CHAPTER TEN

SOME REFLECTIONS

As a historical recovery, this study of the Augustinian Hermits and their missions to Persia, Basra and Georgia has sought to shed light on a significant and important period of mission history which is still underresearched. A number of themes have been illustrated through the activities of the missionaries, and aspects of these, including the consolidation of the Safavid state under ‘Abbas, the ever-present play of religion and politics, questions of comparative missiology and theology, ecclesiological issues, and the possibility creation of a Safavid variant of the millet system, will be the focus of this concluding section, together with an overall assessment of the Augustinian presence in Persia. Inevitably, the broad scope of a pioneering study of this nature will suggest avenues of future research, and a number of these are proposed for scholarly consideration.

‘Abbas and the Consolidation of the Safavid Shi’a State

The context of a Safavid state which expressly defined itself over against its Sunni Ottoman neighbours as characterised by adherence to Shi’a Islam is clearly crucial, and it is the figure of ‘Abbas I, ‘the Great’, who played such a significant state-building role, which dominates much of our historical account and context. It is no surprise that the first missionaries in Persia should devote considerable attention to ‘Abbas in their accounts. It was, after all, a widespread European belief that, not only was he sympathetic to Christianity, but on the verge of embracing it himself, that had led the missionaries to hope that his subjects would soon follow his example. In fact, as we have seen, if he was not directly responsible for such ideas in Europe he was certainly, at least in his early contacts with the missionaries, quite prepared to encourage their delusions in this respect. The picture of ‘Abbas as he appears in the missionary accounts shows him to be possessed of a lively intelligence and curiosity, and possessed of a wide range of skills and accomplishments. It is clear that he has a detailed knowledge of the various groups which composed the Safavid polity, and that this not only extended to the different groups of Christians, but also
included an appreciation of the doctrinal differences between them. Essentially pragmatic he was also quixotic, mercurial, and unpredictable. As we have seen, he was not above ridiculing the missionaries, or of playing off members of different missionary Orders against each other.\footnote{Gulbenkian (Estudos Históricos I, 230) notes ‘Abbas’ expertise in the policy of divide and rule, citing two specific occasions when the shah attempts to introduce dissent between the Carmelites and Augustinians. See also Carmélites, I, 129.} It is also clear that at this period religious authority is very much in the hands of the shah, and it will be some time before the members of the clerical establishment, whom ‘Abbas clearly treated on occasion with scant regard, would begin to assert themselves.

Interestingly, while from a religious perspective he seems to have generally accepted that the pope was, at least in a nominal sense, the head and spiritual leader of all Christians, perhaps seeing a parallel to the evolving claim to the Islamic Caliphate of the Sunni Ottoman sultans, and of ‘Abbas self-understanding of himself as ‘the principal column’ of Shi’a Islam, he nevertheless appears to have over-estimated the power and influence of the papacy in European politics, attributing to it an authority over the Catholic princes which, as the continued failure to create an anti-Ottoman alliance among them demonstrates, had little basis in fact.\footnote{The article by Maurice Borrmans, ‘La Rome pontificale vue par les Musulmans’, Islamochristiana 30 (2004), 15–24, notes that even today Muslim perceptions of the papacy are influenced by much earlier Muslim accounts. The author quotes from the Caliph al-Idrisi, who says of the pope in 1153–1154, ’no one is more powerful than he: kings submit to him and consider him the equal of the Creator’ (16).} The attempts of the Spanish monarchy and the papacy on one hand, and Shah ‘Abbas I on the other to forge this joint anti-Ottoman league has been a recurring theme, especially in the early years of the Augustinian presence in Isfahan. The correspondence quoted indicates the importance that both sides attached to the project, but the reality of the matter may be somewhat different. While ‘Abbas was prepared, as he demonstrated to Gouveia during his first stay in Persia, to attack the Ottoman enemy as a demonstration of his sincerity, the European side was able to offer little evidence of military commitment on their part. It is frankly unlikely that Spain would by this time have been able financially or militarily to undertake the significant role which would have been required of it in any such league. It is entirely possible that Spanish diplomacy merely sought to keep open the possibility of a league in order to maintain good relations with a powerful ruler who had diplomatic interests both in India and in the Persian Gulf, where Portuguese power was already beginning.