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IRAN TODAY

BY THE RT. REV. W. J. THOMPSON, C.B.E.
(*Anglican Bishop in Iran*)

Lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on March 24, 1954, Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt, G.B.E., K.C.B., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: Bishop Thompson, who has kindly come to speak to us on Iran, first went to that country before the 1914-18 War, during which he served as a Sapper. After that war he took Holy Orders and went out to Iran again in 1921, and there he has been since, having been made Bishop in 1935.

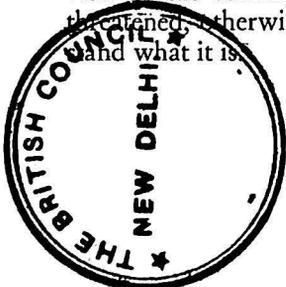
I GREATLY appreciate the invitation you have again given me to address you. I have no qualification of erudition or learning to justify inflicting my views upon such an informed group as this on all matters relating to the Middle East, beyond this—that I have spent most of my life in Iran and that I have a great love for the country and the people of Iran, amongst whom I count many of my closest friends.

One thing I should make quite plain at the outset, which is that I shall not talk "politics"; and if I shall mention matters which are commonly considered political (and what can really be excluded from this category?), at least I do not approach them from a political angle nor with any political inside information. I shall speak from my own personal observations (for what they are worth), and they will be from the point of view of one who has a great affection for the people of Iran; and I think I can claim to speak from the point of view of the Irani, so far as a foreigner can do this.

Much water has passed under the bridge since I last spoke to this Society, but on referring to what I said then I see that I did stress the great changes which were taking place in the country and the signs that people were not all in full sympathy with existing conditions. But it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to have predicted the extent of the changes which have since taken place or their effects. It has become a hurricane which has swept all before it, tearing up old landmarks and destroying many familiar features and old popular ideas and leaving people dazed and uncertain. In order to see the situation in its true perspective I think one must relate it to a wider scene, which has been shaping itself gradually, but with gathering force and speed, throughout Asia and Africa as well as the Middle East. Perhaps Iran got caught up in this storm more suddenly and violently than some others because of the previous comparative isolation of the country. I refer, of course, to the clash of cultures and ideas which has been coming to a crisis lately between East and West. We must try and get some picture of this in our minds if we are to be able to understand and appreciate the sudden violent rise of nationalism in Iran (and elsewhere). We must try and see the problem from the point of view of the country and people whose culture and way of life is being threatened, otherwise we shall not be able to sympathize with it or understand what it is.

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Here was a country, Iran, which for many years had been largely bypassed by the world—or rather by the West—tucked away behind its great rampart of mountains, living a life of its own and enjoying her ancient culture and civilization. Then two things happened concurrently, which changed the whole course of her life.

The people of Iran were suddenly woken up out of their comfortable apathy and ancient ways by the appearance of that dynamic personality Reza Khan, later to become Reza Shah Pahlavi. He gave to the country internal peace and security, creating a sense of unity and purpose which had been conspicuous by its absence for a long time. He forced the pace of changes and reforms—social, educational, industrial and political—which otherwise might have been indefinitely delayed or instituted much more slowly. He brought order out of chaos, he tied up the loose ends of government and strengthened the central government in Teheran; he freed the women from their age-long seclusion and gave them a new sense of importance and value; he introduced modern education and many Western ideas and technical improvements; he built roads and railways, and at the same time created a new interest in and revival of Persian literature and culture. He made the people feel alive, united and expectant. Anyone who lived through those years out in Iran could not but be struck by the new spirit which Reza Shah inspired throughout the country.

While all this was happening internally, the discovery of oil under her soil and the fortunes of war brought Iran suddenly, and to an unusual degree, into the centre of attraction for the rest of the world and specially the West. Money poured into the country and foreigners by the thousand invaded her boundaries and imposed a kind of industrial revolution for which she was quite unprepared and which was unrelated to the rest of her social development. One has to remember that our own industrial revolution was one of our own making and grew out of our own development. This fact tempered its baleful effects, although even for us it was a major social revolution the effects of which we are still feeling today. How much greater must the impact of this new industrial development due to the discovery of oil have been to a country like Iran. We tend to emphasize the great material benefits which this great development brought in its train to Iran—and there is no denying the truth of this—and at first Persians also were dazzled by the superficial advantages and material comforts which Western technology and industry were introducing into their midst. But gradually they became conscious of a greater fact—that this interference and intrusion was undermining and endangering the whole structure of their life and culture. Their way of life was breaking up and they were in danger of being left stranded and unprotected against the inroads of the West. Something foreign was being forced upon them, and that not for their own good but purely for the advantage of the foreigner. Arnold Toynbee, the historian, expresses all this very well in his book *The World and the West* in the chapter entitled "The Psychology of Encounter," from which I would like to quote the following:

"The reception of a foreign culture is a painful as well as a hazardous undertaking; and the victim's instinctive repugnance to

innovation that threatens to upset his traditional way of life makes the experience all the worse for him. . . . He gives grudging admission to the most trivial, and therefore least upsetting, of these poisonous splinters of a foreign way of life, in the hope of being able to get off with no further concessions than just that; and then, as one thing inevitably leads to another, he finds himself compelled to admit the rest of the intruding culture piecemeal. No wonder that the victim's normal attitude towards an intrusive alien culture is a self-defeating attitude of opposition and hostility."

That is well said, and we cannot rightly understand the upsurge of Nationalism if we fail to see it as an attempt to stem the tide of foreign influence and intrusion. It is the expression of deep-seated instincts of self-preservation—a fear bred of the sudden half-conscious sense of insecurity, and old sanctions failing to satisfy and appeal. And the greater and richer the old culture and way of life had been the greater will be the shock when that begins to be questioned and to break up. It was inevitable, it seems to me, that this "encounter," this clash of cultures, should happen, for we are all being thrown together as never before in the history of the world, but I think that the shock might have been eased and the bitterness have been averted if the West had had more vision and been less selfish and self-centred, less self-seeking and greedy to make the maximum "profits," and had shown more sympathy and understanding for their "victims," to use Toynbee's word.

In what I have said so far I have been anxious only to emphasize the nature and the reasonableness of the national movement which has been finding such free expression of late in Iran. Our Foreign Secretary said in a broadcast lately the growing force of Nationalism "is one of the most stubborn problems we have to face in the world today." Naturally the East is taking advantage of the difficulties in which the West finds itself at present; these have given the opportunity for the underlying discontents, fears and resentments to find expression. They were there all the time, but it was previously more dangerous and unwise to express them too openly.

Looking back over the last few years in Iran, some things stand out as of special interest: The power of propaganda in a country suddenly exposed to its full force—undiluted, so to speak. It is the first time we have seen this thing happen in Iran. One has to remember that the radio, or rather broadcasting system, is under the complete control of the government, and so only what the government wants to get across is put out. The majority of the people, I suppose, are still illiterate and so do not possess the means for sifting out the chaff from the substance and finding out the truth. It was the first time propaganda had been used in this way in Iran, and so it came with all the added interest and attraction of something new. Wherever loud-speakers were put up there you would find crowds listening. Apart from this anyone who had an idea wanted to put it on paper and rush into print, and I think the influence of the crude cartoon has been very great amongst the less educated. Even if he cannot read a man can usually understand the picture, which is generally lurid, crude and inciting. One realizes how easy it is to alter the mass mind of a people still largely

illiterate. An Irani friend of mine said to me: "There is no such thing as public opinion in Iran, there is only public sentiment." There is a lot of truth in this, though it is an exaggeration, and sentiment can be much more easily and rapidly changed. A thought-out opinion goes deeper and is not so easily rooted out.

Another very noticeable thing in Iran is the great change in the foreign community. The predominantly British character of the foreign community has changed and it is overwhelmingly American today. Irani friends of mine used laughingly to say to me: "We have got rid of you Britishers, but we have now fallen into the hands of the Americans." This probably is the most striking change which a person who had not been in Iran for some time would notice. It was sad to see all the British institutions go one by one. Many of them were old-established and had served the country well. Their disappearance may have been inevitable from the point of view of the nationalist, but it brought great loss to the country, and their disappearance created a great feeling of instability and many were thrown out of work, and owing to their association with the foreigner they could not readily find re-employment elsewhere. The purpose behind all this was, of course, to make a break with the past and all that that stood for and to open the way for a new beginning. It is understandable—all revolutions seem to follow much the same pattern—and we should be able to sympathize even if we may be more conscious of the loss than of the advantages gained. But today the Americans, and specially the Point 4 organization, have more than filled the gap left by the disappearance of the British. Where one Britisher was before there must be half a dozen Americans today. That is the irony of the situation and of a movement designed to rid the country of the foreigner. American Consulates have come into being wherever British Consulates used to be and in many other places as well; and Point 4 have enormous offices in Teheran and their activities are to be seen all over the land. However much we may be inclined to criticize the way Americans are doing the job in Iran, at least we should acknowledge the high purpose and idealism which lie behind it all and the fact that this help, both financial and practical, has been a big factor in keeping the country going through these difficult and troublous times and enabling it to pay its way. It is hardly surprising that in the present critical and suspicious attitude of mind of the people their efforts are not always appreciated. In fact they seem often to have come in for more hostility than even the British. I think the traditional goodwill and friendliness between our two countries and peoples have stood us in good stead through these difficult days, so that in spite of the intensive anti-propaganda the latent good feelings have been able to persist. Speaking personally, and I think for all our British missionaries, we never received anything but the greatest courtesy and consideration. Of course many dared not too openly associate themselves with us, but that is a different matter.

It would not be easy to talk about any country today without some mention of Communism, for that is a world-wide fact of great importance. I think it is true that Communism and Islam do not readily mix (after all, Communism may from one point of view be considered as the embodiment of the materialistic spirit of this age and as such will not mix with any

religion); it is also inimical to the present popular brand of nationalism which is bounded by narrow racial and national limits. But Communism makes a twofold appeal in Iran as in other countries. It claims to be able to get rid of the extreme inequality between the rich minority and poverty-stricken majority. It thus draws into its net all the seething-discontent and natural selfish instincts of human nature. It appeals both to the highest and to the lowest in human nature. But it also claims to be the bulwark against the West—Western imperialism and interference. I think the majority of those who are attracted to Communism in these lands (even the student class and the intellectuals) are very little concerned with—and in fact know very little about—its ideology; if they did, perhaps it would not have the same appeal. I believe also that Communism trades on the complete disillusionment as to the benefits of Western civilization. It is a useful stick with which to beat the West. In any country such as Iran the only effective reply to the Communist is an enthusiastic and satisfactory policy of economic relief to the under-privileged. It is the lack of any such effective and practical solution to this—one of the basic problems—which is the most disappointing element in the successive governments which come into power. Of course all of them pay lip service to these ideals, but very few go beyond this. It is easier and more spectacular to increase military expenditure or to hasten on with an ambitious educational policy. But this is really dangerous, for as has been well said: "Poverty and ignorance can abide together for centuries, but poverty and education is an explosive mixture." So few governments seem to see the truth of this. The fact is that there is a sad lack of the necessary moral incentive or urge to make the necessary sacrifices involved in a really just distribution of the available material resources. Those who have are not prepared to share with those who have not. The Shah is giving a fine lead to his people in distributing his crown estates and encouraging social reform.

There have been some important engineering developments in Iran during the past few years. Among these is the fine new water supply which has been completed in Shiraz and which was lately opened by the Shah himself. Shiraz also has perhaps the most efficient medical service of any town in Iran (except the capital), under the very enthusiastic and efficient direction of its Director of Medical Services. In Isfahan two important improvements have lately been completed—viz., the Turbine power scheme, which gives Isfahan one of the finest and largest power plants in the Middle East, and the Kuh Rang water scheme, whereby some of the water of the Karun river has been diverted by means of a tunnel and a dam into the Isfahan river, and so it is hoped that the agricultural needs of the Isfahan plain will be better met. The Shah also opened this a short time ago. Thus a dream of Shah Abbas the Great is at last realized—he nearly completed a similar project 300 years ago. Teheran is at the present time in the process of getting a fine new water supply, which when it is complete will greatly increase the amenities of the town. But it is likely to be some time before this is completed. It is a tremendous undertaking.

Another very noticeable and welcome change of the last few years is the great improvement in transport facilities in Iran. There is, of course, for those who like it, the aeroplane, though this is not yet very reliable in

winter owing to difficult weather conditions. But Iran is a very large country and rapid, easy, cheap transport is one of the great essentials. When one compares the present facilities with the old unreliable, uncomfortable and infrequent buses and other so-called motor transport which was all that the unfortunate traveller had to rely on (if he did not possess his own transport) only a very few years ago, one must give unstinted praise for the enterprise of the present bus companies which ply buses between the various towns. They seldom let one down and they offer much improved accommodation and more consideration for the passengers. They start up to time, which is a very great change from the old interminable delays. They are also cheap—very cheap when compared with our British Railways here in England. There is really nothing to complain about them except that the old excitements and interesting unrehearsed incidents which made travelling in Iran in former years so full of interest are so seldom met with today. The remembrance of those old days perhaps has given a more romantic colour to them as they recede into the past!

There are only two complaints I think one could justly make: Many of the roads should be kept under better repair. This would not only increase the comfort of the traveller but would also greatly lengthen the life of the vehicles which use the roads. One often wonders as one skims over the interminable corrugations how any motor ever keeps together. The other thing is that the hotel accommodation usually provided for the traveller at the end of his journey, or at the various stops, has very little to commend itself. The available accommodation is usually not worthy of the country and must give a bad impression to those who visit it for the first time. There is another complaint which as a foreigner I would register, and that is that we have lately not been able to make use of the transport as we should like, because of the restrictions in the movements of foreigners about the country. Red cards have to be obtained, and these are not easy to procure and are often refused. I trust this restriction may soon be removed and we be allowed as before to travel freely about the country.

The people of Iran are fast becoming a literate community, with the emphasis which is being put upon education. It is not merely that the government encourages education, but that there is an urge for it; schools are crowded and also the University in Teheran. People have a great belief in the inherent value and worth of knowledge and that this is the road to success and progress. I think there is too much emphasis on the quantity rather than the quality of the education given. There is a crying need for better teachers who appreciate the fact that schools are not merely for imparting knowledge but rather for the formation of character. Efficient normal schools are perhaps the greatest need today.

One very interesting point—or at least it is of great interest to me—is the fact that practically the only British institution which survived the political storm which is just abating was the Missionary Society, and the churches which have grown up as a result of its work. Of course it did not survive unscathed, because missionaries who happened to be out of the country could not get visas to return, as was the case with all other British people. But the Christian hospitals and the blind welfare work as well as the churches are still carrying on, and we hope that those at present outside

will be granted permits to return to their work. I do hope this fact of our survival means that the government and people do recognize the fact that we have no political axe to grind and are in no way connected with any political activities whatever. Actually one of the regulations of the Society is that its members should not take part in any such activities. We hope that by now this fact is generally understood.

I hope I have managed to give a fair glimpse of Iran as it is or has been during the past few years. It is only too easy for anyone at close quarters to miss important trends and get false impressions. However, the points I have mentioned are among those which appear to me worth noting.

May I make one observation before closing? I do not think the West—and that in effect means Britain and America—has yet given to Iran of its best nor what Iran is really looking for. We have, of course, brought to her much of our technical knowledge and appliances, but we have not given her that sympathy and understanding—that friendship, which she looks for as she faces the dangerous times ahead. We have not attempted adequately to interpret to her the more fundamental bases of the best that our civilization stands for, the rich heritage of Christian faith and thought and character to which we owe so much and which we take for granted and are in danger of losing in consequence. Iran, and the East in general, is looking for the solution not only of the economic problems which trouble her but of the deeper questions which are clamouring for an answer. Those questions which Nationalism and Communism are attempting to answer and failing to do so effectively and satisfactorily. If we have the answer we should be sharing it. The future would seem to depend on the answer to these fundamental questions.

Mr. LANGE: The lecturer mentioned improvement in the water system and in transport. Has there been any improvement made in the meantime in the medical service? When in Teheran shortly before World War II I fell ill with measles. I made enquiries in the very comfortable Palace Hotel where I stayed and I was told that there were only two hospitals in Teheran, a Persian hospital and another quite modern one, a propaganda hospital, which was the Soviet hospital. Between the two I chose the Soviet hospital, and applied to the chief physician, a Soviet Armenian doctor, who treated me most efficiently and well in the Palace Hotel, visiting me there almost every day. I had every courtesy shown me and the very finest attention from Dr. B.

Bishop THOMPSON: I think there has been considerable improvement in the medical service, though in my view Iranian doctors are better physicians than surgeons. There are no really adequate facilities for getting practice in surgery, outside the capital itself; there one can get pretty well served today. The criticism one hears is that the practitioners will squeeze the very last penny from the patient's pocket and that, of course, makes things very difficult for most people. Also the American Point 4 are doing a great deal to help improve the situation. Their doctors and nurses are trying to provide help, instruction and advice in regard to the development of medical services all over the country. At present it seems to be the ideal of almost every young Persian to become a doctor. The medical courses in

the University are crowded out. How many of those young men will eventually prove to be good doctors is a question which still remains to be answered.

Mr. LANGE: I should have mentioned that there is a very good medical institution in Teheran which is French, the Pasteur Institute, but I gathered when there that the Institute only produced serum, particularly that used in the treatment of typhoid, which is endemic in Persia. I understood from the Director of the Institute that the whole French army is inoculated with serum made at the Institute, this being the finest typhoid and paratyphoid serum in existence.

Dr. NANCY LAMPTON: May I point out that the Pasteur Institute in Teheran is Persian, not French.

Mr. DAVID SCOTT: Could the lecturer give us some idea of the present influence of the Bahai community?

Bishop THOMPSON: It is difficult to say anything very definite in that regard. All I can say is that they are maintaining their position, though probably not increasing to the extent they were a few years ago. My impression is that they have become stabilized.

Sir CLARMONT SKRINE: Could the lecturer give some idea of the religious feeling generally at the present time? Is there more fanaticism now than in the time of Reza Shah? What has been the tendency in that regard during the last few years? In the course of the work of the Church Missionary Society the nationalist factor must sometimes enter into the question. Would the lecturer say that the mullahs are a greater menace to the Society's work than they were a few years ago?

Bishop THOMPSON: That is a very wide subject. The national movement has its religious side and it has given an impetus to Islam on its political side. I do not believe that it is much of a spiritual movement, but Islam has three strands: the religious, the political and the social. The political aspect is certainly today in the ascendant. Any Muslim wishing to become a Christian has to face today, besides the old difficulty, the fact that he is considered to be unpatriotic, and it is not pleasant for anybody loving his country to be termed unpatriotic. That is a big obstacle to anyone wishing to become a Christian. I should say that, on the whole, Islam has gained some advantages as a result of the national movement in Iran, but that amongst those who have been educated in the West Islam does not probably appeal very greatly on the religious side.

Mr. A. M. HAMILTON: It would seem that after World War I when the Assyrians came from the north and reached Baghdad they suffered dreadfully from religious persecution. Would that be likely to happen again or is there quite so much feeling towards other religions as there was in that earlier period? The Mar Shimun, when he last spoke to this Society, was pleased that he and his bishops were given more liberty of action in Persia than in the past; more so than in regard to Iraq, I gathered, where there are still some difficulties for him.

Bishop THOMPSON: Religious intolerance appears to be pretty near the surface all over the world and not only in Iran. At the moment there appears to be wonderful religious tolerance in Iran. Of course it might easily be turned the other way, though normally the Irani is an extremely

peace-loving person and to my mind very tolerant. During the first war there was the terrible experience of the movement of the Assyrians down through Persia to Baghdad. That was war, and one of the terrible effects of war. I do not think the Iranians are worse or better than others in such respects.

Mrs. FOX HOLMES : Does the lecturer believe that the best way to oppose Communism in other countries is by a real living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? If so, and the Communists are not tolerant, how only through faith in Christian principles can the Communist be opposed?

Bishop THOMPSON : I said in my closing remarks that I felt we had not given Iran of our best, that is the basis of our Western life and culture. We have been content very largely just to give and share with them some of our technical knowledge. I believe the whole matter is beginning to come on to a quite different level. All over the world it is not so much technical knowledge that people are wanting today. They have already got that. They want to know what is the meaning of life. If we can help them in that way we shall have done something very much greater than we have done so far.

Mrs. CHAMBERS : Could the lecturer add something in regard to art in Persia, the wonderful Persian rugs and materials? I am interested because when I was in Istanboul last year everything of beauty seemed to have come from Persia.

Bishop THOMPSON : Iran is the home of some of the most beautiful arts, and I suggest the best source from which to get information on the subject would be from the Survey arranged by Professor Upham Pope. That Survey runs into seven large volumes containing a number of fine illustrations. In Iran carpet-weaving is still as important as ever, though the cost of producing the carpets has risen so greatly that I am told by the carpet weavers it is becoming more and more difficult to sell their carpets in foreign markets. The majority of the carpets produced in Iran today probably go to the United States of America.

A MEMBER : Some years ago I heard that there was a large exodus of Armenians from Isfahan to the Soviet Union. How far did that go?

Bishop THOMPSON : For two or three years there was a movement to return to their country, a desire fostered by the Soviet Union. Many Armenians did go, not so much from Isfahan but rather from the villages around. Others got as far as Teheran. They had sold all their belongings and goods at very poor prices, and then they were held up in Teheran and never got any further. They are in a very sorry plight. There is a large community in Teheran at present of displaced persons living in very poor conditions.

Sir HUGH DOW : The lecturer said we have not given Persia of our best. I should rather like to hear that elaborated and to hear a little more as to what we should have done and what we have not done. We have to the best of our ability already given the Persians our religion, and, within the limits possible, we have done what we can for education and for the promotion of health. With regard to those two last matters, we have had to work within a very limited sphere. It must be remembered that although Persia has had considerable revenues from the United Kingdom we have

not been consulted as to how those revenues should be spent. We could only show an example in the area in which we were in control, that is, in the oil area, and that I think we did.

This difficulty runs through most countries. At present all through the East and in Africa there is a great demand for increased expenditure on education and on health, and the people of the various countries also want their industries developed. At the same time, they are very jealous of those industries being developed through the only way in which they can be developed, and that is by trained Europeans or Americans. The people tend to say: "Let's get rid of these people and develop our industries ourselves for our own benefit," and then they find themselves immediately up against the problem that they have not themselves the knowledge to enable them to develop their industries, and thus development ceases. Also they say, "Let's first get educated," failing to realize that in order to expand education and health measures vast sums of money are needed and that these can only come from the development which they insist on holding up. I believe that to be true as regards a great part of the world.

Does the lecturer think it is equally true of Persia?

Bishop THOMPSON: I think that there is something besides education as such. I do not know that the people are conscious of that or that they quite know what they want. I believe they are convinced that education will provide the answer to most of their problems—until they are educated, and then they realize that it will not; they realize that education has given them another handle, shall we say, but what they do with it when they have it is the great problem. We see the same here in the United Kingdom. It is a world problem, and it is something altogether deeper than merely education or medical knowledge. So much can become a travesty when translated to people who have not the background which we have with our heritage. Education can be merely thought of as knowledge and not character-building; and medical knowledge can be merely regarded as a means whereby one can get rich quick rather than as a means of rendering service to one's country and the people in it. Those are the dangers evident all over the country. Many young people who become doctors are not thinking of the service they can render to others, but of the amount of money they can make. That is a danger which we have to face as we try to give these people something on which to build a firmer basis of life and which will encourage them to want to serve others and help them to understand the meaning and the value of character rather than to strive merely for the acquisition of knowledge.

The CHAIRMAN: Before we leave I know you would all like me to thank Bishop Thompson very much indeed for his most interesting discourse, so extraordinarily broad and tolerant. I am sure we all agree with what has been said. I always feel that what is required, not only in all these new countries but in our own country, is a proper sense of values, which only true education—which is the balance of the development of character and training—can give. We thank you very much indeed, Bishop Thompson, for a most interesting lecture.

