which, until quite recently, has been very largely shut off from outside contacts and influences, whether Moslem or Christian. Here and there an Orientalist has been found, like the Count de Gobineau or Professor E. G. Browne of Cambridge, who has made a special study of Persian thought and shown a special sympathy and admiration for the Persian philosophic and religious genius, but, in the attitude of such men, however great their merits and achieve-

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ments, there has always been an element of dilettantism, and usually a lack of such philosophical and theological preparation as would have given them definite standards of judgment and certain means of spiritual mastery and appropriation.

Men who by their profession are destined to be at once religious, philosophers and spiritual teachers, if once lit by enthusiasm for and enlightened by a sympathetic understanding of the Persian genius, are, it would seem, the fittest subjects for so exacting a task of spiritual approach and wise constructiveness. A Dominican is not a dilettante. He is concerned for the Truth, for truth of life, for truth, not in the abstract, but as realised in human lives and in human societies. If, among people like the Persians, he sees faults and failings, he does not harp on them, but seeks rather for the germs of the opposite virtues, and aims at fostering those till the defects fall away of themselves, like dry scales. A Dominican, when he observes defects and abuses, individual or social, does not sneer, but strives to treat the wound with the healing wisdom and love and the unstinted Blood of the Redeemer.

A Dominican, a 'Preaching Friar,' finds in himself those elements of religious poverty and detachment from the world which separate him off from the usual type of European traveller and enable him to understand and to be understood by religious men—becoming, alas! so rare here—of Orders such as the Shah Ni'matullahis or of similar groups of dervishes, who, at their best, are the salt of the Persian earth.

A Dominican, moreover, is the privileged possessor and exponent of a perennial and centrally-situated philosophy. The scientific and technical experts whom the Persian Government now employs are concerned with matters in the first degree of abstraction, concrete problems which cannot bring souls closely together,

and which may often send them farther apart. Thomism goes to the root of things and, by its calm, realistic intellectuality, is admirably fitted to establish spiritual bonds between thinkers of the East and the West. The Thomistic system represents a profound and central attitude of the human mind with which the traditional forms of Persian thought find themselves far more closely allied than with many of the manifestations of the so-called 'scientific' spirit, so morbidly sectional and specialised, of later ages. Just as, in everyday life, medieval Europe was far closer to Asia than is the Europe of to-day, so the philosophic outlook of medieval thinkers in Europe was far closer to that of Asiatic thinkers of yesterday and to-day than is that of men who, nowadays, are often taken to be the official representatives of that outlook.

When young Persians come to the West to complete their studies, they acquire but a superficial knowledge of European culture. They scarcely ever come to realise the foundations of the spiritual structure of our civilisation. It is time, then, for scholars and religious on both sides to get together and to understand each other: for Europeans, with their precious outfit of Christian culture, to strive to see the profound elements of truth and goodness which have survived in the Persian soul, and for Persians to penetrate beneath the surface veneer of our modern mechanical forms of life and to study the spiritual foundations upon which all the dazzling mechanical and social achievements of Christendom ultimately rest. The Catholic position, rooted and grounded in divine revelation as well as in reason, is impregnable, and precisely for this reason we are able, more easily than Moslems, to fence and bend this way and that with a view to finding the vital points. The Catholic, as being the stronger brother, more rigid in his adhesion to ultimate principles, can be more supple in his readiness to adapt

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their expression to this or that mode or manner of the Persian mind, to this or that formula of the Persian vocabulary.

Jalaluddin Rumi, in his great poem, the *Masnavi*, tells a story of four men—an Arab, a Persian, a Turk and a Greek—who, having been given a sum of money to be spent in common, began to argue and dispute as to what each wanted to buy. The Arab wanted 'inab.' No, said the Persian, we must get 'angur.' The Turk, on his part, protested that it must be 'uzum,' and the Greek would have nothing but 'stafilia.' In the midst of the hottest of the dispute, a fifth party arrived who knew all their languages and solved all their difficulties by pointing out that they all wanted one thing—grapes—but that each had called it by the name proper to it in his own language, whence the trouble.

We must make sure, therefore, that we do not let ourselves be estranged from our Persian brethren by a mere misapprehension of terms. Our work is, above all, a work of adaptation. What the Word of God made flesh did for the world at large, that each apostle has to do for the people to whom he is called: he has to tell the good news to them in a way which suits their temperaments and their mental habits. Being a fisher of men, he has to choose the kind of bait this particular kind of fish will like. It is the 'problem of adaptation' of which we hear so much.

Only those who are unacquainted with Persian religious literature, or who have but a smattering of it, would be inclined to assert that the terminology of Catholic philosophy and even, to a large extent, of Catholic theology, does not exist in Persian. In searching for them, a spirit of mere mathematical accuracy is inadequate. A certain broad and genial intellectual sympathy, a certain delicacy of insight and a certain feeling for language, and for thought, are

needed to overcome any misplaced diffidence one may feel about leaving hold of the dictionary, usually compiled with a far different outlook from the one that must here prevail. A long familiarity with Persian religious literature and with the Persian mind and its working must bridge the gap between two vocabularies which, for so many centuries, have grown apart.

It is this work of adaptation and submission to the object (which, in this case, we take to be the Persian soul), this attempt to see things as the Persian sees them, that constitutes the apostle's essential and most excruciating sacrifice. It is comparatively easy to give up home and country in the cause of God. It is not difficult to put on a turban, and make a profound salaam. What is really difficult is to quit the inner fatherland of familiar concepts and terms and to impose upon oneself the ceaseless task of trying to think and talk like a Persian. Needless to say, where we fail in this—and we are bound to fail to a considerable extent—the grace and love and superabundant wisdom of the ever-present Jesus are ready to make good our shortcomings. Moreover, as I have suggested, we find in the angelic Doctor, St. Thomas, in whom thought is mingled with ardent, loving prayer, clear-cut definitions and divisions with heartfelt passivity to unutterable inspirations, a spiritual outlook and method which, if we have steeped ourselves in it to our heart's content, will have proved the best and deepest training for sympathetic understanding of the Persian religious mentality. In a poet such as Hafiz, in a theologian such as Gazzali, we can see this subtle and entrancing combination of intellectual distinctness and mystical abandonment which ranks them among the great souls, the mahatmas, of the world of spiritual mastery.

Where the Persian mind, however, usually goes wide of St. Thomas, is in power of systematic thought,

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in ability to construct great syntheses, in which no aspect of reality is left unaccounted for. The Persian soul, it has been said, loves high flights. Nothing could be easier or more futile than these high flights of the mind when they are not aimed at definite objectives. It is because St. Thomas, in his highest flights, keeps in touch with humble realities that he continues to interest and inform us. An article of St. Thomas is a miracle of unity and concise concentration. A ghazal of Hafiz may be brilliant with bright thoughts, cast out at random, but it has no essential and formative unity of conception and purpose.

The Dominicans, then, whom Mother Church is sending out as students and interpreters of Persian thought, will be perpetually on the search for truths and methods where West and East, Thomas and Ghazali, are in agreement. It is on this positive basis of agreement that they can slowly and surely build the edifice of absolute and universal truth. Père Sertillanges has said it : ' Tout se rejoint dans le réel, parce que l'Être est divin, et pour la même raison tout se rejoint dans les opinions d'une certaine manière. Le vrai relatif, approfondi, mène au vrai tout court . . . . L'erreur toute pure ne pourrait pas se formuler, surtout dans une formule générale, et à plus forte raison ne ferait-elle pas des conquêtes. Le faux est un certain vrai, dira notre Docteur, comme le mal est un certain bien. En traversant la couche des erreurs, on arrive à ce qui les provoque, à ce qui parait les justifier, à ce qui fait leur force auprès des esprits, et c'est là du vrai.'

In connection with the League of Nations there is 'a committee of intellectual co-operation.' Our little group will be a work of 'spiritual co-operation.' We desire to awaken, among the thinkers of Persia, a livelier consciousness of their true and highest rôle in the world of ideas and of action. In their present eager-



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ness and hurry to catch up with the mechanical and social progress of Europe, many Persians are apt to think that the whole of their past has to be scrapped. This is a mistake which might have distressing consequences, the more so as all are not equally convinced that Persians as a people possess mechanical and technical ability in any marked degree.

Who knows, then, whether, in the long run, it will not be our task, as it was once that of Benedictines for the culture of ancient Rome and Greece, to save the patrimony of true Persian culture from the vandalism of modern barbarians, European or Persian?

Far down in the South of Persia, battlemented by royal mountains, lies Fars, the ancient kingdom of Cyrus, whence he set out to found the Achaemenian Empire. Past the ruins of his palace at Pasargada, and those of the palaces of Darius at Persepolis, a drive of two hours takes the traveller to the modern capital of the Province, Shiraz, set in its delightful garland of mountains and gardens. Here two great poets, Hafiz and Saadi, were born and died and are buried. And here, with the help of God, before a year is out, a small band of English Dominicans will have settled and have begun, humbly and imperceptibly, their work for Persia and the Church.

The Order possesses in Jerusalem a School of Biblical Studies which has acquired world-wide renown. May we not hope to create, at Shiraz, a School of Oriental Philosophy on Catholic lines which will have its part to play in the universal scheme of the Church?

Success comes from God, says the Arabic proverb. But readers of this brief article can help, too, by their 'intellectual co-operation,' and by their spiritual and moral support. In our admiration of the treasures of Persian art, so magnificently displayed in London now, let us not forget the still untapped treasures of the Persian heart.

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