The Rt. Rev. Hassan Dehqani-Tafti



1920-2008

Anglican bishop in Iran 1961-1990

He was generally known as Bishop Hassan. He was the first ethnic Persian to become a Christian Bishop in Iran since the seventh century and the Islamic conquest of Persia. There had been ethnic Armenian and Assyrian bishops in Iran but no ethnic Persian bishops up until the 20th century.

His story begins in Taft, a village south-west of Yezd in central Iran. His home had two rooms and a kitchen. His father, Muhammad, was a maker of cloth shoes. His mother, Sekineh, used one of the rooms as a dispensary. Many people came to her for help since she had some knowledge of modern nursing and at that time there was no hospital in Taft. Where had she gained her knowledge of nursing?

Before the First World War the first hospital in Yezd had been built by Christians. The skill of the doctors and nurses was well-known throughout the whole region. Hassan's grandmother, Mullah Zahra (so named because she had learned to read and recite the Quran) needed treatment for her eyes so she travelled to the hospital in Yezd with her two daughters. The hospital welcomed them and received the grandmother as a patient with her daughters as nurses to look after her. They stayed in Yezd and later trained as nurses in the hospital.

Years passed by. The gospel of love was being shared by word and action in the hospital in Yezd. In later years Bishop Hassan wrote of the formidable task of building the church of Jesus Christ at that time in Yezd. **"It needs two very special gifts of the Holy Spirit, patience and humility and that means being ready to work for a lifetime without necessarily seeing any results. Some of the early workers in the hospital seem to have been endowed with those gifts – they were specialists of the impossible! Through their selfless service and faithful teaching here and there individuals would come, sometimes out of curiosity, sometimes for mixed motives and sometimes sincerely.**

People who have suffered much throughout their long history cannot be indifferent to the Cross of Jesus once they see it. But there's the rub! If they see it! The Son was hidden behind a cloud of suspicion – pride, arrogance and domination from the West. In the East there was hatred, revenge and the wrong kind of loneliness that springs from poverty and not from true humility. But those working in the hospital went on in spite of all this and the loveliness of Christ and the meaning of His Cross would every now and then shine through the thick clouds and gently and miraculously open up a humble and sensitive heart."

One such heart was Hassan's mother Sekineh. She saw the love of God revealed in Jesus. She was baptised and confirmed and later on taught to read and write. She must have suffered a lot at the hands of her relatives but in Yezd she felt safe in the small community of Christians.

In 1914 war broke out between Germany and Britain. Turkey was Germany's ally and Persia's neighbour. In the unrest that followed the hospital in Yezd had to be closed and the workers evacuated. Mullah Zahra and her daughters Sekineh and Rubabeh made the journey back to Taft. So much had changed in their lives through their time in Yezd. The daughters started to practice nursing in Taft and the surrounding villages.

According to village custom they must be married. This was not such a problem for Rubabeh, but what was Sekineh to do? She was the only Christian girl in Taft. Who could she marry? She had grown in her faith in the Christian community in Yezd. Now back in Taft without fellowship she adopted many of the customs of her old life. It is impossible to comment on the state of her faith in Christ. Eventually she was married to a relative named Muhammad – an illiterate but intelligent young man. He was much respected in the community. Soon they had a son, Yahya (John) and then another son – Hassan. Another boy and another girl were later added to the family.


Rock relief carvings - Yezd

After the end of the war the hospital in Yezd was re-opened and workers returned. The evangelist attached to the hospital at that time was Miss W A Kingdon. She went from village to village on a donkey visiting from house to house. An entry in her diary for May 29, 1921 reads:

"Sekineh and Nazanin came for reading. Then I went to Sekineh's house where we had a nice little meeting, about 25 or so. They listened well."

Hassan was born in May 1920 so when he was just one year old a Christian meeting was held in his home at the invitation of his mother. When he was just five years old sadly his mother died from tuberculosis. Before her death some friends from the hospital in Yezd made the journey to visit her. She asked them to make sure that Hassan was brought up as a Christian. The only way they could seek to fulfil her wish was for him to go to a Christian school. By now he was 6½ years old. Would his father allow it?

In Muslim villages when someone was unsure about a decision he often looked in the Holy Quran for guidance. Hassan's father did this and felt it confirmed to him that he could let Hassan go to school in Yezd. Since there was no boys' school, permission was given for him to attend the girls' school. A Persian couple from Isfahan working in the hospital agreed to take him into their home. His father took him to the school. It took them some days to cross the 15 miles of desert from Taft to Yezd.

Hassan completed the school year successfully. A new problem confronted him. He was now seven years old and it was impossible for him to remain in a girls' school. The nearest boys' school was in Isfahan. Once again Miss Kingdon prevailed on his father and permission was given for him to go. Once again his father accompanied him back to Yezd. This time they rented a donkey. One night he began to recite Psalm 8:

"Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! … When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place; what is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him?"

Hassan's father was always interested in poetry and recitation. He asked where he had learned these words and Hassan was proud to respond, **"At the school in Yezd"**.

On arrival in Isfahan, Hassan was to meet someone who would have a great role in his life. His name was Jalil Aqa. In later years Hassan wrote, **"He was the head of the school I would attend – the College Branch School – with its hostel. Jalil Aqa lacked much as an educationalist but his great quality was his sincerity. He was sincere through and through. He was never a hypocrite. Often in Christian institutions people deceive themselves and others by pretending they are Christians but inwardly in their homes and with old acquaintances they are not. The effect of such hypocrisy on the life of a young church is devastating"**.

Jalil was a Cossack. His father, Khalil, was a Colonel in the army of the king of that day. He was sent to Isfahan to train the local army. He was keen that his son could have a good education and should learn French and English – very rare in those days. Jalil had a problem with his chest and so went to the Christian hospital. He talked with the doctors there and read the Bible. He was attracted to the person of Jesus Christ. He decided to trust Him and give himself and his abilities to His church. He wrote books and hymns and was soon put in charge of the College Branch School. He married a Christian girl and she ran the school hostel.

Jalil's personality had a great effect on Hassan. As Hassan made good progress with his studies, Jalil spent a lot of time coaching and encouraging him. Each school holiday Hassan returned to his family in Taft. As he understood more about Christianity, he found it harder and harder to re-adjust to the Muslim culture and atmosphere of Taft. He felt himself on a mental and spiritual seesaw. By the time he was 12 year's old the school's influence had outweighed his home's influence and he had decided quite definitely to be a Christian. Whenever he was in Taft he argued vigorously with his father, his

brother and the village elders. This was too much for them. They decided he must leave school in Isfahan and remain in Taft. He was sent to the Maktab – a kind of one-room school run by a mullah.



Royal Mosque – Isfahan

This was more than he could bear. After a few days he refused to go to the Maktab. His father then sent him to the village government school that had recently been started. Before long, 6 letters arrived in the village – some for his father and some for him. They were from Miss Kingdon and Jalil. They pleaded with his father to reconsider his decision. His father refused but Miss Kingdon was not going to give up so easily. She sent two Christian men from Yezd to put the case to Hassan's father. He was overwhelmed by their eloquence. Once again he decided to seek wisdom through consulting the Quran. For the second time he felt that God showed him it would be good for Hassan to go back to Isfahan where he attended the newly built Stuart Memorial College.

Just at this point the government issued a decree that all foreign schools should be closed. After an appeal, permission was granted for the class Hassan was in to continue for two years so the current students could graduate.

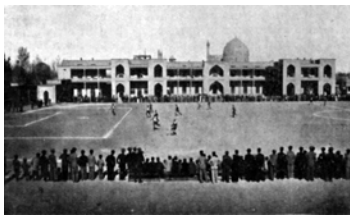
In His early teens Hassan came to the sure decision to follow in his mother's footsteps and become a Christian. It wasn't possible for him to be baptised till he was 18 years old. As that time approached, he wrote to his father, **"Man cannot please God by fasting, pilgrimage and even prayer. God isn't in need of these things, He only wants a pure and strong faith. No one can save himself but God will save those who seek him. I will be 18 soon. I have found the joy and happiness that I want in Jesus Christ. Dear father and brother I know you will be very sad and angry when you read this, but this is what I have found out myself from God. I hope that both of you will also read our mother's Bible which is still in our house. Please father, do not count yourself in any way responsible for my religion. I will soon be 18 and legally responsible for myself."**

Whenever Hassan was back in Taft his father and brother still tried to convince him he was wrong. People in the village were not very friendly. Old friends would pass him by without even looking at him. But his family were always loving and hospitable even though they regarded him as unclean, would not feed from the same bowls as him and would change their clothes and wash ceremonially each time they wanted to say their prayers. One day his father said to him, **"When your letter came telling us of your decision, I dreamt that my right hand was cut off from me and that means you. You are no longer a part of us!"**

In September 1939 the Second World War started. Hassan received his High School Diploma in June 1940 and shortly afterwards the college and hostel passed out of the hands of the mission and the church. That summer Hassan put himself at the disposal of the Diocesan Council as someone who had a call to the ministry. A decision had to be made. Should he go to Teheran for higher education? Would the atmosphere in the capital and in its university affect his faith in an adverse way? It was decided the Diocesan Council would give him an annual scholarship to go to University in Tehran. In the event that he decided not to be ordained or work for the diocese in the future, he was to pay back all the money he had received from them.

Hassan found that not many students in the University were interested in religion of any kind. They were more eager to study books about economics and communism than the holy books of the religions. When still at school one of his Christian teachers had advised him never to give up prayer and church-going even if the whole thing seemed meaningless at times. He came to understand that this wasn't hypocritical; it was simply refusing to be controlled just by his feelings.

In the intimate circle of his friends he was known as a Christian. Some were interested and some disgusted but the majority were indifferent and thought there was something strange for him to be seriously thinking about religious things in the 20th century.



Stuart Memorial College – Tehran

Hassan graduated from university in the summer of 1943 and then had to do his military service. This was very confusing for him. As a Christian he didn't believe in fighting of any kind. At last the training finished and he was commissioned as a second lieutenant staff officer to be secretary/interpreter to an American colonel who was adviser to the Isfahan Division. He was very glad to be in Isfahan again.

At the end of his military service he offered to work with the diocese but they advised him to continue a little longer in his present employment. He was earning a good salary and it was a prestigious position that made his family in Taft very proud.

Some months later the diocese asked him to leave this employment with a view to ordination. It was a hard decision but one he felt he must make. These words from Psalms became very real to him, ***"Truly you are my God even from my mother's womb. Truly marvellous are your works and that my soul knows well …. I have said, you are my God, my time is in Your hand. You have instructed me and taught me in the way I should go. You have guided me with your eye."***

His job in the diocese was to work with the youth, get on with Christian literature work and study as much as possible. Even though he enjoyed this work, he wasn't at peace. Sometimes he felt utterly alone and weak. After two years it was arranged that Hassan would go to Ridley Hall, Cambridge for theological training. He was very excited about this opportunity and also glad for the chance to attend the second **World Christian Youth Conference** in Oslo in the summer of 1947. He was amazed to see 1300 delegates from over 70 countries at that gathering.

It came as a great shock to him to see the divisions that existed in the Christian church. He was shocked that not all those at the conference could join together in one Lord's Supper. He felt this should be a real burden on all Christians until such tragic divisions in the Body of Christ were healed.

Hassan found Cambridge to be a beautiful city – very different to the long stretches of dry sandy desert he was used to in his own country. He found the atmosphere peaceful. The ancient buildings with their lovely chapels and the continuity of academic life undisturbed for centuries were sources of wonder, joy and amazement to him.

He wrote, **"Here I was, a son of the desert and mountains of Yezd, where life had not changed for the last 3000 years at least, studying theology in Cambridge – the heart of the best the western world could offer! I couldn't get over the wonder and excitement of it all. Somehow I wanted to devour, to breathe in the whole thing and make it a part of myself."**

Once the initial excitement had worn off Hassan experienced some very difficult times. He felt lonely and he often sank into unbelief and despair. He blamed God that his mother was taken away so early in his life. He longed for the warm love of family. On one level he understood that his new life involved suffering and God was counting him worthy to go through mental and spiritual torments so that the new life of Christ could be let loose through him. Still he struggled day by day with many difficult and unanswered questions.

At the conference in Oslo Hassan had met a Christian leader who had been a great help many young people with their questions. He wrote to him. He soon received an answer and he stayed in touch with this brother through both personal interviews and through letters. Much of the advice he received, he treasured and referred back to throughout his life.

A turning point came for Hassan when he began to really understand the meaning of repentance. He needed to repent of regarding himself as the centre of the universe! He had never realised how very self-centred he was! He came to understand in a real way that anything he had achieved was only by the grace of God. He asked God to have mercy on him and forgive him. After this everything was different.

He wrote, **"Then I knew what sin really was, what forgiveness meant and what it cost God to forgive us through the Cross of Jesus Christ. Once I started to understand this and learn something of the love of God, the healing came gradually. All worry, tension and restlessness began to vanish away. I found I could sleep better. People were no longer difficult to live with, but lovable and interesting objects of the love of God exactly as I was."**



Ridley Hall – Cambridge

Hassan realised he had spent a lot of his Christian life depending on other people for his faith. He asked the friend who had helped him, **"Is it really as simple as that?"** The answer came that it was. By faith Hassan believed this and learned to rejoice in God's free grace and love.

His time at Cambridge was almost at an end. Before leaving to return to Iran he spent a few days with his old friend Miss Kingdon who had retired in England. She was delighted to see him. They talked together about Taft, his mother and the church in Iran. Hassan felt something of her pride in him – the nearest he had ever experienced to a mother's pride. Soon after his return home she went to be with her Lord.

On October 18, 1949 Hassan was made a Deacon in St Luke's church, Isfahan. Ten months later he was ordained as a priest in the beautiful church of St Simon the Zealot in Shiraz. He served as the pastor of St. Luke's, Isfahan for ten years. He was also briefly Pastor of St Paul's church in Tehran.

Hassan was twenty nine. His thoughts turned to marriage. How would he be able to find a partner? Mixing of boys and girls was still a problem in Iran and there were only small numbers in the churches. As well as this, when you marry in Iran you marry the whole family! He considered whether God might want him to remain single. He prayed that he would be willing for this if it was God's will. He fully surrendered the whole matter to God and prayed that his life would glorify God whether he was single or married.

Just three years later Hassan married Margaret. Her father was his bishop, William Thompson. Like her mother before her, she had lived most of her life in Persia. The marriage took place in June 1952. To his great joy Hassan found himself part of a family in a way he had never been before. After six happy years of marriage he was the proud father of three children.

On the resignation of Bishop Thompson in 1960, Hassan was elected bishop and consecrated in St. George's, Jerusalem in April 1961. On his return to Isfahan he was installed in St. Luke's which remained his base for almost 20 years. His episcopal ministry was marked from the outset by a strong concern for education.

Hassan had a strong conviction, born in his years under the mentorship of Jalil Aqa, that a strong and intelligent Christianity could truly belong **in** and **with** an authentic Persian Culture. This remained his strong conviction throughout his life together with a passion to help heal divisions in the Christian church that he had first experienced in the youth conference in Oslo.

Changes were taking place in the Anglican Church in the Middle East. Plans were made for the dioceses of the Middle East to become a self-governing province of the Anglican Communion. Hassan was strongly in favour of this. His vision was that the church should be truly indigenous while being a spiritual home for all. In January 1976 the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East was established. Hassan was elected the first President Bishop.

Life under the Shah was never easy for the Christian communities. Hassan was among those who welcomed the 1979 revolution. He wrote to Ayatollah Khomeini pledging support for the building of a just, equal and free Iranian society. But the consequences of the seizure of power were worse than anything experienced before and soon the bishop and his church found themselves maligned and harassed.

In October 1979, two men broke into his house while he and his wife were asleep. Five shots were fired – four of them around Hassan's head and the other hitting Margaret's hand as she threw herself across her husband to protect him. A few days later they left Iran for a conference in Cyprus. Friends and colleagues strongly advised them not to return to Iran. This meant that Hassan was obliged to spend the last 10 years of his episcopate in exile. Even though this was the case, he was strongly urged to stay in his position.

In May of the following year news came that their only son, Bahram aged 24, had been ambushed and killed in Tehran on his way home from work teaching English at the university. Although deeply grieving, Hassan was not bitter. He was not able to go to his son's funeral, but he composed a prayer to be read. The closing lines are:

"O God, Bahram's blood has multiplied the fruit of the Spirit in the soil of our souls;
So when his murderers stand before Thee on the Day of Judgement
Remember the fruit of the Spirit by which they have enriched our lives and forgive."

In exile Hassan remained President Bishop of the newly inaugurated Anglican province of Jerusalem and the Middle East until 1986. Until his retirement in 1990 he also exercised a valued ministry as Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Winchester, UK.

He stayed in touch with the church in Iran and was a great support to the Iranian Christian community in Britain. He was a good man who suffered much for the sake of the Gospel. In his book, **The Hard Awakening**, he wrote:

"The Cross of Jesus Christ ... has often been misunderstood. Instead of being a symbol of suffering and sacrificial love, it has been regarded by some as the symbol of possessions and power. Christians must reverse this and the only way of doing so is to be ready to suffer for love's sake – in weakness not in power. The only remedy for a false view of the Cross is the Cross itself."