

The Muslim Counter-Reformation Prince? Pietro della Valle on Shah ‘Abbas I

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Late in the Ottoman-Safavid wars (c.1624–1639),¹ a set of transcultural interlocutors began negotiating with Venice and other European powers on behalf of the Safavid shah ‘Abbas I (1587–1629). One such mediator, the Roman nobleman and orientalist Pietro della Valle (1586–1652), occupied himself with representing the shah to the papacy. Della Valle’s role as cultural mediator rested on his extensive travels through the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Persia, and Mughal India. During twelve years abroad, he mastered languages, collected manuscripts, and acquired a web of connections that he would later rely on in Rome to establish his reputation as the premier interpreter of Safavid Persia.² Religious organizations in Rome consulted him on all business involving the Safavid court.³ Through his efforts, including his 1628 treatise *Delle Condizioni di ‘Abbas, Re di Persia*, Della Valle transformed Italian concepts about Islamic rulers by elaborating a universal concept of effective rule and religion that could accommodate ‘Abbas and rulers like him.

Perceptions of Islamic rulers shifted as Catholic Europeans developed new assumptions about the appropriate relationship between religion and the state. In scholarly literature, this relationship has often been analyzed under the controversial rubric of “confessionalization,” the princely support and control of religion.⁴ Though early modern writers did not use the term, their recognition that religion could be useful to the prince and was thus of particular interest to him made confessionalization a part of early modern statecraft, even if its real-world effects were limited. Confessionalization, in early modern Catholics’ understanding, was not limited to European states or to Christian churches.⁵ It was a policy followed by all civilized princes, regardless of creed.⁶ As Catholics detached civility from the Christian religion, they developed

¹ The Ottomans and Safavids remained at war, with intermittent periods of calm, from c.1500–1639.

² For Della Valle’s information-gathering strategies while abroad, see Sonja Brentjes and Volkmar Schueller, “Pietro della Valle’s Latin Geography of Safavid Iran (1624–1628): Introduction,” *The Journal of Early Modern History* 10, no. 3 (2006): 169–219, at 179–81. For Della Valle as a writer, see Nathalie Hester, *Literature and Identity in Italian Baroque Travel-Writing* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 51–75.

³ For Della Valle’s role in the Propaganda Fide, see his response to Shah ‘Abbas’ offer to establish a Catholic hierarchy in Persia, Archivio di Propaganda Fide (hereafter APF) Scritture Originali referite nelle Congregazioni Generali (hereafter SOCG) 209 fols. 232–34.

⁴ Wolfgang Reinhardt, “Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and the Early Modern State: A Reassessment,” *Catholic Historical Review* 75 (1989): 390. For a recent assessment of the confessionalization paradigm, see Simon Ditchfield, “Of Dancing Cardinals and Mestizo Madonnas: Reconfiguring the History of Roman Catholicism in the Early Modern Period,” *The Journal of Early Modern History* 8, no. 3–4 (2004): 387, 390.

⁵ Robert Bireley, *The Counter-Reformation Prince: Anti-Machiavellianism or Catholic Statescraft in Early Modern Europe* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 30–32. While some Catholic anti-Machiavellians wrote from a providentialist perspective, others believed that recourse to Scripture was not necessary to produce a coherent theory of statescraft. This pragmatic perspective, which defined a Catholic theory of governance in terms of universal patterns of human behavior, would inspire Della Valle’s Muslim Counter-Reformation prince.

⁶ For confessionalization in non-Christian contexts, see Tijana Krstic, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 76–77. For conversion as a cornerstone of a Mediterranean state, see Natalie Rothman, “Becoming Venetian: Conversion

new perceptions of Islamic rulers. This new image can be summed up in a quintessentially early modern paradox: the Muslim Counter-Reformation prince.

‘Abbas’ transformation into a Muslim Counter-Reformation prince reflected the fact that becoming a Counter-Reformation prince, like becoming a Counter-Reformation saint, was not simply a matter of personal piety. Counter-Reformation princes, like Counter-Reformation saints, adhered to a set of behavioral norms. In the case of princes, these norms linked masculinity and political authority.⁷ An effective ruler, according to the noted political thinker Giovanni Botero (1544–1617), was a mature man who exerted control over his body and his emotions:⁸ “Vehement passions make young men unfit to govern; he who cannot rule himself will be unable to rule others.”⁹ In all instances, the effective ruler, as a mature man, was governed by reason. Since an effective ruler was guided by rational behavior, it was possible for others to predict and anticipate his actions. His predictability enabled him to establish the types of routines that perpetuated personal trust.¹⁰

In order to pursue a closer relationship with Europe, as ‘Abbas desired, it was necessary that he establish his trustworthiness. Trust could and did exist independent of religious tolerance. Merchants, commercial institutions, and rulers regularly formed alliances that transgressed confessional boundaries. France’s alliance with the Ottoman Empire was perhaps the most noteworthy example.¹¹ Many of these cross-confessional relationships were brokered by individuals who crossed religious, cultural, or political boundaries themselves.¹² Della Valle’s efforts to represent ‘Abbas to his Roman audience are one example among many of this broader, global process of cultural mediation.¹³

Della Valle did not need to prove that ‘Abbas had converted to Christianity to establish his trustworthiness. He simply needed to prove that the shah was predictable, rational, and reliable, that is to say, that he possessed qualities associated with effective Catholic princes.¹⁴ Notions of Islamic rule circulating among members of the Propaganda Fide, the congregation overseeing Rome’s relations with the Islamic world, implied that ‘Abbas was incapable of possessing these

and Transformation in the Seventeenth-Century Mediterranean,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 21, no. 1 (June 2006): 42–43.

⁷ Peter Burke, “How to Become a Counter-Reformation Saint,” in *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Kaspar von Greyerz (London: German Historical Institute, 1984), 49–51. For the Counter-Reformation prince, see Bireley, *Counter-Reformation Prince*, 224.

⁸ For the importance of reason and self-control in early modern Italian masculinity, see Emlyn Eisenach, *Husbands, Wives, and Concubines: Marriage, Family, and the Social Order in Sixteenth-Century Verona* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2004), 202–19. For masculinity and rulership, see Stanley Chojnacki, *Women and Men in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Articles on Patrician Society* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 227–43 (on political adulthood) and 244–56 (on patrician bachelors).

⁹ Giovanni Botero, *The Reason of State*, trans. P.J. and D.P. Waley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1956), 23.

¹⁰ Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 1–11.

¹¹ For the French alliance, see Christine Isom-Verhaaren, *Allies with the Infidel: The Ottoman and French Alliance in the Sixteenth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

¹² On cultural brokers, see Natalie Rothman, “Dragomans and Turkish Literature: The Making of a Field of Inquiry,” *Oriente Moderno* 93 (2013): 392.

¹³ For state vs. non-state actors, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to Be an Alien: Travails and Encounter in the Early Modern World* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 137.

¹⁴ For a summary of current literature on trust, see Trivellato, *Familiarity of Strangers*, 1–11.

qualities.¹⁵ The Congregation was founded in 1622 to coordinate global evangelization efforts and was overseen by an elite group of cardinals that included Urban VIII's cardinal-nephew, Francesco Barberini (1597–1679). Eastern Christians within the Ottoman and Safavid Empires were the Propaganda Fide's primary area of concern.¹⁶ Della Valle shared the Congregation's interests and worked closely with it from the beginning. He cultivated particularly close ties with its director, Francesco Ingoli (1578–1649). Apart from their mutual interest in Islam, both men shared passions for astronomy, natural philosophy, languages, and mathematics.¹⁷

The Propaganda Fide's theory of Islamic rule reflected the debt the Congregation owed to the influential Catholic theorist, the Spanish Discalced Carmelite Thomas á Jesu (1564–1627). Thomas was an early proponent of global institutions like the Propaganda Fide and a firm believer that religion overshadowed all other forms of identity. The Propaganda Fide recommended Thomas' writings, above all his missionary handbook *De Procuranda Salute Omnium Gentium* (1613),¹⁸ to missionaries operating in the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Persia.¹⁹ Thomas claimed that Islamic rulers were driven by emotions such as lust, anger, frustration, and fear. They lacked the capacity for reason that Thomas associated with Christian rulers.²⁰ Thomas built his argument by selecting commonplaces from classical and humanist ethnographers.²¹ His most important source, however, was the influential body of medieval polemic first analyzed by Norman Daniel.²² The discourse on Islamic rule that Thomas popularized was inherently emasculating, as it argued that Islamic rulers were irrational and unpredictable—like European women.²³ If Islamic rulers like 'Abbas were not worthy of being

¹⁵ Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 107, 109. For the relationship between domestic and foreign affairs, see Bireley, *Counter-Reformation Prince*, 55.

¹⁶ For a recent treatment of the Congregation's history and interests, see Molly Greene, *Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants: A Maritime History of the Mediterranean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2010), 100–07.

¹⁷ See, for example, the meeting with Ingoli which Della Valle recorded in his diary, Archivio Segreto Vaticano (hereafter ASV) Della Valle-Del Bufalo Busta 186 fol. 41 (Ingoli acts as a godfather to Della Valle's daughter, December 12, 1639).

¹⁸ Thomas á Jesu, *De Procuranda Salute Omnium Gentium* (Antwerp: s.n., 1613).

¹⁹ APF *Lettere Volgare* 6 (1627), fol. 132. Though rather hagiographic, the fullest treatment on Thomas á Jesu is a 1930s dissertation: P. Tommaso di Gesù, "Il P. Tomasso di Gesù e la sua attività missionaria all' inizio del secolo XVII, Tesi per dottorato" (Ph.D. diss., Rome: Procura delle Missioni dei Carmelitani Scalzi, 1936).

²⁰ Thomas á Jesu, *De Procuranda Salute*, 718–19. The Propaganda Fide regularly mailed this text to its missionaries. See, for example, APF SOCG 59 fol. 217, where a Carmelite missionary in Persia requests "opera di p. fra Thomaso Carmelitano Scalzo che tratta per procuranda salute omnium gentium" ["the work of fra Thomas Discalced Carmelite that discusses procuring the salvation of all people"].

²¹ Bisaha has written on humanists' transformation of the Turk from the enemy of Christ to the enemy of civilization; see Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 93. See also Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). Thomas relied heavily on Renaissance humanist writers and included an excerpt of Pius II's letter to Mehmed II in *De Procuranda Salute* (p. 731–34).

²² Thomas regularly cited "Richardus," the medieval missionary Riccoldo da Montecroce. For Riccoldo, see John Toland, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 245–54. The Qur'an that Thomas most likely studied was that of Robert of Ketton; see Thomas Burman, *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140–1560* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 29–35. For a general analysis of Thomas' sources, see Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, rev. ed. (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2003), 260–66.

²³ For the relationship between masculinity and femininity, see Eisenach, *Husbands*, 204.

overthrown as tyrants, they were certainly not fit allies for any European power, including the papacy.²⁴

Thomas' opinions were not shared universally among Italian thinkers.²⁵ Giovanni Botero, for example, incorporated Ottoman and Safavid rulers into his influential anti-Machiavellian treatise on statescraft, *Della Ragione di Stato* (1589).²⁶ Botero was in fact adamantly opposed to the Ottoman sultan and concluded *Della Ragione di Stato* with a plea for war against the Turks.²⁷ He did, however, include Mehmed II (1432–1481) and Shah Ismail I (r. 1502–1524) in his treatise on the assumption that these non-Christian rulers, like the pagan rulers of antiquity, could furnish models of effective governance for Catholic princes.²⁸ Rather than Botero's position, however, Thomas' became influential among the cardinals of the Propaganda Fide and shaped their perceptions of 'Abbas.

Della Valle identified Thomas' strain of thought as the primary impediment to the achievement of 'Abbas' goal: a closer relationship with Rome that could culminate in a European-Safavid alliance against the Ottomans. The discourse on Islamic rulers current among the members of the Propaganda Fide argued that 'Abbas could never be a trustworthy ally. This discourse shaped the cardinals' misreading of events at the Safavid court. Della Valle rebutted the claim that 'Abbas was an unsuitable ally by arguing that 'Abbas was not a tyrant and that he possessed the reason, predictability, and reliability of a European sovereign. While he was Muslim, he conducted himself in a manner that paralleled a Catholic prince.

Della Valle's 1628 treatise in defense of 'Abbas was an extension of his role as mediator between the Safavid court and Catholic Europe. His arguments in favor of Shah 'Abbas, however, were not only of interest to the Propaganda Fide. Della Valle's slim treatise, running to 125 pages in the Italian vernacular, partook in a broader desire for information about the Islamic world in 17th-century Europe. This European interest supported the publication of collections of *Turcica* and other works on "Oriental" matters.²⁹ Della Valle's work circulated among a mixed international audience, including scholarly academies in Rome and Naples, curious Venetian readers, and members of the Habsburg court in Vienna.³⁰ The circulation of Della Valle's treatise beyond the congregation it was originally written to address justifies the use of this text to reconstruct an influential Italian perspective on the Safavid shah.

Approaching Europe: The Safavid Angle

Della Valle's efforts to shape perceptions of the shah built upon a history of Safavid engagement with Europe. The diaries of Marin Sanudo (1466–1536), which the Venetian patrician kept assiduously from 1499 to 1533, depict Armenian merchants, Greek attachés of the Venetian diplomatic service, and anonymous travelers presenting reports to the Venetian Senate about the

²⁴ Bireley, *Counter-Reformation Prince*, 36–37.

²⁵ Lucette Valensi, *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 56–57.

²⁶ Giovanni Botero, *Della Ragione di Stato* (Venice: s.n., 1589). For Botero's significance in Counter-Reformation political thought, see Bireley, *Counter-Reformation Prince*, 45–46. Della Valle read Botero; see ASV Della Valle-Del Bufalo Busta 92 fol. 37.

²⁷ Bireley, *Counter-Reformation Prince*, 49, 71. See Botero, *Reason of State*, 163–64.

²⁸ Botero, *Reason of State*, 37. See also Bireley, *Counter-Reformation Prince*, 49, 71.

²⁹ Rothman, "Dragomans and Turkish Literature," 394–95.

³⁰ For international anti-Machiavellianism, see Bireley, *Counter-Reformation Prince*, 27, 45–46. Della Valle's elite, courtly audience overlapped with that of Botero.

first Safavid shah, Ismail I.³¹ Safavid intermediators' activity, however, peaked under Shah 'Abbas. His decision to invite European merchants, adventurers, diplomats, and soldiers-for-hire to his court brought Safavid Persia to European attention as never before.³²

Economically, Europeans were the primary market for raw and processed silk, Persia's chief export. 'Abbas exercised a royal monopoly over the silk export trade, and demonstrated greater interest in developing Persia's economy than any of his predecessors.³³ Even more than trade, however, 'Abbas wanted military aid against the Ottomans. It appears that Catholic missionaries in Isfahan, who served as papal representatives, convinced the shah that the pope exercised more authority than he did in reality.³⁴ 'Abbas identified Rome as his entry-point into European politics, and pursued diplomatic gestures towards the Holy See in the expectation that doing so would win him military support in Europe. He initiated discussions to establish a Catholic hierarchy in Persia, a gesture that some in Rome naively interpreted as a desire on the shah's part to convert to Catholicism.³⁵ Fra Giovanni Taddeo, a Spanish Discalced Carmelite friar and favored courtier of 'Abbas, recognized that 'Abbas' overtures were driven by reasons of state rather than by any incipient Catholic piety.³⁶

Like other Safavid mediators, Della Valle had no official position at 'Abbas' court or among the cardinals of the Congregation in Rome. In Isfahan, he assumed the amorphous title of "guest of the shah." 'Abbas regularly bestowed such titles on favored courtiers regardless of background, as his wealthier, cosmopolitan rival Akbar did at his own court in India.³⁷ Della Valle occupied a similarly liminal position in Rome after his return to the city in 1627. Della Valle was a scion of one of Rome's noble families and profited as a young man from his family's ties to the Crescenzo family, which included a number of high-ranking cardinals.³⁸ As a layman, however, Della Valle had no official title or defined status on the Congregation's board of directors.³⁹ Della Valle's authority as a cultural mediator rested on his mastery of sensitive

³¹ For the Greek Constantino Laschari, self-described as "buon servidor di questa illustrissima Signoria" ["good servant of this most illustrious Signoria (government)"] (Signoria is commonly used in early modern texts to describe a government) see Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti, *Sah Isma'il nei diarii di Marin Sanudo, I: testi, studi, e materiali sulla conoscenza del Oriente in Italia* (Rome: Istituto per Oriente, 1979), 33–37, and for an Armenian merchant, see *ibid.*, 111. Many of these informants cultivated relationships with the Venetian embassy. For the unofficial Venetian nation, see Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 61–62.

³² On Europeans in Isfahan, see Jean Calmard, "Shi'ite Rituals and Power: The Consolidation of Safavid Shi'ism: Folklore and Popular Religion," in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 142.

³³ Rudi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 55.

³⁴ See 'Abbas' argument with Giovanni Taddeo about his inability to obtain European assistance: APF Scrittura referite nei Congressi (hereafter SC) Mesopotamia 1 fols. 38–39.

³⁵ See Della Valle's response to 'Abbas' petition to establish a Catholic hierarchy in Europe, APF SOCG 209 fols. 232–34.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 209 fol. 172.

³⁷ Franco Gaeta and Laurence Lockhardt, ed., *I Viaggi di Pietro della Valle: Lettere di Persia* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1972), 28. Lockhardt and Gaeta's edition is considered the most authoritative edition of Della Valle's Persian letters. On Akbar's cosmopolitanism, see Stephen Dale, "India under Mughal Rule," in *New Cambridge History of Islam, 3: The Islamic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 281–87.

³⁸ Note Della Valle's many letters to the Crescenzo family in his register of correspondence (ASV Della Valle-Del Bufalo Busta 188).

³⁹ For Della Valle's role in Rome, see the collection of documents surrounding the shah's plans to establish a Catholic hierarchy, APF SOCG 209 fols. 232–34. For Della Valle's language skills, see the Turkish profession of faith which the Propaganda Fide asked Della Valle to review (ASV Della Valle-Del Bufalo Busta 52 fol. 28).

information. Like his friend, Fra Giovanni Taddeo, Della Valle was recognized for his unique ability to translate Safavid norms for his Roman audience.

Though Della Valle styled himself as the shah's unofficial representative in Rome, his treatise cannot be understood as Safavid propaganda per se. While the term "propaganda" dates only from the French Revolution, early modern people were certainly aware of royal and ecclesiastical efforts to manage, develop, and project a coherent image at home and abroad.⁴⁰ The distance from Persia to Rome ensured that 'Abbas could not have enforced any meaningful control over the publication of Della Valle's text. Missionaries in Isfahan, who enjoyed the most regular contact with Europe, normally had to wait two years for a reply from Rome.⁴¹ Della Valle's register of correspondence reveals that he neither sent nor received any letters from 'Abbas while preparing his manuscript in Rome.⁴²

While it seems unlikely that 'Abbas personally commissioned the text or oversaw Della Valle's work, Della Valle apparently believed that the work would advance 'Abbas' goals and would please his patron. Della Valle engaged in all of the strategies that previous humanist writers had used to elevate non-Western rulers. Della Valle, for example, included a lengthy genealogy as an addendum to his text—a common strategy that Renaissance humanists employed in arguing for a non-Christian ruler's right to rule.⁴³ Della Valle's genealogy, which he claimed to have copied from a palace scribe in Isfahan, connected 'Abbas to the Prophet Muhammad, to the Old Testament patriarchs, and ultimately to Adam.⁴⁴ Della Valle also incorporated as a legitimizing device brief anecdotes within the text in which 'Abbas' subjects acknowledged his descent from the Prophet Muhammad and his right to rule.⁴⁵

If *Delle Conditioni*'s foreword is to be believed, Della Valle originally intended that his work circulate in manuscript among the Congregation's board of directors. Writing for this restricted audience likely offered Della Valle greater flexibility as an author than he would have enjoyed if he had chosen to pursue publication through print.⁴⁶ It was only after his learned friends read the manuscript that they sensed its wider appeal. These friends were most likely fellow members of the *Accademia degli Umoristi*, one of Italy's innumerable scholarly academies.⁴⁷ Della Valle's unnamed friends urged him to contract with a Venetian printer, Francesco Baba, to publish his work for a wider market. Francesco Baba wrote in his foreword that Della Valle's friends secretly spirited the treatise from his study after he refused to send the work to press. While perhaps a commonplace, Baba's anecdote reflects the fact that Della Valle did not significantly alter the text to accommodate the interests of his new Venetian readers.⁴⁸ Della Valle's text, even in print, took the Propaganda Fide as its point of reference. Della Valle referred to people, places,

⁴⁰ Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 4.

⁴¹ Della Valle dispatched a letter to Fra Basilio di San Francesco on May 31, 1631 in response to a letter that Fra Basilio wrote on April 26, 1629. For Fra Basilio's letter, see ASV Della Valle-Del Bufalo Busta 52 fol. 160–61, and for Della Valle's reply, see the entry in his register of correspondence, ASV Della Valle-Del Bufalo Busta 188 fol. 141.

⁴² The 1627 entries may be found in ASV Della Valle-Del Bufalo Busta 188 fols. 77–91.

⁴³ Meserve, *Empires of Islam*, 203, 231–37.

⁴⁴ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 114–19.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁶ Sonja Brenjes, "Immediacy, Mediation, and Media in Early Modern Catholic and Protestant Representations of Safavid Iran," *Journal of Early Modern History* 13, no. 2–3 (2009): 174–75.

⁴⁷ On academies, see Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 99, 129–31.

⁴⁸ Francesco Baba's letter may be found in the unnumbered opening pages of Della Valle's treatise.

and events known to the Propaganda Fide, and developed his argument in terms that the Congregation would have found compelling.

Governing Emotions and the Body

Della Valle knew that Ingoli and the Congregation would approach his treatise with firmly established beliefs about ‘Abbas that they had gleaned from previous reading. Few of their impressions would be positive ones. To counter any charge of partiality, Della Valle listed all of the allegations against ‘Abbas that he expected the Congregation would offer: “Dicono dunque essi, ch’egli è troppo dedito à piaceri con donne; ch’è inchinato à lasciuie nefande, ch’è beuitore, matto, crudele, mall’osseruator della sua propria legge, e della sua setta; à danni del Christianesimo, zelantissimo propagatore” [“His opponents say that he is overly given to pleasure with women, that he is inclined to forbidden pleasures [*lascivie nefande*, sodomy], that he is a drinker, crazy, viciously cruel, a poor observer of his own religion and sect, and a most fervent proponent of it, to the detriment of Christianity”].⁴⁹ Della Valle asserted that these “note di biasimo” [“points of blame”] were leveled at the shah by those who were “gl’inuidiosi della sua gloria” [“envious of his glory”].⁵⁰ (Indeed, these points are commonplace denigrations, directed by Christian polemicists at Middle Eastern rulers over several centuries, as detailed by Edward Said in his *Orientalism*.)⁵¹ They reflect an image of the “Oriental despot” as sexually deviant, cruel, and hostile towards Christians and the Christian religion.

More recently, cultural historians such as Lucette Valensi have historicized this prejudiced view of Middle Eastern societies in European writing. In the case of the Safavids’ better-known rivals, the Ottomans, the language of oriental despotism only began to harden in Venetian diplomatic correspondence after 1570 and the Ottoman invasion of Cyprus. Previously, ambassadors’ characterization of Ottoman rule was neutral or even positive.⁵² Early perceptions of the Safavids, though often incoherent and confused, were also generally positive. Initial European reactions were shaped by a sense of apocalyptic frenzy that Joseph Flannery has characterized as emblematic of “Prester John Syndrome”—the Western, Christian obsession with finding a non-European ally against Islam.⁵³ They were not, however, as critical as Della Valle’s list of allegations proffered against ‘Abbas.

Della Valle never cited any sources for the accusations against ‘Abbas. He nevertheless explored their grievances in great detail in the second part of his treatise. This portion of the treatise immediately follows a lengthy celebration of ‘Abbas’ (secular) virtues, which stress his excellence as a military strategist, his skills at hunting, and his affability at court.⁵⁴ Della Valle’s list of virtues, which consumes half the treatise, paints an image of the shah as a courteous and cultured prince indistinguishable from his Baroque contemporaries. Here, as elsewhere, Della Valle is guided by his belief that “che ciascuno ama quelle cose, che sono più simili à se” [“everyone likes what is most similar to himself”].⁵⁵ He thus emphasizes how ‘Abbas conducts

⁴⁹ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 46. Translation by author.

⁵⁰ “Rapporterò nella seconda alcune note di biasimo, che da gl’inuidiosi della sua gloria recate gli uengono,” *ibid.*, 2.

⁵¹ Edward Said, *On Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

⁵² Valensi, *Despot*, 37, 58.

⁵³ John M. Flannery, *The Mission of the Portuguese Augustinians to Persia and Beyond (1602–1747)* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 28–31. See also Meserve, *Empires of Islam*, 218–37.

⁵⁴ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 3–17.

⁵⁵ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 1.

himself according to a common set of courtly values. Della Valle dwells with particular detail on the shah's wit, social grace, and hospitality.⁵⁶

Della Valle's list of vices, however, is tinged with Christian-Muslim polemic. According to Della Valle, 'Abbas' opponents alleged that he was viciously cruel, using harsh punishments such as blinding, amputation, and castration to punish offenses. Moreover, his actions were impossible to predict, as he executed individuals without providing any cause.⁵⁷ In fact, however, 'Abbas' actual use of judicial violence was not the issue. Della Valle's world was one in which judicial torture was licit and applied in secular and ecclesiastical courts. His society also approved of the use of exemplary punishments as deterrents in the absence of other means of ensuring social order.⁵⁸ Della Valle's task was to persuade his readers that 'Abbas used force in a manner commensurate to Europeans, not to argue that 'Abbas' detractors had lied and that 'Abbas did not execute criminals.

According to Della Valle, 'Abbas punished offenders who had committed ordinary crimes (which Della Valle defined as simple theft) using beheadings. Beheading thieves, as Della Valle pointed out, paralleled Italian practice.⁵⁹ Only in the case of more egregious crimes did 'Abbas deploy extravagant punishments, such as disemboweling assassins and castrating rapists. According to 'Abbas, the nature of his subjects demanded that he rely on extreme forms of judicial violence to ensure order:

Abbàs non è tanto crudele, quanto molti lo fanno: ma che la mala conditione di alcuni de' suoi sudditi, e la durezza del genio in generale de' popoli, à quali comanda, com'egli stesso hà detto. Che in gastigare i delinquenti usi pene atroci, e generi di morti crudeli, è necessario, perche quelle genti d'una semplice morte non si spaventano: e più s'astengono dal commettere eccessi graui per tema del genere della morte, che per timore della morte stessa [...] bisogna usare atrocità di pene perche altrimenti si commetterebbero troppo spesso, essendoui quegli huomini per natura inchinati, e dalla coscienza poco ritenuti dallo'ncorrerui.

[It is the bad state of some of his subjects, and the hardness of the people's spirit in general, that commands [him to use] those measures, as he has said himself. In punishing delinquents, atrocious punishments and cruel means of death are necessary, because his people are not frightened by mere death [...] it is necessary to use atrocities of punishment because otherwise they would commit crimes too often, being that they are men by nature inclined [to crime], and not held back from committing such crimes by their consciences.]⁶⁰

'Abbas' dark view of human nature—in particular, the nature of his subjects—would find its echo in the writings of ecclesiastical elites such as Carlo Borromeo on his parishioners or Jesuit commentators on the urban mobs of early modern Naples.⁶¹ Impoverished Neapolitans were also

⁵⁶ Ibid., 3–7, 26–27.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁵⁸ Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta in Renaissance Italy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 28–38.

⁵⁹ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 84.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 84–85.

⁶¹ For Borromeo's view of human nature, see Wietse de Boer, *The Conquest of the Soul: Confession, Discipline, and Public Order in Counter-Reformation Milan* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 73, 256. For disorder in Naples, see Jennifer

considered inclined towards crime and incapable of exercising self-restraint.⁶² ‘Abbas’ outlook, though dark, was ultimately reassuring for his elite audience as it confirmed their own views of law, justice, and the princely duty of ensuring social order.

For Della Valle’s contemporaries, the most objectionable quality about ‘Abbas’ justice was not the fact that he used “atrocities of punishment” to enforce social order, but the fact that he punished at random. ‘Abbas’ capriciousness suggested that he was driven by emotion, not reason, the quintessential attribute of the Christian prince.⁶³ Della Valle did not deny ‘Abbas’ use of extraordinary punishments, but argued for the rationality of his approach. There was no shame attached to being a harsh ruler. One simply needed a clear reason for it, which Della Valle provided in his reported conversations with ‘Abbas concerning capital punishment. ‘Abbas estimated that he had executed about one thousand people since first coming to power. Of the thousand executions which he ordered, only two did he later regret, as he had compelling reasons for authorizing all of the others.⁶⁴

Della Valle freely admitted that his defense of ‘Abbas, as far as his sexual mores were concerned, stood on much shakier ground.⁶⁵ According to Della Valle, reports circulated that the shah was immoderate in his sexual desires, that he seduced many women and even had syphilis. Della Valle describes rumors of the shah’s humiliating efforts to conceal the progress of syphilis in his body, such as the charge that the shah wore a false mustache to disguise the fact that he had lost much of his hair to the disease.⁶⁶ Other rumors circulated that the shah’s interests were not limited to women. ‘Abbas was alleged to seduce young men and boys who served as royal pages with “dishoneste & abbominevoli conversationi,” [“dishonorable and abominable conversations”].⁶⁷ These boys were trained in the palace schools and brought up in the court, providing ‘Abbas with ready access to them.

Reports of ‘Abbas’ seductions circulated because many Europeans, both Catholic and Protestant, believed that sodomy was accepted in Muslim-majority societies. These accusations were based not only on a misreading of the Qur’an, but also on the apparent openness and prevalence of same-sex relations among Muslim men.⁶⁸ Della Valle’s long residence at the shah’s court, and his travels through the Ottoman Empire, allowed him to pursue deeper and more intense studies of Islam than many of his contemporaries. He noted in his corrections to Thomas á Jesu’s *De Procuranda Salute* that sodomy was not permitted in the Qur’an, contrary to what Thomas believed.⁶⁹ According to Della Valle, the apparent prevalence of same-sex relations among Muslim men must derive from another source. Della Valle argued that same-sex relations among elite Ottoman men were a reflection of their own culture and form of (Sunni)

Selwyn, *A Paradise Inhabited by Devils: The Jesuits’ Civilizing Mission in Early Modern Naples* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), 2–3, 22–23.

⁶² Selwyn, *Paradise Inhabited by Devils*, 22–23.

⁶³ For “atrocità di pene,” see Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 84. For the perceived senselessness of ‘Abbas’ executions, see *ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 110–11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 46–47. Syphilis was known to be sexually transmitted in the early modern period. See Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 176–93.

⁶⁷ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 48.

⁶⁸ Khaled El-Rouyaheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1–2.

⁶⁹ ASV Della Valle-Del Bufalo Busta 92 fol. 297.

Islam:⁷⁰ “Delle altre due male conditioni, che sole restano delle sette opposte ad Abbàs, cioè della seconda, e della prima, ch’io notai, confesso il vero, non posso scusarlo; perche in effetto nel vitio delle sensualità con le donne è molto traboccheuole, e nell’altro peggiore, se ben per certo non tanto, e forse poche volte vi cade, tuttauia non ne v`a affatto essente d’ogni macchia” [“Of the other two faults, which only rest among the sect opposed to ‘Abbas, that is the second [sodomy], and the first, as I have noted, I have confessed the truth, I cannot excuse it, because in effect he is much given to the vice of sensuality with women, and of the other worse vice, he certainly does not [do it] very frequently, and if he falls into it a few times, nevertheless he does not go completely spotted”].⁷¹

In fact, Della Valle is incorrect in arguing for a different set of sexual mores among Persians. Khaled el-Rouayheb speculated that elite Persians and Turks likely shared similar attitudes towards sodomy, same-sex infatuation, and sexual desire to those that he surveyed among urbane, educated men in the Ottoman Empire’s Arab provinces.⁷² ‘Abbas’ same-sex relationships, like the ones that el-Rouayheb studied, reflect the same hierarchical dynamic that scholars of sexuality have observed throughout the Mediterranean basin. Same-sex relationships were usually between an older, socially prominent man and a younger, often feminized adolescent. These relationships reproduce the same differential as ‘Abbas’ purported liaisons with his pageboys and teenage servitors.⁷³

Della Valle’s aim was not to argue that ‘Abbas is an angel of light; in fact, Della Valle never denies that ‘Abbas may have had sexual relationships with young men in his service. Arguing for ‘Abbas’ abstention from these relationships would not address concerns about his self-governance which were implicit in any discussion about authority and masculinity. ‘Abbas could freely admit to engaging in liaisons with men and women without suffering any loss of masculinity. He only needed to demonstrate that his behavior was marked by the same principles of self-control that the Propaganda Fide considered essential in a ruler.

Della Valle carefully noted that ‘Abbas’ pursuit of attractive young people never caused social disruptions.⁷⁴ According to Della Valle, ‘Abbas could hardly help himself, as he was continually presented with young people as tribute and occasionally as gifts. Most of ‘Abbas’ lovers were drawn from that pool of undifferentiated young people. In one instance in which ‘Abbas’ pursuit of a young woman was discovered to be unlawful (‘Abbas discovered that she was already married), he personally apologized to her husband: “Pentita del commesso errore, staua molto afflitta, & importunandola il marito, che l’amaua, per saper,che cosa hauesse, confessato ella liberamente il suo fallo, dal Marito non solo non ne fù gastigata, nè ripresa, anzi ne fù lodata e consolata; dicendo, che Abbàs era loro Rè; ch’era discendente dal loro legislatore, e da quelli, che per santi più grandi essi venerano, e che, con tale attione, non solo non haueua fatto dishonore alcuno alla lor casa, ma più tosto l’haueua honorata & illustrate” [“The King, regretting the error he had committed, was greatly afflicted, and importuned the husband, whom he loved, revealing what had happened [and] freely confessing his fault to him. The husband not only did not punish him or reprimand him, but in fact was honored and consoled; he said that Abbas was their shah, that he was descended from their Prophet, that many venerated him as a saint, and that by his actions, he had not cast any dishonor upon his house, but in fact honored

⁷⁰ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 110.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁷² El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 11.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 27–33.

⁷⁴ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 113.

and made it more illustrious”].⁷⁵ This quasi-Biblical episode, with its echoes of David and Bathsheba, establishes ‘Abbas as the principled, moral ruler. Unlike King David, ‘Abbas did not attempt to conceal his liaison from his lover’s husband. He voluntarily confessed his fault and sought the husband’s forgiveness. ‘Abbas’ practice of concubinage did not pose any danger to the patriarchal family. In fact, ‘Abbas’ offer to relinquish his concubine to a lower-status man subtly reinforced the institution that Catholic reformers considered an essential building-block of a reformed, Christian society.⁷⁶

Della Valle’s treatment of ‘Abbas’ sexual practices, and his incorporation of ‘Abbas’ same-sex liaisons within other accounts of opposite-sex relationships reflect Della Valle’s own participation within a Renaissance sexual culture that did not distinguish between homosexuality and heterosexuality. This sexual culture, most recently explored by Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli, was shaped by the unique ecology of the court society, the locale in which ‘Abbas’ seductions allegedly took place.⁷⁷ In an intense, male-dominated environment that allowed for little distinction between public and private life, the male courtier’s search for patronage and competition for royal favor were often expressed using the vocabulary of romantic love.⁷⁸ In a world in which the lover, beloved, and rivals were all men, the focus of any courtier’s relationship would inevitably be another man. Given the circumstances, same-sex intimacy, such as that reflected in ‘Abbas’ confession to the husband, “whom he loved,” was a natural and socially accepted development.⁷⁹

As Della Valle himself wrote, “anche à noi, che molte cose son peccato, come l’andare à meretrici, ma pur si tolerano, e si fano da molti, che in effetto non disprezzano la legge, ma per fragilità tal volta la trasgrediscono” [“Also among us there are many things that are considered sinful, such as visiting prostitutes; however, these things are tolerated and done by many, who in effect do not despise the law, but transgress it through [human] weakness”].⁸⁰ Though Della Valle’s words in that context apply to ‘Abbas’ drinking rather than his sexual practices, they sum up the attitude that Della Valle argues that the Propaganda Fide should take towards matters that violate their own understanding of sexual morality. ‘Abbas’ liaisons were not serious enough to reject him as an ally on that basis alone. One indication of the importance which Della Valle ascribes to his rebuttal of ‘Abbas’ alleged sodomy lies in its placement within the treatise. Della Valle’s discussion occupies only a paragraph within the whole. This authorial choice attests to Della Valle’s assumption that the Propaganda Fide did not consider ‘Abbas’ sexuality a serious obstacle to establishing ties. ‘Abbas’ sexuality was not the most problematic issue for the cardinals, as it was an area in which they and ‘Abbas were relatively in agreement. Far more problematic was ‘Abbas’ religious policy. His religious policy, rather than his sexuality or attitude towards crime and punishment, consumes the bulk of Della Valle’s defense.

Shi’ite “Catechesis”: Della Valle on Islamic Social Discipline

The cultural expansion of the Ottoman Empire through conversion had been a potent source of European anxiety since the conquest of Constantinople. It reinforced longstanding fears of the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 111–12.

⁷⁶ For Catholic reformers’ outlook on concubinage, see Eisenach, *Husbands*, 169–77.

⁷⁷ Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 28.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 229, 236–37.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 90, 95.

⁸⁰ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 79.

might of Islam and the weakness of Christianity.⁸¹ Della Valle could not avoid the topic, especially when his intended readers were members of a religious institution like the Propaganda Fide, which was gravely concerned about Christian conversion to Islam.⁸² One of the most devastating criticisms that Della Valle attempted to counter was the charge that ‘Abbas had forced Christians to convert to Islam, a charge with a basis in fact. Like his rivals the Ottomans, ‘Abbas relied upon converted slaves, known as the *ghulam*, to staff his court and his army. These slaves were Georgians, originally of Christian backgrounds.⁸³

As far as the *ghulam* was concerned, Della Valle assures readers that while the Georgians were originally Christians, they were “Christiani sì, ma rozzamente” [“Christians, yes, but crudely”].⁸⁴ Like un-catechized Neapolitan peasants, ‘Abbas’ Georgian converts were barely Christians at all in the eyes of Catholic elites like Della Valle and the Propaganda Fide. Since ‘Abbas’ new converts had not been particularly exemplary Christians to begin with, Della Valle argued that his readers ought not be scandalized to discover them converting to Islam.⁸⁵

Other aspects of ‘Abbas’ religious policy were also of concern to the Propaganda Fide. While ‘Abbas’ policy towards non-Shi’ite Muslims did not directly affect missionaries, it interested the Congregation because the cardinals believed that a ruler’s religious policy determined whether or not he was a civilized, and therefore trustworthy, prince.⁸⁶ Della Valle based his argument for ‘Abbas’ status as a civilized prince on the commensurability of Shi’ite and Catholic reform. Through his careful selection of evidence and deliberate word choices, Della Valle depicted Shi’ite social discipline as the counterpart to similar programs underway in Italy. In so doing, he provided a powerful argument for the legitimacy of ‘Abbas’ approach. ‘Abbas was not a Christian and thus could not be expected to promote the Christian religion. He, however, clearly understood the princely duty to support a religion that he believed to be of the true faith. In this regard, he pursued legitimate means to establish a strong state.

Religion acquired such importance for Della Valle and his contemporaries because state-directed, organized religion was considered an essential element of civility.⁸⁷ Botero argued that a single religion was the essential foundation of a strong, stable state. Though Botero was a one-time Jesuit priest later associated with the Borromeos,⁸⁸ his argument was based more on the usefulness of religion to the prince than on piety, though personal piety did not escape his consideration.⁸⁹ For Botero, Islam, like Roman Catholicism, was conducive to establishing a strong state because it promoted the social cohesion and princely control necessary for social stability, whereas, Lutheranism, and above all Calvinism, invited rebellion, schism, and faction, and thus could not serve as stable foundations for princely states.

‘Abbas, like his ancestors, faced two challenges in his attempts to spread Twelver Shi’ism among his subjects. Many wealthy, urbane Iranian merchants were Sunni Muslims. The vast

⁸¹ Meserve, *Empires of Islam*, 169–83.

⁸² Eric Dursteler, *Renegade Women: Gender, Identity, and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 111. See also Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople*, 112–19.

⁸³ Abisaab, *Converting Persia*, 54.

⁸⁴ “Per lo contrario de’ Giorgiani, Christiani sì, ma rozzamente,” Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 80.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸⁶ Bireley, *Counter-Reformation Prince*, 230–32.

⁸⁷ Carina Johnson, *Cultural Hierarchies in Sixteenth-Century Europe: Ottomans and Mexicans* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 29–30.

⁸⁸ De Boer, *Conquest of the Soul*, 134–37.

⁸⁹ Botero’s writing assumed a more providentialist cast after *Della Ragione di Stato*; see Bireley, *Counter-Reformation Prince*, 52.

majority of ‘Abbas’ subjects, however, were not Sunni Muslims, but followers of a blend of Sufism and folk Shi’ism. Like the Safavid’s original military supporters, the Qizilbash, peasants and semi-literate artisans, adhered to charismatic, millennial sects. These sects espoused beliefs and practices incompatible with more institutionalized forms of Imami, or Twelver Shi’ism.⁹⁰ Later scholars would characterize these beliefs as *ghuluwwism*—occasionally as exaggerated or heterodox beliefs, or more neutrally as religious speculation. Most of these beliefs were concerned with the status of the imams. Some also included unusual teachings about reincarnation and the transmigration of souls.⁹¹ Few of these teachings were acceptable to the trained Twelver Shi’ite clerics whom ‘Abbas and his predecessors had invited to the country to oversee the transition to Twelver Shi’ism.⁹²

Instituting Twelver Shi’ism not only required converting Sunni Muslim subjects, but also required abolishing heterodox rituals, regulating Sufi orders, and harnessing *ghuluww* tendencies among more enthusiastic subjects. In many respects, the Safavid shahs needed to render toothless the potent blend of messianic fervor that had propelled them to prominence.⁹³ This process did not begin with ‘Abbas but gained increased momentum under him. Religious and bureaucratic reform proceeded step by step at the Safavid court. Just as ‘Abbas gradually replaced his former soldiers, the tribal Qizilbash, with converted slaves, so too did he replace the charismatic religion of the Qizilbash with Twelver Shi’ism. Like the converted slaves who staffed ‘Abbas’ bureaucracy, recently arrived Arab clerics had less of a built-in power base than the charismatic Sufi dervishes associated with the restive Qizilbash. ‘Abbas’ championship of Twelver Shi’ism was highly conducive to state-building. The clerics he appointed owed their positions solely to him.⁹⁴

Like his contemporaries in early modern Europe, ‘Abbas accomplished religious reform through the reformation of rituals. ‘Abbas oversaw key Shi’ite rituals in his new capital, Isfahan. One of the most important rituals that he adapted for public worship was the ‘Ashura ritual, which mourns the death of the first Shi’ite martyr, Husayn.⁹⁵ ‘Abbas’ recourse to ritual created opportunities for half-guessed similarities on the part of visitors like Della Valle, who interpreted the rituals that they observed through the symbolic vocabulary associated with their own religious traditions.⁹⁶ Shi’ite rituals like the ‘Ashura were similar to early modern Catholic devotions in that they elicited grief, joy, or tenderness through processions, ritual violence, and intense imagery. These images included tableaux of (simulated) dead, flayed, and bloodied bodies representing Shi’ite martyrs.⁹⁷ Though understandings of atonement were and are

⁹⁰ Kathryn Babayan. “Sufis, Dervishes, and Mullas: The Controversy over Spiritual and Temporal Dominion in Seventeenth-Century Iran,” in *Safavid Persia: History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 118–20.

⁹¹ On *ghuluwwism*, see Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 65–71.

⁹² Abisaab, *Converting Persia*, 1–5.

⁹³ Babayan, “Sufis,” 118–20.

⁹⁴ Abisaab, *Converting Persia*, 9, 54.

⁹⁵ For the ‘Ashura ritual, see Heinz Halm, *Shi’a Islam: From Religion to Revolution*, trans. Allison Brown (Princeton, NJ: Marcus Weiner Publishers, 1997), 19–20, 57. For Husayn as a focus of devotion, see *ibid.*, 31–33.

⁹⁶ For similar episodes of cultural translation in India, see Joan Pau Rubies, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 28–29.

⁹⁷ The Ashura ritual, as practiced under ‘Abbas, had a baroque aesthetic. See Calmard, “Shi’i Rituals and Power,” 153–54.

different in Shi'ite and Catholic theology, Shi'ite rituals were emotionally and aesthetically commensurable to Catholic practice.⁹⁸

Other European observers, like the English adventurer Anthony Sherley, commented extensively on Safavid social discipline, especially its more coercive side. Their commentary was much more critical than Della Valle's. According to Sherley, 'Abbas dispatched men into Sunni villages, where they forced villagers to drink wine—a practice that would have scandalized a devout Sunni Muslim.⁹⁹ According to Sherley, drinking alcohol was an unambiguous sign of difference between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, much as eating meat on a fast day differentiated Protestants and Catholics. Della Valle wrote that Shi'ites considered drunkenness, rather than the consumption of alcohol itself, to be sinful. Drinking alcohol, when done in moderation, was not sinful.¹⁰⁰ Della Valle unfortunately cited no source for the information. He did mention that 'Abbas was “the head of his sect,” and the ultimate arbiter in religious matters, which suggests the likely source of Della Valle's information.¹⁰¹ By forcing villagers to drink wine, 'Abbas' agents delineated boundaries between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, and between the shah's followers and those of the Ottoman sultan.

Della Valle does acknowledge 'Abbas' efforts to instruct (*instrutti*) and reduce (*ridurli*) converts in his own sect (*setta*) of Twelver Shi'ism, but never in terms of the forced wine-drinking of Sherley's *Travels in Persia*. Della Valle's choice of words, *instrutti* and *ridursi*, suggests why he and his potential readers failed to find 'Abbas' social discipline problematic. They are the same verbs that Catholic missionaries used to describe their own efforts to catechize converts.¹⁰² 'Abbas' use of wandering clerics and baroque spectacles would have seemed natural and reasonable to a Roman nobleman like Della Valle.¹⁰³ Della Valle would have been familiar with Jesuit missionaries' analogous practices during his own time in Naples.¹⁰⁴ While sacred Shi'ite dramas and Shi'ite catechesis might have struck an English Protestant reader as foreign, bizarre, and expressive of psychological and physical violence, they would not have seemed in need of defense to an audience like the Propaganda Fide.

Della Valle did admit that a number of 'Abbas' strategies to ensure religious conformity might appear morally questionable, such as his practice of removing impressionable children from their parents.¹⁰⁵ Coercion in religion was a deeply controversial matter in 17th-century Rome, especially as the growth of early modern states made new degrees of surveillance possible for Catholic and Protestant princes.¹⁰⁶ Coercion was even more of an issue for European Christians when they pondered Christian conversion to Islam. Thomas á Jesu acknowledged that it was possible for Christians to adopt Islam from what he described as a false or deluded belief

⁹⁸ Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, 17–20 (on the difference of atonement in Christianity and Shi'ite Islam).

⁹⁹ For Sherley's thought, see Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to Be an Alien*, 75–128.

¹⁰⁰ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 78–79.

¹⁰¹ For wine's place in Islam and in Iran, see Rudi Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500–1800* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 39–41.

¹⁰² For “ridurli,” see Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 61. A Jesuit publication describing analogous missionizing activities may be found in the central Jesuit archives in Rome. See Archivio Societatis Iesu (hereafter ARSI) Neap 74a fols. 50–67.

¹⁰³ For the commensurability of Shi'ite and Catholic practice, see Matthee, “Safavids Under Western Eyes,” 166.

¹⁰⁴ For Jesuit missionaries in Naples, see Selwyn, *Paradise Inhabited by Devils*, 211–38.

¹⁰⁵ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 61.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas, *De Procuranda Salute*, 206–12.

in the validity of Islamic teachings.¹⁰⁷ Most Christian conversions to Islam, however, were interpreted as a product of coercion.¹⁰⁸

Rather than being scandalized at ‘Abbas’ methods, Della Valle argued that readers ought to recognize that ‘Abbas’ form of religious discipline was a sound one. Della Valle noted that Catholic Italians themselves removed baptized Jewish children from their parents, and that they proceeded “similarly with other infidels.”¹⁰⁹ Readers should not be surprised if ‘Abbas adopted similar methods that were known to be effective. Nor should readers be critical of ‘Abbas’ method: “lo scuso, perche usa gli artifici, che sono à proposito, per quello, che à lui, miseramente in questo acciecatò, pare bene” [“I excuse it, because he uses this means, which is appropriate, for things which to him, miserable in his blindness, seem to be the right thing”].¹¹⁰ Ultimately, ‘Abbas’ actions were motivated by the same rationale that Catholic reformers ascribed to their own efforts to restrict non-Catholics’ liberties: “Noi altri ancora alle volte facciamo quasi il medesimo con Ebrei, e con simili infedeli, e non si riprende: perche se bene in quel, che manco importa, cioè del godere una certa libertà ciuile, e non patir tali molestie, veniamo à far loro non sò che d'ingiuria, tuttauia in quello, che più importa, ch'è'l procurar la salute delle loro anime, con quella poco ingiuria, facciamo loro maggior bene. Così Abbàs, stimando la sua falsa Setta vera legge di salute, fà di cose tali, ma pensa con quelle fare opera à Dio grata” [“We also at times do the same thing with Jews, and with other unbelievers, and do not find it reprehensible; because if in those things that lack importance, such as to enjoy a certain civil liberty or not suffer such harassment, we come to do them such injuries that altogether are more important—that is to procure the good of their souls; with such little injury, we do them the greater good. Thus ‘Abbas, considering his false Sect to be the true path of salvation, does such things, but thinks that by doing such things he does work pleasing to God”].¹¹¹

Della Valle’s defense may seem certain to invite controversy in 17th-century Rome. In fact, however, he was merely restating a common, Augustinian argument for the use of coercion in religion.¹¹² Instead of criticizing ‘Abbas’ efforts to discipline his subjects—actions that Della Valle explicitly suggests are perfectly commensurate with Catholic practice—readers’ efforts would be better spent praying for ‘Abbas’ conversion to Christianity, and the redirection of his reforming zeal.¹¹³ Whether by spending his personal fortune or by marshalling royal authority to favor the establishment of his religion, ‘Abbas conducted himself in a manner that paralleled a Catholic prince: “i Principi nostri, che hanno più ragion di farlo, in ciò l’imitino” [“in these matters, they [Catholic princes] imitate him”].¹¹⁴

The charges that Della Valle struggled most to defuse are ones that would, at face value, appear strange for any 17th-century Catholic to level at Shah ‘Abbas: that he was a bad Muslim. Yet Della Valle considered the allegation that ‘Abbas was a bad Muslim to be serious enough to merit a full defense. Before offering his defense, Della Valle summarized the charges against ‘Abbas: that he did not fast during Ramadan, that he drank wine in secret, and that he was

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 721–22.

¹⁰⁸ For conversion to Islam in the Ottoman Empire, see Krstic, *Contested Conversions*, 98–100. Many converts stress the fact that they chose Islam after a period of prayer and inquiry.

¹⁰⁹ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 61.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 60–61.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 61–62.

¹¹² Thomas, *De Procuranda Salute*, 211–12.

¹¹³ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 57.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 57.

hypocritical in the observance of his own law.¹¹⁵ According to accusers, this alleged behavior showed that that ‘Abbas was unable to exert control over his human appetites, whether such appetites were for food, wine, or sexual conduct.

Della Valle worked to persuade his readers that ‘Abbas’ decision not to observe certain fasts was a well-reasoned, legitimate choice that did not reflect a lack of self-control. He argued that ‘Abbas did not maintain the Ramadan fast for reasons of health, rather than personal weakness: “Non digiuna il mese del Ramadhan: ma persume, che la sua complessione à così fare lo costringa, il che, quando sia, anche frà noi senza peccato si permette. Si ritira ben’ egli in quei tempi di digiuno in campagna alle caccie, & in luoghi solitari, per non dare a gli altri scandolo, e mall’ essemio, co’ esser veduto trasgredir il precetto: & in vece di digiunare, che, come dice, non può, fà distribuire a’ poueri gran quantità di limosine, accioche digiunino, e preghino per lui” [“He does not fast during the month of Ramadan, but because his health forbids him, the same which is permitted among us without being considered sinful. He withdraws during the time of fasting to hunt in the country, and frequents solitary places, so as not to give scandal or poor example to others, who would see him transgressing the precept. In place of fasting, which, as he said, he cannot do, he arranges for a great quality of alms to be distributed among the poor, so that they might fast and pray for him”].¹¹⁶ In Della Valle’s interpretation, ‘Abbas’ behavior is governed by the same principles of self-discipline and courtesy that readers would regard as admirable in a ruler. ‘Abbas’ actions mirror those of the cultured Baroque prince, such as that described by Wietse de Boer in his own analysis of Federico Borromeo (1564–1631).¹¹⁷ Like Federico Borromeo, ‘Abbas is defined by his desire to avoid scandal, the pious *faux pas* that could become a stumbling block to lesser men.¹¹⁸

Della Valle reminds readers that they should not be surprised or scandalized when confronted by ‘Abbas’ personal weaknesses. ‘Abbas is human, and subject to the same weaknesses that Della Valle’s readers know all too well. The only difference between ‘Abbas and Della Valle’s readers lies in the religion in which ‘Abbas was raised:¹¹⁹ “Che Abbàs sia propagator zelante della sua Setta, essendo nato in quello, e credendola per legge vera, non deue imputarsegli à vitio: ma più tosto à disauuentura d’esser nato tale: e dobbiamo pregar Dio, che l’illumini: perche ogni un di noi, senza l’aiuto Diuino, sarebbe forse il medesimo: e sappiamo, che la fede è dono di Dio” [“That ‘Abbas is a zealous promoter of his Sect, being born in it, and believing it for the true religion ought not be imputed to him as a vice; but rather as a misfortune to be born in such a state. We ought to pray to God that he illumine him, because each one of us, without divine help, would perhaps be the same, and we know that faith is a gift of God”].¹²⁰ At first glance, Della Valle’s comments appear tantalizingly relativistic, especially considering his original audience. Carina Johnson located a moment in the early 16th century when the popularity of humanistic *prisca theologia* made religious relativism possible in court circles.¹²¹ She argues, however, that this moment ended with the Reformation.¹²² Carlo Ginzburg and Stephen Schwartz have both argued that relativism may have been more widespread in Italy and the Mediterranean than previously believed. The long afterlife of the story of the Three Rings,

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 79.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 79.

¹¹⁷ De Boer, *Conquest of the Soul*, 4, 126–39.

¹¹⁸ For scandal, see *ibid.*, 63–64.

¹¹⁹ Della Valle, *Delle Conditioni*, 94.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹²¹ Johnson, *Cultural Hierarchies*, 29–30.

¹²² Ibid., 158.

which argued for the equal validity of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, also suggests a degree of popular toleration for Islam. While the story is best known from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350), it continued to circulate through the Mediterranean for centuries afterwards.¹²³

During Della Valle's residence in Naples, he moved in learned circles where he was exposed to the relativistic thought of Tommaso Campanella, a radical thinker and Dominican friar who was unabashed in his praise of Islam. Campanella's utopian treatise, *The City of the Sun*, has been interpreted as a depiction of an idealized society influenced by a blend of Christian, Muslim, and pagan practice.¹²⁴ Della Valle, however, did not take religious relativism to its natural conclusion. He never voiced any overt approval for 'Abbas' faith, or made the argument that Shi'a Islam was equal or in any way comparable to Tridentine Catholicism. The last lines of his quote—that "faith is a gift of God"—provide the key to interpreting the quote.

The belief that God bestowed faith in Christ on whomever God wished provided early modern Catholics with a way to understand their inability to make converts. While this belief did create interpretive space for Christian-Muslim interactions, it did not require adherence to any form of universalism or religious tolerance à la Campanella.¹²⁵ While Della Valle may have dabbled in religious relativism at the end of his treatise, his final comments are best read as an effort to de-exoticize 'Abbas. Della Valle argued that 'Abbas was not categorically different from his European counterparts. While a Persian Shi'ite, 'Abbas conducted himself according to a universal set of rational principles that are summed up in the figure of the Counter-Reformation prince.¹²⁶

Delle Conditioni's Afterlife

Perhaps the best way to understand European perceptions of Islamic rulers is to examine the writings of Europeans who attempted to alter those perceptions. By their very nature, each author's text engages with the beliefs that he hoped to supplant. When read carefully, texts like Della Valle's *Delle Conditioni di Abbas* reveal the author's own opinions as well as the attitudes that he considered widespread among his audience. Pursuing this approach reveals the dynamic nature of Italian perceptions of Islam and Islamic societies. Like other examples of European travel writing, writings on Islam evolved in dialogue between past scholarly traditions and fresh depictions of other societies.¹²⁷ Many of these first-hand observations were produced by cultural mediators like Della Valle, whom Shah 'Abbas and the Propaganda Fide relied upon to act as translator, interpreter, and advisor in their ongoing negotiations.

Della Valle's original audience, the Propaganda Fide, was unusually well-informed about events at the Safavid court. The cardinals who staffed the Congregation met regularly, either in private or in the pope's presence, to coordinate global evangelization strategies. In a typical meeting, the cardinals might read reports from missionaries in Italy, Baghdad, London, Holland,

¹²³ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, Day 1, Tale 3. On the Three Ring story, see Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 48–51. On universalism in the Mediterranean, see Stuart B. Schwartz, *All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 8.

¹²⁴ Noel Malcolm, "The Crescent and the City of the Sun: Islam in the Renaissance Utopia of Tommaso Campanella," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 125 (2004), 57–62.

¹²⁵ Lee, "Theologies of Failure."

¹²⁶ For these principles, see Bireley, *Counter-Reformation Prince*, 52–56, 224.

¹²⁷ Grafton, *New Worlds*, 6–7.

and Denmark.¹²⁸ Like other institutions with global aspirations, the Propaganda Fide developed a universal outlook as it synthesized a tremendous amount of unrelated, fragmentary material.¹²⁹ The Congregation imposed some coherence on this decentered world by relying on a number of analytical concepts that they assumed would have universal relevance. Among these concepts was a Eurocentric discourse on personal rule embodied in the figure of the Counter-Reformation prince. This discourse could accommodate non-Christian rulers like ‘Abbas, provided that they behaved in ways that the cardinals could recognize as civilized.¹³⁰

Della Valle considered most allegations against ‘Abbas to arise out of false or improper readings of events. He did not question the assumptions about masculinity and authority which formed the bedrock of the Congregation’s idea of right rule. For Della Valle, proving that ‘Abbas was a trustworthy ally demanded that he prove that the shah conducted himself in a manner that paralleled European practice. The ‘Abbas that emerges from Della Valle’s account was an effective ruler in the same way that a Catholic prince would be an effective ruler. That ‘Abbas happened to be Shi’ite was incidental. In every respect, ‘Abbas conducted himself according to the same set of rational principles that the Congregation considered essential in an ally. These principles primarily revolved around questions of piety—both the prince’s individual piety and his state policy. ‘Abbas pursued a religious policy that, though Islamic, could easily be recognized by the Congregation as a shrewd and sound one. He even disciplined his Shi’ite converts like a good Catholic prince.¹³¹

‘Abbas, of course, was not a Counter-Reformation prince and would never become one. Whether he would have recognized himself in Della Valle’s depiction is even more difficult to say. Della Valle’s depiction of ‘Abbas, like other products of cultural mediation, was composed of commensurabilities both real and imagined.¹³² Admittedly, these similarities were imagined by a Roman traveler who spent years at ‘Abbas’ court, mastered Persian, and knew the shah well, as Della Valle regularly reminded his readers.¹³³ Unlike other cultural mediators who might vanish from their texts, Della Valle’s persistent use of the first person ensured that he would always remain highly visible to his audience. He clarified readers’ misconceptions and translated Isfahan’s court society in terms that made it comprehensible to his audience.¹³⁴ His literary strategies project a rhetoric of immediacy and accuracy¹³⁵ essential to his self-construction as an expert on Persian matters.

Despite its apparently positive reception in Vienna, Della Valle’s *Delle Condizioni di Abbas* never did produce the military alliance that ‘Abbas desired. ‘Abbas’ death in 1629, shortly after its publication, ensured that Della Valle’s treatise would remain a curiosity. Its chief value lies in its ability to reveal new aspects of Italy’s relationship with Islam. Islam shaped Italian thought about religion as a category of analysis. Religion, for early modern Catholics, was not simply a matter of doctrines or rituals. It was also a sign of civility and an important building-block of the early modern state. Della Valle’s treatise provides a compelling testimony to the rise of a distinct

¹²⁸ APF Actae Congregationis Generalis (hereafter ACTA) 3 fols. 30–33.

¹²⁹ Selwyn, *Paradise Inhabited by Devils*, 1, 7.

¹³⁰ For Botero’s global perspective (which Bireley describes as “universalist”), see Bireley, *The Counter-Reformation Prince*, 51.

¹³¹ For Botero’s perspective on the prince’s role in establishing religion, see Botero, *Reason of State*, 61–62.

¹³² Brenjes, “Immediacy and Mediation,” 175.

¹³³ Della Valle, *D’In elle gf2*.

¹³⁴ On cultural translation, see Rubies, *Travel and Ethnology*, XIV–XVII.

¹³⁵ On the rhetoric of immediacy, see Brenjes, “Immediacy and Mediation,” 175.

concept of religion among Italians during a time when Europeans were encountering new continents, new religions, and new ways of ordering society.

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APF: Archivio di Propaganda Fide

ACTA: Actae Congregationis Generalis (meeting minutes of the Congregation)

SOCG: Scritture Originali referite nelle Congregazioni Generali

SOCG 59

SOCG 209

SC: Scritture referite nei Congressi

SC Mesopotamia 1: 1614-1690

ARSI: Archivio Societatis Iesu

Neap.: Neapolis (Naples)

Neap. 74. Neapolitana Historia ab anno 1640 ad 1647

ASV Della Valle-Del Bufalo: The Della Valle Papers, Archivio Segreto Vaticano

Busta 52: Della Valle's letters, 1626-1635

Busta 92: Della Valle's writings

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