

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN PERSIA.



I. CONDITIONS OF THE PROBLEM. Persia is now a country with a constitution. The *Kanun-i-Assasi* (fundamental regulations), was approved by the Shah A.H. 1325, A.D. 1907, and published by authority.

Art. I. declares that the established religion of the country is Islam of the *Jaafari* type, and that the Shah must hold this religion and be a promoter of the same.

Art. II. decrees that never in any age of the ages can the *Majlis* (Parliament) act contrary to the sacred principles of Islam . . . Moreover, five Doctors of the religious Law at least, or more according to the requirements of the age, shall be members of the Parliament. They shall confer together and investigate the matters proposed in the Parliament, and every one that is contrary to the sacred canons of Islam they shall oppose and cast out ; and the vote of this corps of the *Ulema* in this respect shall be obeyed and followed. This point shall never be changed until the appearance of his Majesty, *Hojat-i-Asr*.

Art. XXXIX. enacts that no king shall sit upon the throne unless previous to his coronation he shall appear in Parliament, and in the presence of the members of the Parliament, of the Senate and the Ministers of the State, he shall swear not only to obey and defend the fundamental principles of the Constitution, but also that he will try and endeavour to advance the established religion. In 1907 a farmán was published at Teheran, printed in gold letters, containing an autographic order of the Shah, in which he calls upon the Parliament to arrange matters according to Mohammedan Law.

Now we know that the supreme law of Islam is the

Koran. Notice, then, its attitude toward unbelievers. "I will cast a dread into the hearts of the infidels. Strike off their heads, then, and strike off from them every finger tip" (Sura viii. 12. Rodwell's translation). For those who depart from the faith the law is as follows: "If they turn back, then seize them and slay them wherever ye find them" (Sura iv. 91. Rodwell's translation). As the Grand Vizier of Turkey put it to the Representatives of the Powers of Europe in 1843: "The laws of the Koran compel no man to become a Moslem [here is where the 'no compulsion in religion' applies], but they are inexorable both as respects a Moslem who embraces another religion, and as respects a person not a Moslem, who after having of his own accord publicly embraced Islam, is convicted of having renounced that faith. *No consideration can produce a mitigation of the capital punishment to which the law condemns him without mercy.*"

II. EXPERIENCES OF THE MISSIONS IN EARLIER DAYS. Much opposition was encountered even from nominal Christians. Thus, in one of the villages near Teheran, where a helper was sent, the Armenian priest was so hostile to the work that he threatened to hamstring his horse and to kill the helper. In 1875, when the outstation of Hamadan was visited by missionaries from Teheran, the Armenians were so opposed to the evangelistic efforts of the helper stationed there that they threatened bloodshed. The missionaries appealed to the Moslem authorities, and the enemies of the work were put under bonds to keep the peace. In 1880 an official notification from the Persian Minister for Foreign Affairs was sent to us by the British Legation (there being no American Legation yet established in Persia). It stated the objections on the part of the Shah's Government to religious instruction being given to Moslems; and declared that such a course would not be tolerated under threat of expulsion. "Should you continue in this course, it will be impossible for the Persian Government to allow of your continuing to reside here."

In 1881 there was a remarkable interest among the

Jews in Hamadan, a number of whom professed to have accepted the Christian religion ; this stirred up opposition and continued persecution. We appealed to the Persian Authorities and to the British Legation on behalf of these oppressed converts. Repeated orders for their protection were issued by the Persian Office for Foreign Affairs. One of these orders plainly declares : " Let a Jew choose the Christian faith or a Christian accept the Jewish faith, they should not incur opposition or molestation from anybody." This, however, related only to non-Moslems. About ten years ago the police of the quarter reported to the Government, as follows : " In the American school, a section has recently been opened for the purpose of giving tuition in certain kinds of handwork. Instruction is given there to Armenian girls, and about fifteen Moslem girls are also in attendance. These girls are accepted on the condition that they enter the school dressed as Armenians with high boots, and in the streets put on a black covering (*chadur*) like the Armenians. In consequence of this report, an order was issued to the Ata Beg Azem, as follows : " Give orders to the Eyn-ed Douleh that this proceeding is to be entirely given up, and on no account are Moslem girls to be admitted to that school ; and if the parents shall continue the conduct, they are to be severely reprimanded and chastised." It is interesting to note that there are now 142 Moslem girls in the said school.

III. PROGRESS MADE TOWARD RELIGIOUS TOLERATION. The change of attitude in relation to the work since those earlier days, with the threat of bloodshed and murder, may be seen in Hamadan, where for some years the newer Evangelical church building has been located close by the old Gregorian church, without any dividing wall. In Teheran also there is a marked difference between 1880, the time of the interdict against giving religious instruction to Moslems and the threat of expulsion from the country, and the present time, when Moslems freely attend religious services. One Sunday morning this year a distinguished convert from Islam

occupied the pulpit at the Persian service, and delivered a powerful address on the only remedy for the leprosy of sin; though a number of Moslems were present in the congregation, no disturbance was caused or opposition aroused. A few years ago, when the strike occurred in the Boys' School, Teheran, it was published in the Persian newspapers that one of the officers of the school was a Moslem who had become a Christian and had been baptized. Notwithstanding this public proclamation of him as a baptized Christian, he has not been molested. It should be noted that there is now a large measure of religious liberty, or at least toleration, as regards the Rulers of the State and the religious authorities; the opposition which the convert still has to face comes rather from his own household and relations, and this may occur even in a land where religious liberty has been declared.

IV. CIRCUMSTANCES FAVOURABLE TO THE PROGRESS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY. The growing indifference to religion in general which seems to be pervading the people, and the progress of rationalism among the higher classes of Persia, may first be mentioned. There is further a favourable influence for tolerance in the disintegration of Islam, resulting from the activity of the adherents of the new religion Bahaism, who demand freedom of discussion. The political condition of the country has also reacted. The demand for civil liberty, doubtless, has a tendency toward greater toleration in the matter of religion. In the meantime the attention of the people being so much occupied with the contest between the forces of progress and the re-actionary movement, there is afforded an opportunity for Christian work; so that a foreigner, long resident here and well acquainted with the people, remarked the other day, "I would not wonder if you could preach openly in the bazaars in these days."

There are, it seems to me, two ways in which full religious liberty may come about—one by the gradual growth of toleration within the country, and the other by pressure from other countries. Japan may be taken as an example of the former, and Turkey of the latter. In the earlier history of Christianity in Japan, we are

told that 40,000 Christians, native and foreign, were massacred and cast into a vast pit, over which they placed this inscription : " So long as the sun shall warm the earth let no Christian be so bold as to come to Japan. Let him know that the king of Spain himself, or the Christian's God, or the great God of all, if he violate this command, shall pay for it with his head." For many years the edict against Christianity was not repealed, but when the gradual change of sentiment had come about, the boards with the official notice against Christianity were quietly removed. In Turkey the circumstances were different. In the summer of 1843 an obscure Armenian, while under the influence of alcohol, had accepted Mohammedanism. Later he repented of his act, and returned to the faith of his fathers. He was arrested, tortured, and finally decapitated in a place of concourse in Constantinople. The British ambassador made an earnest effort to procure his release, and the Grand Vizier promised that the young man should not be beheaded. On learning that he had been, the Ambassador declared it to be an insult to the established religion of England as well as to all Europe, and insisted that no such act of fanaticism should ever again occur. But in December a young Greek, who had become a Moslem, and later on returned to his former religion, was executed. This aroused the indignation of Europe.

The despatch of Lord Aberdeen, of Jan. 16th, 1844, contains the following : " Whatever may have been tolerated in former times, by the weakness or indifference of Christian Powers, those Powers will now require from the Porte due consideration for their feelings as members of a religious community, and interested as such in the fate of all who, notwithstanding shades of difference, unite in a common belief in the essential doctrines of Christianity ; and they will not endure that the Porte should insult and trample on their faith by treating as a criminal any person who embraces it. *Her Majesty's Government require the Porte to abandon once for all so revolting a principle.*" England was supported by the other nations, and by the concurrent intervention of five Powers, including Russia, after some weeks, an Imperial

edict was obtained from the Porte that "*henceforth no person should be persecuted for his religious opinion in Turkey.*" Thus by pressure from without toleration was promised ; but Dr. F. J. Bliss, of Syria, speaking at the International Missionary Union last year, declared, " No Mohammedan could now be sentenced to death for becoming a Christian, but yet a Mohammedan may disappear in many ways and never be heard of again." And Dr. Washburn stated that under the present new régime things are practically no better. The gradual growth of toleration within the country seems to be better than compulsion from outside. With devout thanks to God for the advance already made in the matter, let us continue our prayers for complete religious liberty in this land, and make fuller use of the toleration now existing by aggressive evangelistic efforts and a wider proclamation of the Gospel.

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