

The Rt Rev Hassan Dehqani-Tafti

Bishop of Iran who survived an assassination attempt and had to continue his ministry in exile.

The Right Reverend Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, who died on Tuesday aged 87, was the Anglican Bishop in Iran from 1961 to 1990 but was obliged to spend the last 10 years of his episcopate in exile, following the 1979 revolution and an attempt on his life in November of that year.

In the course of the attack, in which several shots narrowly missed their target, his wife, Margaret, was wounded in the hand; and in May of the following year his only son, 24-year-old Bahram, was murdered, apparently by government agents.

All this he accepted with heroic courage and Christian charity. The closing lines of a prayer he composed for his son's funeral in Iran, which he was unable to attend, read:

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 judgment Remember the fruit of the Spirit by which they have enriched our lives, And forgive.

Many considered that Bishop Hassan, as he was generally known, was one of the 20th century's saints. A man of gentle and compassionate spirit, he seemed incapable of thinking evil of anyone, and he devoted virtually the whole of his adult life to the service of the tiny Christian community in Iran – making and nurturing converts in an atmosphere that was always unsympathetic, and often hostile, to non-Islamic faiths, and labouring to support missionary schools and hospitals.

Having been converted to Christianity in his late teens, he was the first Iranian to become a bishop since the seventh century, apart from those of the Armenian and Assyrian churches. But although he enjoyed cordial relations with Islamic leaders in the days of the Shah, he never found it easy to minister in his own country, as his change of religion led to the severing of cultural roots and some alienation from Persian society.

In exile he was a faithful pastor to the Iranian Christian community in Britain, and he travelled extensively in America and other countries to enlist support and raise funds for his beleaguered Church in Iran. From 1976 to 1986 he was also President-Bishop of the newly-inaugurated Anglican province of Jerusalem and the Middle East, and his faith and vision, combined with firm, yet gentle, leadership, helped to give a tricky development the best possible start. He was an episcopal canon of St George's cathedral, Jerusalem.

Hassan Barnaba Dehqani-Tafti was born on May 14 1920 at Taft, a small village near Yazd. His parents were Muslims and poor, but he went to the Stuart Memorial College, Isfahan, and thence to Teheran University, where he trained as a teacher. He became a Christian in 1938 and was soon recognised as the leader of a growing Christian youth group at Isfahan.

From 1943 to 1945 he was an officer in the Iranian Imperial Army, and his good knowledge of English led to his appointment as an aide and interpreter to senior British officers serving in the region. When the war ended he spent two years working as a layman in the diocese of Iran under the English bishop William Thompson.

In 1947, however, he went to Ridley Hall, Cambridge, to prepare for ordination; and soon after his return he became pastor of St Luke's church, Isfahan, where he remained for 10 years, ministering to the local congregation and also engaging in missionary work further afield. A

brief spell as pastor of St Paul's church, Teheran, was ended by his appointment as bishop in succession to Thompson, whose daughter he had married at an unusual Anglo-Iranian wedding nine years earlier.

In the early years of his episcopate Dehqani-Tafti concentrated on the development of the Church's educational programme, and he established a boarding school for boys as well as a second school for girls. He also brought about the expansion of the Church's work among the blind. Inevitably, much travelling was required, and he took a full part in the affairs of the World Council of Churches and Middle East church consultations.

Life under the Shah was never easy for the Christian communities, and Dehqani-Tafti was among those who welcomed the 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 Bishop Hassan and his Church found themselves maligned and harassed.

Pastors were arrested, Church hospitals and blind missions were confiscated, the bishop's house was looted, and later its occupant was arrested and temporarily detained. Then, one night in late 1979, two gunmen scaled the wall of the bishop's house in Isfahan, entered the bedroom he shared with his wife and opened fire. Miraculously, the first four shots narrowly missed – Margaret Dehqani-Tafti still has the pillowcase with its four bullet-holes – and the fifth passed through her hand as she flung her body across her husband to protect him.

In May the following year the bishop's secretary, Jean Waddell, was also shot (although badly wounded, she too survived); and a few days later came the attack on the Dehqani-Taftis' son, Bahram. He had been a student at Oxford and in the United States, but had returned to Iran to undertake military service. As part of his duties, he was teaching English at a university in Tehran, and was returning from work when his car was ambushed. He was shot and killed.

No one was brought to justice for any of these crimes.

Although the bishop wished to remain in Iran, he was persuaded by his friends that this was now impossible and he eventually made his way to Britain. In addition to his work as bishop-in-exile, Dehqani-Tafti exercised a much-valued ministry as an assistant bishop in the diocese of Winchester. Over the course of his eventful life he wrote many books in both Persian and English. He not only had a special knowledge of Persian mystical poetry but was also a considerable poet and a gifted watercolourist.

The circumstances of his retirement caused him some pain, for, while he had always been determined to resign on reaching the age of 70, the Church in Iran – including the assistant bishop who was effectively in charge – pleaded with him to stay on because of the special circumstances then prevailing. He agreed to do so, but the decision was overturned by the standing committee of the province, which seemed to misunderstand both the situation and his motives. He continued to serve his former diocese from afar, however, and is certain to be remembered as one of the outstanding leaders in the history of the Anglican Communion.

His moving autobiography, *The Unfolding Design of My World*, was published in 2000 and his final years were spent at Oakham, in Rutland, where one of his sons-in-law is vicar.

He is survived by his wife, Margaret, and their three daughters.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1918728/The-Rt-Rev-Hassan-Dehqani-Tafti.html>
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