

“Roman Catholics are the true Christians. The Shah continued on this topic of religion and touched in the course of it on four main points, which were:

“(a) fasting and good works, (b) about the Cross, and its adoration and images, (c) on free-will, (d) on the antiquity of the Roman Catholic religion, and the primacy of the Sovereign Pontiff.

“The occasion for the first topic, that of fasting and good works, arose from the Shah asking the Fathers why they were not eating. They replied that it was Ember Saturday in Pentecost. The king enquired of the English what fasts they kept. Their ‘Chief’ replied that God had not commanded men to fast, and, although the English Agent spoke through his interpreter, still the king asked the Fathers what he was saying, and they answered in Persian that the Englishman said that God had not commanded men to fast: and the Fathers continued: ‘See, your Highness, what an absurd falsehood and error it is, as it is true that by their religious laws Christians, Muslims, Jews and Gentiles have fasts of obligation.’

“Here there was small controversy since the matter was manifest and clear. With one voice the Shah and the grandees sitting with him said that it was a very great error and falsehood, because fasts, prayer, penitential exercises and good works are recommended in the law of Moses, in the Gospel, and the Quran, and in fine by all the prophets.

“Second point: on the Cross, its adoration, and on images. The Shah enquired of the Fathers whether the English made the sign of the Cross to bless themselves. The Fathers answered ‘no’. He asked further whether they had images of the saints and adored them: the reply was given him: ‘no’. He asked the Fathers: ‘Why do the Franks venerate them, as in this they resemble the Idolaters?’ (Persians, in praying, prostrate themselves repeatedly, and with their head and forehead venerate certain seals or counters of earth, of the size of a doubloon, and the beads, on which they recite their prayers, are made from earth from Mecca.)

“In order to convince him the Fathers put the question to the king: ‘Because your Highness and your people prostrate yourselves and worship seals and beads made of earth would it be right for us to call your Highness and your people idolaters? Certainly not, because we know that, when you perform that act of adoration, you do not mean by it that that seal and stone are God, but do it out of piety and reverence for that soil, as it comes from the places of sepulture of your ancestors and the great men whom you consider saints.’ The Shah answered: ‘That is not the chief reason and intention we have for worshipping on earthen seals¹ and beads, but rather in that act of veneration we make an act of recognizing that we are clay, and that from earth God created us, and we adore the Creator of this: and the reason why in the mosques and in our houses whilst we say our prayers on matting and carpets our prayers would not be lawful and acceptable, unless we said them on’ (i.e. touching) ‘the earth. With this in view, for more convenience and cleanliness we use the earthen medallions and beads: and that they are of this or that soil is an accidental matter: it suffices that it be earth. And so, when we have any other sort of stone, even if it be a piece of rock, we have no need of a seal. It is also true that we venerate it (the seal) as a memorial and a pious object, as thou sayest, but not mainly for that reason.’

“To this the Fathers replied: ‘Very good! And thus our Christian religion does not adore nor serve images, as if they were gods, nor does it expect from them the future judgment (God preserve us from such a thing!), but it venerates images for the things they represent. They serve us also as memorials to remind us of the virtues of those saints they represent, in order that we may imitate them and beg them to intercede by their prayers with our Lord God, that He will grant us what we ask and that we may be good and his servants, as they have been, so that we may attain the glory which they now enjoy. So that, just as your Highness and your people do not say that that

¹ *Muhreh* which Shiah touch with their foreheads in the prostrations during prayer.