

Dialogue Under Persecution: Anglicanism in Iran Engaging with Shi'a Islam

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This essay explores the influence of Kenneth Cragg on the Anglican Church in Iran through a survey of his relationship with its various bishops. It shows how his influence can be seen especially at a time when the church was trying to find its identity as an authentic indigenous Christian presence in Iran during the 1960s and 70s. Furthermore, it underlines how traces of Cragg's theology and approach to interfaith relations have undergirded the response of the church to the persecution it has experienced in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution as it has sought to retain a faithful presence in times of trouble.

Introduction

This essay is based less on academic research and more on thoughts and reflections about the topic in terms of how it has been a part of my life and experience. Nonetheless, it has, I believe, a place within this collection for two reasons in particular. First, it helps keep alight the tiny flame of Anglicanism in Iran by ensuring that this isolated community, small and insignificant though it appears, should not be forgotten. And secondly, because it highlights the enormous significance which Kenneth Cragg has had on the Anglican encounter with Iran's Shi'ism.

My primary aim is to outline something of the history of Anglican presence in Iran and to distinguish the changing phases of its encounter with Shi'a Islam over the past one hundred years or so. In addition, the essay will end with some reflections which may be pertinent for Christian approaches to dialogue generally.

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History

The subtitle of the *Presence of Faith* symposium is *A Century of Anglican Engagement with World Religions*. Well, it was almost exactly one hundred years ago that the Anglican Church was established in Iran, when the Diocese of Iran was created in 1912. A small church community already existed, through the efforts of CMS missionaries from the late nineteenth century. Earlier in the century Henry Martyn had translated the New Testament into Persian and in 1811 he spent some time in Iran shortly before his untimely death. However, when missionary work began in earnest it was more by accident than design. In 1869 a CMS missionary by the name of Robert Bruce interrupted his journey to India by stopping in Iran to learn Persian. Foreigners were prohibited from residing in Muslim quarters, so Bruce and his wife Emily settled in Julfa, the Armenian area within the town of Isfahan. During the two years they were expecting to be there the country experienced a severe famine and the Bruces tried to help. Among other things they set up an orphanage with money sent from Germany.

In 1871, just as they were preparing to leave, several Muslims requested baptism and Bruce took this as a sign from God that he should stay in Iran. CMS initially opposed him and it took considerable time and effort to persuade the Society that Persia was fertile ground for missionary work. A station was finally given official recognition by CMS in 1875, after which the educational, medical, and evangelistic work gradually began. Robert and Emily worked alone for several more years, cooperating with the Armenians as best they could. By the 1880s a small band of missionaries was well established and the work began slowly to shift its center of gravity from Julfa to Isfahan itself.

When the Diocese of Iran was eventually formed it was under the auspices of the Diocese of London and was led consecutively by four missionary bishops, until in 1961 the first native Persian bishop was appointed. Finally in 1976 the Anglican Church in Iran came of age, taking its place as one member of the newly created Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East.¹

¹ For more on the history and beginnings of the Diocese of Iran, see Robin E. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973); and Gordon Hewitt, *The Problems of Success: A History of the Church Missionary Society 1910–1942, Volume I* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 380–383.

For the purposes of this essay, the period has been divided into four sections. There is overlap, but each may be regarded as manifesting a particular phase or approach to the task of interfaith encounter.

1. The early years, up to 1960: under the leadership of missionaries and foreign bishops;
2. 1961–1980s: under the leadership of Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, the first native Persian bishop;
3. 1980s–2004: under the leadership of Iraj Mottahedeh, a Persian convert from Judaism;
4. 2004–present: under the leadership of Azad Marshall, a Pakistani Christian.

I have been deliberately vague in distinguishing between the second and third periods, for there is no clear break. Hassan Dehqani-Tafti remained bishop until 1990 but was working in exile from 1979. At this point, local leadership transferred to Iraj Mottahedeh, who was eventually consecrated assistant bishop in 1986 and installed as diocesan bishop following Dehqani-Tafti's retirement. For the duration of the 1980s then, these two men, utterly different in personality and style, worked closely and faithfully together, each carrying out his calling and bearing the burden of his own vocation. In 2004, on Bishop Mottahedeh's retirement, there being no clear candidate to replace him from within Iran, Azad Marshall, a Pakistani priest, was invited to take over episcopal oversight. He remains in that post today.

Each of the four periods has been marked by different circumstances and the church's engagement with Islam has been defined by the need to respond to the given situation. But each era has also been characterized by the personality and theology of the bishop at its helm.

The Early Years: Missionaries and Foreign Bishops

From the earliest days, when CMS began work in Iran from the late 1800s, the relationship with locals was marked by a degree of animosity and mistrust on behalf of the host community in particular. Foreigners were a rare sight in Isfahan where missionaries started work, and were regarded with suspicion. Gradual entrees were made among the Muslim population through the missionaries' medical and educational efforts in particular. They had a confidence borne out of a sense of Western superiority which linked technological and social

advances to Christian civilization. There was little place for doubt in their mission to convert Iran to Christianity, and they were confident that the advantages of social improvement and modern technology would follow.

This general attitude fed the missionary ethos and is reflected in the language of much of their writings.² However, alongside this perspective developed friendships and relationships based on growing mutuality and respect.³ These missionaries were among the earliest Christians to have contact with people of other faiths and their experiences were part of the blossoming of what we now call interfaith dialogue: living alongside, listening to, learning from, and understanding the other. The history of Christian–Muslim encounter in Iran was always going to be checkered by social, political, and economic events and in the early years of Anglicanism there was a certain amount of unhelpful, even harmful, anti-Islamic polemic from within missionary circles.⁴ But there were also (and these were in the majority) humble and gentle men and women who fostered an environment in which better relations developed. In this way, roots were put down for what would later grow.

From the outset missionaries were keen to give a local flavor to the Christianity they brought, to help give it a sense of belonging within its own land and culture. This bore fruit over the years through an authentic use of Persian as the language for worship, the architecture of churches that were built, and the development of an Iranian spirituality—seen, for example, in the Persian hymnal. And yet for many the Anglican Church was always regarded as a foreign element planted within Iranian soil, an unwanted intrusion into the Persian way of life, representing Westernization and the expanding arm of imperialism.

² For more on this issue, see Guli Francis-Dehqani, *Religious Feminism in an Age of Empire: CMS Women Missionaries in Iran, 1869–1934*, CCSRG Monograph Series (Bristol: University of Bristol, 2000).

³ This reflects what I have referred to elsewhere as the growing tension between the theory of pure evangelism and its practical application on the mission field. See, for example, Francis-Dehqani, *Religious Feminism in an Age of Empire*, 85.

⁴ This may have had something to do with the presence and influence, in particular, of one senior CMS missionary in Iran, William St. Clair Tisdall, who was known as a fierce critic and author of some repute on Islamic matters. His writings include *The Sources of Islam: A Persian Treatise*, trans. William Muir (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1901); *The Religion of the Crescent* (London: SPCK, 1906); and *Christianity and Other Faiths: An Essay in Comparative Religion* (London: SPCK, 1912).

The 1960s–1980s: Hassan Dehqani-Tafti

In 1961 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti was consecrated—the first native bishop in Iran since the fourth century. The church was trying to establish itself as a local, rooted community of converts and included a growing number of second-generation Christians. It was (and I believe still is) the largest diocese in the Anglican Communion geographically and the smallest numerically, with a handful of congregations scattered across Iran with vast desert expanses dividing them. Its existence has always been in danger, and being threatened can breed fear and defensiveness. As the church matured under Persian leadership, its future approach toward Islam hung in the balance.

Dehqani-Tafti had been a young convert from Islam, baptized at the age of eighteen. In his youth he was a passionate evangelist with all the zeal of a new convert. He needed to establish his identity as a Christian and might well have done this in stark opposition to his Islamic roots. In the process he might have led the church in such a way that it could easily have become anti-Islamic in its stance in order to define its own place and character. But then he met Kenneth Cragg and grew familiar with his writings. Indeed, a deep friendship developed that would last a lifetime. This was to prove of enormous significance for Bishop Dehqani-Tafti himself, but also for the church he was leading.⁵

Bishop Dehqani-Tafti was fascinated by Cragg's approach to Islam and by his themes of hospitality and generosity. He was struck by Cragg's gentle, respectful manner toward the Shi'a clergy they visited together, and toward Islam as a faith and the truths to be found therein. Perhaps more than anything, he was influenced by Cragg's emphasis on *understanding* Islam and Muslims, taking their truths seriously and establishing ways to convey Christianity by means that were understandable to them. In Cragg, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti found an approach to Muslim–Christian encounter that he could build upon.

Cragg, of course, was a poet. Dehqani-Tafti also was a poet—a Persian poet and writer, and a lover of language. Like Cragg he understood that language is more than just words and meanings. It is also about people and contexts and so much more. So the task of translating Christianity for his country folk began, as he sought to translate

⁵ For more on Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, see his autobiography, *The Unfolding Design of My World: A Pilgrim in Exile* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2000).

not just words, but the meaning of his faith in terms understandable to the Persian psyche and appropriate to the social context and historical framework of Iran.⁶ This lifelong project became the style of the Anglican Church *and* the method Dehqani-Tafti employed personally as he strove to integrate being both Christian and Persian. For him, being a Christian was not to deny his Persian and Muslim roots. Rather, he sought the more complex and uncomfortable approach of integrating the apparent contradictions, seeking a more wholesome identity for himself and the church he served. These were the themes that he explored in his writing, his preaching, and his prayers as he sought a faith that was authentically and intentionally both Christian and Persian.

Of course, events conspired against him and Dehqani-Tafti faced the might of the 1979 Islamic Revolution against himself, his family, and his small flock.⁷ The revolution was well underway and gathering force by the summer of 1978. A storm was brewing in which Dehqani-Tafti and the small Christian community would be swept up. The Anglican Church had always had an uneasy presence in Iran, being made up primarily of Muslim converts. In the anarchy and Islamic fervor of the revolution there was finally the opportunity to seek punishment for the apostasy which was regarded both as a sin and a crime. Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, who still wore his Islamic identity in his name, was known as the convert bishop leading this group and so both he personally and the church community came under attack.

After a brief spell of imprisonment and an attack on his life in which his wife Margaret was shot and injured, Dehqani-Tafti left the country for meetings in the Province, where he was also Presiding Bishop. While he was away the situation worsened and the country spiraled into the full chaos of revolution. By those he trusted from within and without Iran, he was advised not to return "for the time

⁶ As early as 1969 Dehqani-Tafti preached a sermon at a service to which the elite of Isfahan had been invited, entitled "*Tafhim va Tafahom*." *Tafhim* means to speak in such a way that you may be understood clearly and correctly, while *tafahom* is creating an atmosphere of mutual understanding and trust. This sermon is included in Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, *Geranbari va Arami* (Basingstoke: Sohrab Books, 1997), 41–53.

⁷ For further details on the impact of the revolution upon the church in Iran and Dehqani-Tafti himself, see his book *The Hard Awakening* (London: Triangle/ SPCK, 1981).

being.” In the event, the revolution was to take hold in a manner few expected and Dehqani-Tafti remained in exile for the rest of his life.

From exile, he continued to lead the church through its period of intense suffering during the 1980s as it was stripped of its medical and educational institutions, and underwent severe persecution through interrogations, imprisonment, assassination attempts, and martyrdom, including that of his own son, murdered in 1980 at the age of twenty-four. Yet he remained true to the principles upon which he had built his life and faith. While standing out against the atrocities carried out in the name of Islam and calling for justice, he did so in a spirit of generosity. There was a compulsion to practice the forgiveness he had always preached. Also he understood and echoed Kenneth Cragg’s defense of Islam as a faith struggling with two integrities: one advocating violence and another rejecting it.⁸

The early years of Dehqani-Tafti’s episcopate represented the high point of Anglicanism in Iran. The church was respected for its welfare work and recognized by the authorities. There were always those on the sidelines causing unrest and trying to undermine the church, especially those who regarded Christianity as a Western import, furnishing the ambitions of British and American imperialism and thus having no integrity of its own. But these factions were restrained by the power of central government and for the most part relations were good. There were opportunities for fruitful interaction and good relationships, both personal and formal.

By the 1980s all seemed lost. Everything the church had worked toward appeared to have been for nothing. The church was stripped of its legal status, assets were frozen, numbers dwindled, and there was a climate of fear and uncertainty. The fervor of the anti-Shah movement in Iran was fuelled by a great hatred for the West which he had tried to emulate and through which he had sought to influence his country. The church’s association with Britain and imperialism, in the minds of many Iranians, meant that it too became a target for the anti-Western expression of those seeking a change of regime.

1980s–2004: Iraj Mottahedeh

This was the community that Iraj Mottahedeh was to lead through the 1980s: a small group, deeply shaken and lacking in

⁸ See Cragg’s postscript in Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design of My World*, 259.

confidence—the faithful remnant—in need of steady and loving guidance. And in Iraj Mottahedeh they found a man able to do exactly that as he held together a community which might easily have fractured and been destroyed. He did so by continuing the legacy he had inherited, based on a thoughtful Craggian approach to the Islam which had now become a full-scale hurricane. Iraj Mottahedeh, a Jewish convert, had also encountered and been influenced by Cragg and his writings while studying theology in England. He and Dehqani-Tafti had been colleagues for several years, they knew and respected one another, and their vision for the church and its place within Islamic Iran was founded on the same theology: that of a fruitful presence, shining the light of Christ, and seeking good relations with its Shi'a fellow citizens. This was a presence that was seeking authenticity as truly Persian but with an important sense of identity as one part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. During the most difficult times it was crucial for Anglicans in Iran to feel part of something bigger, to have a sense of belonging to a family with differences in cultural expression and experience, but held together in unity through faith.

If Dehqani-Tafti was the right man to see the church through the turmoil of the early stages of the revolution—a passionate, sometimes impetuous character who spoke out vehemently for justice—then Mottahedeh was right for the next phase. His quiet-spoken, composed character provided him with the tact and fortitude to see the church through the years in which it was forced to lie low and survive.

The 1980s and early 1990s were not years for fruitful dialogue. Instead the church concentrated all energies on growing inwardly as a Christian community so as to withstand the aggressive external forces. They learned that they did not need institutions and worldly recognition, but that in their powerlessness and vulnerability they would be sustained. Cragg's theology of *kenosis*, the self-emptying or self-limiting of God through which the Word became flesh, was a daily reality. They were emptied of all but their faith, and Mottahedeh (supported and guided by his exiled colleague) through faithfulness and perseverance held them together. For a small fragile community is not immune from internal struggles and quarrels, and needs strong but gentle leadership.

The political climate in Iran shifted subtly in 1997 when Muhammad Khatami was elected president. Reform was high on Khatami's agenda and he was keen for Iran to regain her place as a legitimate player on the international scene. As part of a larger program known

as the Dialogue of Civilizations, attempts were made to introduce opportunities for interfaith dialogue. Academic and religious institutions were invited to send and receive delegates for the purpose of initiating greater understanding between the Christian West and Shi'a Islam. Iraj Mottahedeh was a useful tool, employed by Iranian officials, to encourage Christian groups abroad to participate in the program. This was an altogether new approach in interfaith dialogue, instigated by the Iranian Government with a number of motives in mind.⁹

There was of course a desire for Iran to ingratiate herself with the Western world, but also a genuine wish by clerics and scholars to understand Christianity better and especially to learn from the way the church had faced the challenges of secularism. From a Western perspective, the initiative provided the opportunity for contact with Shi'ism in a way that Al-Azhar had done with Sunnism. It also offered a window onto the political and social reality of Iran, in which there was considerable interest following years of fragmented contact and damaged diplomatic relations. And of course there was hope for contact with Iranian Anglicans, isolated for so long. From the perspective of the Church in Iran, Bishop Mottahedeh was unsure but felt bound to play his part, believing that God might work through this new phase to bring about positive change.¹⁰

In fact, it was a painful and difficult time. Mottahedeh was used by officials to participate as they required but the situation of Anglicans in Iran was never on the agenda for discussion and no significant change came about for the church. Some might argue that the impotency of the Western delegates ultimately meant they colluded with the Iranian officials, thereby at the very least letting down the Persian Christian community. On the other hand, this phase might be seen as a minor part within a much larger context—that of two faiths turning toward each other, with a small vulnerable group caught in the middle and bearing the cost. Certainly for the Persian Church it was yet another step toward maturity as it exhibited, through utter powerlessness, a willingness to participate in moves toward better relations with its persecutors. There is at the core of Persian Anglicanism a cross-centered theology which regards suffering as being at the heart

⁹ The following information has drawn heavily from an unpublished, confidential report written in February 2006 following the visit of a British delegation to Iran as part of the Building Communities through Dialogue initiative.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Iraj Mottahedeh for the information he shared with me through several emails while I was writing this essay.

of God and the means by which Christians might be invited to follow their calling.

2004–Present: Azad Marshall

In 2004, on Bishop Mottahedeh's retirement, there being no suitable candidate within Iran, Azad Marshall of Pakistan was invited to take over episcopal oversight for the church and in 2007 he was installed as bishop in Iran. Marshall has never been granted permission to reside in Iran and has a kind of itinerant ministry, visiting for short periods when able. When he began his duties, Khatami was still president and there were hopes for reform. Marshall had plans to develop a center for dialogue in which Persians might play a greater part without reliance on the West.¹¹ This did not happen, for soon Khatami was replaced by the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the climate in Iran changed once more.

Marshall, however, has not given up on interfaith initiatives and does maintain contact with officials, working hard to foster meaningful relationships. His stance, though, seems subtly different from the Craggian mode historically associated with the Diocese of Iran, if in nothing else other than the language used to describe it. With traditional means of proclaiming the gospel no longer possible, interfaith dialogue is regarded by him as more of a tool for evangelism. While providing the occasion to overcome misunderstandings, there is greater emphasis on dialogue as an opportunity for the church to share and proclaim its Christian faith. As Marshall puts it:

Our initiative in starting a dialogue even in difficult circumstances is based on the rationale that we are faced with new realities in the Diocese of Iran where we no longer have [the] means to communicate or proclaim the Gospel in a traditional way, as schools, hospitals and other institutions have been confiscated. Christians with the Christian message [are] not simply to exist but they must seek to break the silence and share and speak out in all circumstances. We feel that Interfaith Dialogue is our time to come forwards to share with the officials and members of the Muslim community, which also has an element of finding a forum which

¹¹ Similarly, I am grateful to Azad Marshall for what he shared with me in a couple of emails during this process.

can help us remove misunderstandings and misgivings which will easily become strong in the face of a lack of any communication.¹²

Moreover, Marshall believes it is vital that the church should set the boundaries for how interfaith dialogue takes place so as to prevent it from becoming merely a forum in which opposition to the church can be justified.

We are also very conscious that the setting of boundaries of interfaith dialogue is very important. In the certain circumstances that I am describing it is very common for the majority community to dominate and instead of looking for common ground to appreciate each other's faith, [try to] justify their opposition. . . . In a Dialogue initiative we are keen to train our Christian Pastors and Scholars in setting up the boundaries of Interfaith Dialogue which will not lead to compromise, but in a Christian and scholarly manner present the Gospel.¹³

This is an interesting perspective, introducing a subtle modification of Cragg's notions of hospitality and his insistence on understanding Muslims on *their* terms and on the basis of *their* truths.

Reflections

Throughout its presence in Iran the Anglican Church has worked openly, albeit discretely. Even in the darkest times it never went underground. Despite persecution and an overriding climate of fear, services have continued in church buildings and inquirers have come and gone, sometimes genuine and sometimes for the purpose of spying. There have been varying degrees of fear and suspicion but there has also been scope for communication or dialogue of some kind or another. From conversations between individuals to contact with officials, friendships and relationships have developed and that really is how interfaith engagement has taken place.

But what of the official dialogue meetings carried out between governments and academic or religious institutions? What part, if any, have these ventures played in the way that Anglicanism and Shi'ism have related to one another in Iran? There is, I believe, a

¹² Private email correspondence with the author from Azad Marshall, November 25, 2011.

¹³ Marshall, private email to author.

place for them but they should not be given greater significance than they deserve. Instead, they should be understood for what they are and for the part they played. The formal dialogue meetings represent Western Christianity—British or German or whatever the case may be—talking to the Islam of Iran, exchanging ideas and seeking better understanding. They might even have taken into account recognized minority groups: Muslims in England, for example, or the ancient ethnic churches in Iran. But for Anglicans it remains rather more complicated, for they are part of the encounter with Islam under the umbrella of the *one* civilization, culture, and language. They could have sat on either side of the discussion table, joined by faith with the Christian delegation or with the Iranians through context and history, culture and language. They might have served to bridge the gap but they were not permitted to do so for they are regarded by Iran as interlopers. By their conversion they are seen as having sided with the foreigner, betraying their own; they are viewed as a threat from within. And ultimately it is so much easier to talk about diversity with outsiders than for a family to sit around the same table, recognize its differences, and discuss them openly and rationally.

Under the Islam of present-day Iran, Persian Christians are guilty of apostasy and their legal status as a church is unrecognized. The question is, “How can a body that does not exist dialogue?” Christians are charged with the mission to share their faith and love their neighbors. This means they cannot be closed communities but ones which reach outwards. But how to do this when you are a minority fearful for your existence? Is it possible to dialogue with those who persecute you? Well, yes and no. If dialogue means conversation between equal partners based on mutual respect and understanding, then no. If the urge to dialogue is a Christian impetus to be fully present and Christ-like, then yes. To have confidence in one’s faith, while continuing to try and understand the other more fully—that is a kind of dialogue. And when the situation arises, by offering the hand of friendship based on generosity and forgiveness—that too is dialogue in action and it is the kind of dialogue Anglicans in Iran have participated in for much of their history.

In exploring the themes underlying Anglican presence in Iran it is impossible to disregard the significance of Kenneth Cragg, chiefly through his influence upon Bishops Dehqani-Tafti and Mottahedeh. Through their leadership a style developed for the church’s presence based on attempts to explore the natural links between Christianity

and Shi'ism and to engage on the basis of humility and hospitality. There began to grow an identity for the church as *Persian* Christians, seeking to integrate faith and nationality rather than divorce and dislocate these. In the post-Revolution years this has meant combining demands for justice with forgiveness and the ability to recognize that the evils befalling the church were not a reflection on the whole Islamic faith. In the words of Kenneth Cragg, while "certainly *an* 'Islam' was guilty," nevertheless "the Islam that is indicated in what befell the [Persian] Church might have stayed its hand by counsels no less claiming its name."¹⁴

Bishop Dehqani-Tafti, who was never able to return to his homeland and died in England in 2008, made it his life's work to improve understanding between the two faiths which had shaped him. He gave up the relative comfort either of residing in the faith he was born into or disowning it entirely in favor of another. He sought instead to find meaning in a more complicated path for himself and for the church which likewise found itself on the boundaries, where there is more pain but also richness to be found. These are the murky grey areas in which the gospel encounters culture and through which God meets humankind, thus transforming suffering by giving it purpose. During Bishop Mottahedeh's years the challenge was to build on these foundations by concentrating on growing internally, to forego the external trappings and develop an inner maturity which allows for fruitful presence.

In his article "Strangers in the Light," Bernhard Reitsma posits that generally two possibilities remain for those who are persecuted: to withdraw from the world or to fight for the right to ring the church bells, as he puts it.¹⁵ Neither approach, he says, is quite in keeping with the gospel, so what is the alternative? Surviving as a threatened minority, claims Reitsma, is only possible in the context of a *strong* community. The challenge then is not to fight or flee, but to build a vibrant, living, true community that becomes God's new society. This, I believe, is what Mottahedeh sought to do during his years, by caring pastorally for his flock and seeking to keep them close in unity and faith.

¹⁴ Quoted in Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design of My World*, 260.

¹⁵ Bernhard J. G. Reitsma, "Strangers in the Light: The Challenges of Being a (Christian) Minority in an Islamic Context," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 2, no. 3 (2008): 218.

What the future holds no one knows. It is immensely difficult for Azad Marshall to help maintain a strong community when he cannot be present for much of the time. Inevitably he will be distracted by issues which may well concern the Anglican Communion elsewhere but perhaps be of less relevance for the community in Iran. While it is important that efforts continue toward fostering good relations with the current government in Iran, this should not distract from the task of building up the church from within—not in opposition to some outside threat, but as the body of Christ growing into a strong and faithful community.

I cannot deny that I am worried for the future. To have a presence you must be whole and strong and fulfilled internally. I see signs that some of that is threatened, and that is a great deal more serious than any external threat. The history of the universal church is proof of that. Since the earliest centuries Christianity has shown strength through weakness—the ability to resist erosion—where there has been a faithful community, growing prayerfully toward inner maturity.

I hold fast to the fact that thus far the Anglican Church in Iran has survived against all odds. *That* in a sense is the greatest miracle of all, and so we are challenged to have confidence for the future of this fragile but precious corner of God's church. And as Reitsma reminds us, the norm for Christianity is that it *should* be persecuted.¹⁶ The church should be very wary indeed of success and power and might. A Christianity that is not being persecuted, he argues, is theologically speaking in a minority. And that thought holds a kernel of truth which offers hope worth embracing.

¹⁶ Reitsma, "Strangers in the Light," 212.