

Article

# From ‘Islamism’ to ‘Spiritualism’? The Individualization of ‘Religion’ in Contemporary Iran

Hossein Godazgar

Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK; h.godazgar.1@warwick.ac.uk

Received: 4 November 2019; Accepted: 31 December 2019; Published: 7 January 2020



**Abstract:** In the first four centuries of Islam in Iran, mosques were arguably the only sacred places for Iranian Muslims to pray. It was only after the invasion of the Mongolians and the resulting expansion of Shi’ism and Sufism throughout the country that the tombs of some sacred figures, including Imams’ grandchildren (*Imamzadehs*) or (*Maqbarahs*), became shrines and important sites for pilgrims. It is interesting that pilgrimage to both Imams’ shrines and *Imamzadehs* and their associated expressions and perceptions lie at the center of the Shi’ite experience of ‘religion’, although they are rarely mentioned in the relevant core sources of Shi’ism. Nevertheless, to borrow a Weberian image, during the Islamic revolution of 1979, mosques became the ‘vehicles’ for the religio-political ideology of the revolution. Unlike *Imamzadehs*, they embraced dissidents from a variety of social classes, ranging from emigrants from rural areas to educated liberals and intellectuals. In the fortieth anniversary of the revolution, the findings of my three-year research project illustrates that whilst the religious status of mosques is decreasing, *Imamzadehs* as well as other venues detached from Islamic authority and political Islam are increasingly becoming ‘vehicles’ for ideas and sentiments for the expression of more individualistic and ‘spiritual’ sensations, rather than the manifestation of an established and institutionalized religio-political ideology. Taking inspiration from a social constructionist approach, discourse and content analysis of media, participant observation in ‘Shi’ite’ venues situated in three provinces, particularly three *Imamzadehs* or *Maqbarahs*, and thirty semi-structured interviews in north-west Iran, this article aims to report the findings of this project by focusing on the meanings of ‘religion’ (and ‘non-religion’) and ‘spiritual’ (and ‘non-spiritual’) attached to these venues, including *Imamzadehs*, and their material culture as well as the changes our informants have experienced in this regard through time and space, particularly during the last forty years.

**Keywords:** social constructionism; religion; Islamism; Islam; Shi’ism; spiritualism; rituals; Iran

---

*‘Inspired by this fundamental thought [the great significance of mosques in early Islam], with the emphasis of the Leader of the revolution [Ayatollah Khomeini], the Iranian Muslim nation turned mosques back to their fully mobile and vital status as in early Islam during the current of the Islamic revolution, particularly one year before and after the triumph of the revolution. And [using mosques] the combatant [revolutionary] clergy explained the political thought of Islam, disseminated the movement’s goals and disclosed the [pre-revolutionary] regime’s catastrophes, the sinister effects of foreign domination and the global imperialist plots, especially that of the United States and Zionism, in the trench of altar and pulpit . . . In summary, mosques changed to forceful centers for the support of the revolution and the operation headquarters of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution at that time. And the Islamic Republic of Iran was born in mosques . . . Against the danger of the separation of the revolution from mosques, which was the Islamic revolution’s new plot, Imam Khomeini (pbuh) said: “Don’t be scared of the enemy’s [military] jets; be scared of [the day when] mosques become empty.”’*

*[Imam Khomeini, Sahifeh-i Imam, vol. 3, p. 21]*

This is a quotation from Ayatollah Abbas-Ali Amid-Zanjani (Amid-Zanjani 2012, pp. 41–42), who was one of Ayatollah Khomeini's students and an influential figure in the powerful Combatant Clergy Association (*jame'eh-ye rouhaniyat-e mobarez*), describing mosques as 'the most important centers for bringing about the revolution' (Amid-Zanjani 2012, p. 40). No scholar of the modern history of Iran would perhaps argue against the critical role that mosques and traditional seminaries played beside the secular political forces during the Iranian revolution of 1977–1979; one that is even referred to as a 'mosque-based' revolution (Halliday 1999, p. 50). In this article, I argue that the mosques have become 'empty' in the fourth decade of the Islamic Republic, despite the wish of its founders and contemporary authorities. The obvious question is: 'Where have the congregations gone?' or 'What has happened to their 'religiosity'? This article is an attempt to answer these questions, aiming to identify and understand the conceptual and practical changes in the 'construction' of 'Islam' and its social meanings in present-day Iran. Before I present evidence of such changes, however, I will report on the definitions of 'Islam' in the modern historical context of Iran.

### 'Islam' and 'Islamism' in the Iranian Context

Here, by 'Islam', I mean the everyday-life meaning of 'Shi'ite religion' in the context of Iran during the large part of the twentieth century until the revolution of 1977–1979. Although 'Islam' was an organizational religion and a major social institution, it was largely kept separated from the institution of politics. Iran had undergone a major socioeconomic transformation as result of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909 (Abrahamian 1982). A new mostly secular judiciary and a 'modern' centralized state were in place. Urbanization, industrialization and bureaucratization, as well as educational, communicational and military developments had progressed enough to assume that traditional forces, namely the clergy and their bazaar allies, would be unable to seriously threaten the Pahlavi regime. In other words, 'religion' as a social institution was undermined, as expected, due to systematic 'modernization' and deliberate, top-down 'secularization'. Like many other societies, 'religion' did not vanish, but was rather pushed to the corners of everyday life, mainly among members of the petit bourgeoisie and rural areas. In order to be an *ideal* 'religious' Shi'ite person, it was sufficient to have some ethical integrity, to maintain cleanliness in religious terms (*taha'rat*), to pray five times a day, to fast during Ramadan, to pay religious taxes (*khoms* and *zakat*), to perform pilgrimage (to Mecca if wealthy enough, Mashad or Qom if less wealthy) and to commemorate the birth and/or death anniversaries of the Prophet and Imams, especially Imam Hussain, in addition to belief in God, his Prophets and the twelve Imams. A 'true Twelver Shi'ite' person would also wish, mostly passively, the return of Imam Mahdi, the twelfth and Hidden Imam in order to bring about social justice and peace on earth, cleansing it of alleged corruption and pervasive injustice. The apolitical clergy, trained in seminaries, played a central role in any number of these practices and beliefs. Mosques, which are traditionally built in the centers of cities and towns, as with bazaars, were the official offices of the clergy, providing 'religious' advice in relation to 'Islamic' practices and providing the setting for collective prayers. A major feature of these seminaries, and indeed the Shi'ite clergy organization, was their financial independence from the government, which was secured mainly by their bazaar petit bourgeoisie allies (Ashraf 1988).

Although the mainstream of the Shi'ite 'ulama remained apolitical and quietist before the Revolution of 1979, political Islam had managed to survive in different forms: whether in individual or collective, progressive or reactionary, violent or peaceful, ways. Ayatollahs Seyyed Hassan Modarres and Abul-Qasim Kashani were individuals who played significant roles in the National Assembly until the early 1950s. However, as Arjomand (1989, p. 94) suggests, 'Islam' in its most politicized form emerged in the late 1940s due to the terrorist activities of a group of young clerics called Fada'iyan-i Islam (Devotees of Islam) who successfully assassinated the Prime Minister Razmara and the well-known 'secular' historian Ahmad Kasravi, as well as attempting a few other unsuccessful assassinations. The 'uprising of 1342 [1963]' by the seminary of Qum, which led to the exiling of Ayatollah Khomeini in the following year and thus the agitation of a segment of the Shi'ite 'ulama,

provides further evidence for the presence of the political ideology of ‘Islamism’ at that time. Since then, there was a gradual amalgamation of Islamist forces with mostly Western-educated intelligentsia and what might be called ‘liberal’ activists, who were shaken by the 1953 Coup, which, together with other factors, paved the way for the revolution of 1979.

Among the intelligentsia, as [Abrahamian \(1982, pp. 462–73\)](#) highlights, the Sorbonne-educated Dr Ali Shari’ati’s role is perhaps critical and incomparable with others, such as Ayatollahs Taleqani, Beheshti and Motahhari. Having said this, his modernist support for democracy and social justice was largely ignored in the post-revolutionary era and Ayatollah Khomeini refused even to mention his name amongst the influential figures ([Godazgar 2000](#)). Influenced by revivalist movements against colonialism and imperialism, especially in north Africa, and intelligentsia, such as Frantz Fanon, Dr Shari’ati blew a new spirit to the dying body of Islam among the educated youth by politicizing it and making it relevant to the modern world. He distinguished between Safavid Shi’ism (*‘tashayyo’e safavi’*), which he described as quietist, and Alavid Shi’ism (*‘tashayyo’e alavi’*), meaning ‘true Shi’ism—the exemplary of which was its first Imam, Ali’—which was supposed to be revolutionary. He also intensely criticized the Islamic *‘ulama*, who were viewed as ‘ignorant’ of the main message of ‘Islam’ and the main philosophy of Imam Hussain’s uprising against despotism and the aristocratic rule of the Umayyad Caliph, Yazid bin Mo’aviyah. His lectures in the modern building of the Hussainiyeh-e Ershad in north Tehran were widely published and attracted the attention of many educated youth. These publications along with other ‘Islamic’ publications, ‘mushrooming’ religious associations and Islamist guerrilla organizations, boosted the ‘religious’ sentiment of the public to the extent that the Qur’an became the bestseller in 1973, with 700,000 copies sold, while *Mafatih al-Jenan* [Keys to the Heaven], a very traditional Shi’ite book composed of highly other-worldly prayers, became the second bestseller, with 490,000 copies sold ([Arjomand 1989, p. 92](#)).

It was interesting and perhaps shocking, as [Milani \(2011\)](#) elaborates, that the Shah himself and his omnipresent intelligence service, titled ‘SAVAK’ (National Organization for Security and Intelligence), ignored such ‘Islamist’ revivalist activities and the ensuing atmosphere until it was too late. The Shah thought that ‘Islam’ and the clerics were in general uninfluential, except as appropriate tools in combating leftists. Furthermore, in his view, activist Islamists, whom he regarded as *‘erteja’e siah’* (radically reactionary<sup>1</sup>), were, he thought, too few to have any impact at a societal level. The global secret services, such as those of the USA ([Emery 2013, p. 621](#); [Halliday 1999, p. 172](#)), the UK ([Ansari 2019](#)) and the former Soviet Union ([Volkov 2019](#); [Halliday 1999, p. 172](#)) agreed with this analysis, as did scholars, such as Nikki [Keddie \(1983, p. 579\)](#), Fred [Halliday \(1999, p. 188\)](#), Michel [Foucault \(1978\)](#) and Edward [Saïd \(1980, p. 23\)](#) and indeed many leftist and rightist European and American intelligentsia or ‘political scientists of all stripes’, as [Halliday \(1999, p. 172\)](#) explains. It was against such expectations that the Iranian revolution finally, and so rapidly, happened, toppling the well-armed and Western-supported regime of the Shah under the banner of the political ideology of ‘Shi’ite Islam’ and ‘religion’: what I refer to in this article as ‘Islamism’.

In the post-revolutionary era, ‘Islamism’, amalgamated with ‘cultural nationalism’ and ‘populism’, have ruled Iran with varying degrees ([Godazgar 2008, pp. 62–80](#)). ‘Islamism’, in this context, means that ‘Islam’, as the highest-ranked social institution with its so-called ‘agents’ (clerics), ‘is fervently believed to be the foundation of a good society, and the whole society should be based on Islamic values.’ ([Godazgar 2008, p. 75](#)). ‘Islamic values’ embrace the political ideologies of anti-Westernism, anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism as well as a specific stress on ‘being welded into the principle of Jurist Guardianship’ (*zob shodan dar vali-e faqih*), as the ‘Deputy of the Hidden Imam’. This would also require an acceptance of theocracy and active participation in mosques as the official and legitimate centers for worship and Shi’ite rituals. The commemoration ceremonies of Imams, especially Tasu’a

---

<sup>1</sup> The literal translation of *‘erteja’e siah’* is ‘black reactionary.’ However, ‘radically reactionary’ conveys a clearer contextual meaning of the term in English.

and Ashra, were transformed into political statements in favor of the Islamic authorities. This was achieved by holding religio-political requiems and by portraying the images of the authorities, in particular that of Ayatollah Khomeini. For the first time since perhaps the influential rule of Shah Abbas I (1588–1629) of the Safavid Empire (1501–1736), during which *official* Friday prayers were established under a Shi'ite state, comparable to those held in the Sunni Ottoman Empire, Friday prayers were established in an official and organized way in July 1979 (Algar 2011). In mosques and Musallas (venues for Friday prayers), people were now required to listen to government-authorized clerics and to defend 'Islamic values' and the Islamic Leader as the 'Hussain of our time' as part of their 'Islamic' duty of 'enjoining good and preventing vice' (*amr be ma'arof va nahy az monkar*). A further aspect of these newly defined 'Islamic values' was a specific stress on sex segregation and the veiling of women as a means of imposing moral purity. Indeed, as Amid-Zanjani (Amid-Zanjani 2012, pp. 41–42) stresses in the quotation above, mosques, scattered across the cities, towns and villages of Iran, provided critical bases and networks for the dissemination of these politicized 'Shi'ite values' or 'Islamism' and other revolutionary activities, including the mobilization of the mass (*'Basij'*) to voluntarily participate in the Iraq-Iran war (1980–1988), during the revolution and in the early life of the Islamic Republic. Forty years after the revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the religio-political ideology of 'Islamism' are still in place. Yet, the question I address here is: Are people still loyal to such 'Islamic values'? If not, what are their definitions of 'Islam' in today's Iranian context? Are mosques still functioning as *the* major sites of the Iranian Muslims' 'religiosity'? If not, what are the alternatives, if any?

### 'Islam' in Its Fourth Decade: Methods and Findings

In this article, I argue for two major points: first, that there has been a decline in mosque-centered Islam, which has taken on a different meaning than it had in both pre- and revolutionary eras; and, second, that there has been a rise in individualized or semi-individualized 'spiritualistic' Islam, which is distinguished from 'Sufism' and the 'spirituality' of ancient Iran found in 'religions' such as Mandaeanism, Manichaeism and Mazdakism (Foltz 2004). I have adopted a triangulation research method in order to demonstrate the above-mentioned trends. For the former, I have used media sources that cite the general complaints of Iranian mosque leaders as well as participant and non-participant observations. For the latter, I have gathered data through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with thirty individuals in three provinces in north-west Iran.

#### (a) Decline of mosque-centered 'Islam' and 'Islamism'

According to Shi'ite jurisprudence, until the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, Friday prayers were *largely* believed to be solely performable under the imamate of an 'innocent Imam' (*'Imam-i ma'soum'*), i.e., the twelve Imams. However, some jurists disagreed with this conventional belief and therefore there *have been* cases of performing Friday prayers in different eras, including the Pahlavi period, in mostly major cities, such as the capital (for more information, see Algar 2011). Yet, such prayers were significantly incomparable with those of the post-revolutionary era, in terms of both forms and scopes. In post-revolutionary Iran, Friday prayers were established and *institutionalized* in a centralized form by the Islamic leader as the legitimate Shi'ite authority (*vali-e amr*), who was involved in the appointment of Imam Jom'ehs in cities and towns throughout Iran. The first Friday Prayer was established with the Imamate of Ayatollah Seyyed [descendant of the Prophet] Mahmud Taleqani, who was widely regarded as a 'liberal and open-minded' Islamic scholar, in Tehran on 28 July 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini gradually appointed Imam Jom'ehs for other Iranian cities soon after. As long as he was alive, although all Friday Prayers were established in a centralized form, their sermons (*'khotbehs'*) were non-centralized. That is, it was up to each Imam Jom'eh to decide what he needed to say to his audience during his sermons. However, during his successor's leadership, all Friday Prayer sermons were directed throughout the country by the Central Headquarters of the Friday Prayers (*Setad-e markazi-e namaz-e jom'eh*), which was established in 1990. Its defined goals were: 'the expansion [of Friday Prayers] in order to promote the awareness of mainly the youth and teenagers towards religio-political affairs and a full imitation of the Guardianship of the Jurist (*vilayat-e faqih*)',

‘defending the values of the Islamic Revolution’ and ‘the encouragement of the people to participation in society and collaboration for the advancement of the goals of the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran.’ (Khatami 2019) This means that all appointed Imam Jom’ehs throughout the country have been required since then to follow orders in terms of what to say in their sermons in each Friday Prayer, which they receive weekly from the Islamic Leader, who is himself officially the Imam Jom’eh of Tehran.

On the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of the first Friday Prayers, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, the ultra-conservative Temporary Imam Jom’eh of Tehran, alongside other Islamic Leader-appointed Imams of Jom’eh throughout the country, acknowledged on Friday 26 July 2019 that Friday Prayers have become ‘empty’. Confirming that Friday Prayers are ‘the microphones of the *Vilayat* [the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist]’, Khatami called for assistance from the media in this regard: ‘... the audible, written and virtual media are to help Friday Prayer[s] and not to be content that Friday Prayer[s] have become empty’ (Khatami 2019). The dramatic decline in the number of participants in prayers is neither new nor confined to Friday Prayers. This has been a subject of discussion especially among ‘reformist’ newspapers, such as Bahar and E’temad, since at least May 2017, but this was the first time that this issue was acknowledged by Friday Imams themselves, who describe such a decline as ‘dangerous’.

The ‘emptiness’ of Friday Prayers is also confirmed by Ayatollah Mohsen Gharavian, an influential member and teacher of the Qum seminary of Hawzeh Elmiyyeh: ‘Friday Prayers lack the previous status nowadays. The main reason for the lack of people’s participation, especially the educated youth, in Friday prayers is the weakness of their analytical and scientific contents, which either does not exist at all or hardly exists’ (Salam-i No 2019). By suggesting this, Gharavian is implying that Friday prayers have simply turned into political ideological propaganda and people are not interested in this anymore. This is also confirmed by a retired professor of political sciences at the University of Tehran, Sadiq Zibakalam. In an interview with E’temad newspaper, he attributes the decline of participation in Friday and collective prayers in mosques to the ‘politicization of prayers and the incorporation of the microphones of prayers into the government structure’ and suggests: ‘we witness the microphones of Friday and collective prayers have no independent views from the ruling [establishment] and what is requested from the Imams [of Jom’eh and Jama’at] is echoed from these microphones.’ (Khatami 2019; Salam-i No 2019). It is interesting that, in a report about Friday prayers in Iran in the last forty years, Deutsche Welle, a German broadcaster, illustrates the change that has taken place from the mainly youthful participation of the Friday prayers in the early years of the revolution to the ‘grey hair’ participation nowadays (Khatami 2019).

The dramatic decline in the participation of prayers is not restricted to Friday Prayers or ‘musallas’, where Friday prayers take place. It also includes mosques and the daily Collective Prayers (*namaz-e jama’at*). This was also acknowledged by Ayatollah Ali Khatami, the Imam Jum’eh of the major city of Zanzan in the north-west Iran on 28 May 2019, in complaining about the ‘emptiness of collective prayers in mosques’ and calling it ‘a cultural concern that requires appropriate cultural tasks’ (Khatami 2019). Indeed, the decline of the mosque-centered and organized ‘Islam’ and ‘Islamism’ is also confirmed by the participant and non-participant observations that took place in mosques and musallahs in north-west Iran. Despite the fact that the offices of the Headquarters in each city provides free transportation to the centralized Friday Prayer venues (*musallas*), they were frequently observed to be mostly empty. Instead, the Friday Prayers’ audiences are packed with soldiers or, on some occasions, school pupils who are forced to attend such prayers. Similarly, the number of attendees in Collective Prayers in mosques, which are mainly situated in the populated areas of the bazaars, often did not exceed one row, especially during noon prayers.

The decline of mosque-centered ‘Islam’ and ‘Islamism’ was also confirmed by the interviews. Out of thirty, only seven informants stated the ‘mosque’ as a venue for their ‘Islamic’ activities—of which, only two mentioned the ‘mosque’ as their sole and exclusive venue. That is, the other five informants merely gave preference to the ‘mosque’ over other possible venues with different degrees and reasons.

A forty-five-year-old male civil servant with a degree in Islamic Jurisprudence, who solely chose the 'mosque', stated: 'Mosque is the best and the most appropriate place for the [moral] training of teenagers and the youth, expressing your personal feelings [*'ehsat-e shakhsi'*] and acquiring inner peace [*'araamesh-e darouni'*]. It is the house of God.' Another informant, a twenty-six-year-old woman and teaching fellow at a university with a family background in the revolutionary guards, mentioned:

*'In my view, the faithful must choose mosques, which are the houses of God, but the majority of the Iranian people prefer to make pilgrimages to Imams' or Imamzadehs' tombs rather than attending mosques these days. Mosque is the house of God and, in my view, is the most sacred place for [having] conversations [with God] [*'raz va niaz'*] and for the expression of religious emotions [*'ehsat-e mazhabi'*].'*

It was interesting that even these two informants, who solely chose the mosque as a venue for their 'religious' activities, mentioned no term related to 'political Islam' or *shari'a* as part of their 'religious' commitment or sensation for attending mosques. These interviews and the non-participant observation also confirm that the decline of participation in Collective and Friday prayers has not occurred overnight, but has happened gradually over the past forty years, especially during the last two decades. I now turn to the question of 'Where have the congregations gone?' and 'What has happened to their "religiosity"?'

(b) *Rise of individualized or semi-individualized 'spiritualistic Islam'*

My strategy for this part of the research comprised participation observation in the three provinces of East Azarbaijan, West Azarbaijan and Ardabil, which are situated in north-west Iran, as well as thirty semi-structured interviews focused on Tabriz, the capital city of East Azarbaijan in 2015–2017.<sup>2</sup> Participant observation included observations of mosques and 'Imamzadehs' (the tombs of presumed grandsons of Shi'ite Imams), 'maqbarahs' (the tombs of reputed saints), Friday prayer venues called 'musallas', university mosques, 'Hussainiyehs', congregation halls for commemoration ceremonies of Shi'ite Imams, and public spaces such as streets, especially during the Shi'ite rituals of Tasu'a and Ashura. This method was adopted due to the 'complexity' of the social context in which 'religious' change was occurring (Darlington and Scott 2002, pp. 74–76; Atkinson and Coffey 2001, p. 812). In addition, after identifying the fact that there were other groups of Iranian Shi'ites that avoided public spaces for performing their 'religious' sensations, a snowball sampling method was adopted in order to interview further informants who were not easily visible for 'ideological or political reasons' and given the 'sensitivity' of the topic (Corbetta 2003, p. 222; Gray 2014, p. 223). However, in order not to compromise the diversity of the sample frame, I made sure to specify the required characteristics of new sample members from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, gender, education, marriage, occupation and social class (Ritchie et al. 2003, p. 94; May 2011, p. 145; Gray 2014, p. 223). It was important to make sure that the diversities of the definitions of 'Islam' were explored.

In terms of the analysis of the qualitative data, influenced by Asad (1993) and Foucault (1972), and due to consistency with the theoretical approach of 'social constructionism' (Beckford 1989, 2003),

<sup>2</sup> The Province of Ardabil was a part of the Province of East Azarbaijan until March 1993. The vast majority of these three provinces speak the Azarian Turkic language and are Twelver Shi'ite Muslims. They also border the Republic of Azerbaijan in the north with the same name, language and religion (Shi'ism). The Republic of Azerbaijan, along with other Caucasian territories (namely Georgia, Armenia and the Republic of Dagestan), was a part of Iran until the 19th century, when Iran lost these territories to Russia during two wars (1804–1813 and 1826–1828). Although the Republic of Azerbaijan, on the one hand, and the Iranian provinces of Azarbaijan (along with those of Ardabil, Zanjan and to some extent Hamadan), on the other, share the same language and religion, they are sharply divided in terms of politics and the definitions of what counts as 'Islamic Shi'ism'. After all, they have historically experienced totally different discourses during the last two centuries. The Republic of Azerbaijan has been subject to Imperial Russian and Soviet rule for around two centuries, with literally little relationship with Iran, including the Azarbaijan provinces. In addition, like other parts of Iran, many Iranian Azarbaijans consider the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan and others as the lost lands and blame the Iranian Qajar dynasty kings for these losses. Therefore, the 'religious' lives of the people of all these three provinces are typical of Iranian society, rather than being similar to those of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Indeed, this is also very clear from the critical roles these provinces have played in Iranian social upheavals such as the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909 and the 'Islamic' Revolution of 1977–1979 (for more information in this regard, see Abrahamian 1982).

this project has adopted a ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ approach, according to which ‘discourses’, in the sense of patterns of beliefs, customary actions and language, are major conventional ways via which ‘ideology’, in the sense of ‘a set of interrelated ideas’ that are associated with power, are produced, re-produced and disseminated (Johnstone 2002, pp. 45–55). That is, I attempt to identify and comprehend the discourses, portrayed via participant observations and semi-structured interviews, by exploring the meanings of our informants’ forms of language and activities and trying to find ‘ties’ or connections between these forms in order to understand the power structure and its impact on the society in which the properties of change and continuity occur (Van Dijk 2001, pp. 352–58; Georgakopoulou and Goutsos 2004, pp. 14–22). All informants, apart from one, were from Shi’ite backgrounds. Due to the flexibility of the method and giving priority to the identification of, and understanding the quality, of change, a semi-structured method of interviews was adopted (Burns 2000, pp. 424–25; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p. 130). The interviewees represent mainly lower and middle classes from an age range of 18 to 62 years. There were 16 women and 14 men, with an educational level ranging from primary school to doctoral studies: four below the equivalent of GCSEs, eleven with GCSE, A-levels and national diplomas-equivalent qualifications and fifteen with bachelor’s degree and above. Nearly half of them came from a state-employment background and the other half from a private sector or bazaar background. All the questions asked were about ‘Islamic’ activities and sensing ‘religion’, including when, where, and how these sensations and activities occur.

Using the above-mentioned methods, I argue here that Iranians have diversified the forms of their ‘religiosity’ by creating and defining a variety of new venues and forms of ‘Islam’ that are overall indicative of an individualized or semi-individualized ‘spiritualistic Islam’. Following Beckford (2003, pp. 71–72), by ‘spiritualism’ (*ma’anaviyat-garaei*), I mean individualized, subjectivized and fragmented definitions of ‘Islam’ that, under the influence of societal conditions and global forces, are ‘socially constructed’ in ways in which they go beyond the objective political or apolitical meanings defined by institutional or organized Islam in the Iranian context: the ‘re-location of the sacred’ from ‘institutional Islam’ to ‘individualized Islam’. In this sense, ‘spiritualism’ avoids and often loathes organized ‘Islamism’ or the political ideology of Islam, which has dominated the discourse of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary era, and also *resists* non-ideological and *shari’a*-centered ‘Islam’ as an institutional religion, which was the characteristic of pre-revolutionary Iran. For Beckford (2003, p. 72), these subjective or individualistic forms of spirituality are the characteristics of late modernity, to be distinguished from medieval Europe and the Pietist movement in 17th and 18th century Germany. In medieval Europe, Christian churches used and/or encouraged ‘spirituality’ as an institutional apparatus in order to *regulate* their members’ lives in the form of training or discipline. In contrast, today’s ‘spiritualism’ tends to embrace ‘a variety of largely voluntary beliefs and practices which are expected to enhance the capacity of individuals to, e.g., realize their full potential or achieve “authenticity” to their “true” self—without any necessary connection to any particular religious tradition or institution.’ (Beckford 2019). His main point is that there has been a historical shift in the definition of ‘spiritualism’ from the former to the latter:

*‘This shift . . . is associated with very broad social and cultural changes such as the declining importance of ‘attributed’ identities (or status) and the rising importance of ‘achieved’ identities; the declining importance of membership in all kinds of voluntary organisations (churches, trade unions, political parties, etc.); the growth of ‘identity politics’; and the growing interest in cultivating ‘the self’ as a life-long project which may produce different views of the self at different stages of life. These changes have all accelerated in the global and digital era (especially through social media); and they help to draw a clearer distinction between ‘religion’ (as a matter of collective discipline, regulation, tradition) and ‘spirituality’ (as something that is freely chosen to be cultivated by individuals).’ (Beckford 2019)*

Although this shift ‘is most noticeable in the liberal capitalist world’, it is not limited to it (for example, see Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Godazgar 2007). In this sense, my definition of ‘spiritualized Islam’ is distinguished from both ‘Sufism’ and the ‘spirituality’ of ancient Iranian ‘religions’ (Foltz 2004), although I believe that both of them *are* important ‘cultural resources’, to borrow Demerath’s (2002,

p. 21, cited in Beckford 2003, p. 72) term, for the present-day individualized 'spiritualistic Islam', which is 'modern' in Eisenstadt's (2003) sense. While, 'modern spiritualism' in the contemporary Iranian context shares to some extent with 'Sufism' elements of intercession (*shefa'at*), mediation (*tavassol*) and entreaty (*talab-e hajat*), especially in the act of pilgrimage to *Imamzadehs*, it does not share with it Sufism's critical element of having a tutelage (*pir* or *morshed*), which is highly hierarchical and organizational. That is, unlike Sufism, 'modern spiritualism,' in the Iranian context, is neither *institutionalized* nor organized. In addition, intercession in Sufism is mainly spiritual in other-worldly forms. Yet, intercession in 'modern spiritualism' can take both this-worldly (physical and materialistic) and other-worldly or metaphysical forms. Iranian 'ancient spiritualism' also has a commonality with 'modern spiritualism'. Both of them emphasize the significance of 'coming from the heart', 'genuineness' and lack of 'duplicity' (*ri'a* and *tazahor*) and indeed any type of 'formalism', including institutional or organizational formations. However, 'modern spiritualism' is distinguished from 'ancient spiritualism' in the sense that the modern version is shaped by global forces and conditions of late modernity such as satellite TV, internet, migration and social media. In brief, 'modern spiritualized Islam' may be considered a response to a person's individualistic and subjective needs that arise from the new societal conditions that one might associate with 'late modernity' or 'post-modernity', which may be materialistic, metaphysical or psychological.

In terms of the question of whether my informants pursued an individualistic subjective or a universal objective 'Islamic' requirement, it may be concluded that they were predominantly in favor of the former. However, the extent of subjectivity among them was not the same, as is to be expected. Therefore, I have compared the degrees of their subjective spiritualism from various angles, as outlined below. That is, individualized or semi-individualized 'spiritualistic Islam' in the context of modern Iran takes various forms: venues, conceptualization of and relationship with 'saints', outward appearance of participants, impact of mass and social media, language, 'art' and 'music', and architecture. These different forms are designed to check to see whether Iranians in the modern context express the kinds of spiritualist tendencies predicted by the theory. What I find is that they do indeed express such tendencies, as in many other societies. Furthermore, what I find is that within the Iranian context, the popular meaning of 'religion' has changed since the revolutionary period.

### 1. Diversification of 'Islamic' Venues

As mentioned above, our informants did not restrict themselves to mosques as the only 'official' venue of organized Islam to perform their 'Islamic' commitments or sensations. They now have many choices: *Imamzadehs*, *maqbarahs*, *Hussainyehs*, *Tekyes*, university, streets, and even their own private spaces within their homes. That is, they did not feel required to follow the objective rules of institutionalized and/or politicized 'Islam' to use mosques in order to perform 'Islamic' collective prayers and rituals. Each individual chose the most appropriate venue for him or her at a particular time. Regardless of the kind of venue that is selected, 'spiritualism' (*ma'anaviyat-garaei*) has taken different meanings:

- (i) The foremost meaning of 'spiritualism' is an '*expression of personal feelings*' or '*self-reflection*', especially when a private space at a household is selected, for the purpose of '*acquiring inner peace*' (frequency = 17).
  - a. '*The place is not very important. What is important is to be able to express my own [religious or spiritual] sensations. If convenient and on my way, I would rather [go to] Imams' or Imamzadehs' mausoleums. If this is not possible, I attend a mosque or any mourning event that takes place in a relative's or neighbor's household. In general, it does not make any difference whether it takes place in a household, Imamzadeh or any other place. The expression of my [religious] feeling is important.*' (A 29-year-old woman with a general education background.)
  - b. '*... Religion [in public life] is entertainment for human beings. I choose my [private] room in order to have [spiritual] self-reflection. Those who participate in [religious] rituals, in my view, lack*

*something psychologically and they fear loneliness and [therefore] they need to fill their psychological vacuum ...* (An educated 25-year-old man.)

- (ii) 'Spiritualism' is related to the meaning of 'genuineness' and 'coming from the heart' aspect of so-called 'religious' activities, which avoids any form of 'religious formalism' and 'duplicity' and 'two-facedness' (*'ria va tazvir'*) (frequency = 5).
- a. *'... If I want to choose to attend an event, I will choose one [in a venue] that is more genuine in terms of their [religious] intentions and lacks any religious formalism.'* (A 23 year-old male student.)
  - b. *'... I choose a place in which there is no duplicity (ri'a) and formalism (zaher-sazi). One that [is genuine and] comes from the heart ... I also like to make pilgrimages to the tomb of Imams ...'* (An educated 24-year-old man.)
- (iii) 'Spiritualism' is not just related to other-worldly demands and expectations. It embraces both this- and other-worldly needs (frequency = 3), although some may prefer 'simple' places to other venues due to the current difficult economic conditions (frequency = 2). However, this does not mean that their form of 'spiritualism' is solely 'other-worldly'. This was particularly clear when our informants chose *Imamzadehs* as their 'religious' venue. This form of 'spiritualism' is particularly related to circumstances when one is *'depressed of and exhausted by the troubles of [this] world and needs a simple [peaceful] place'* and therefore makes a pilgrimage to *Imamzadeh's* tombs as they are 'easily available' and they were believed to be 'simple persons', suggested an unemployed twenty-five-year-old educated woman. This may sound highly other-worldly. Yet, it is not explicitly chosen, as in Sufism. Rather, it is imposed by the deeply stratified social structure of contemporary Iran, in which some Iranians, such as the above-mentioned woman, resort to 'spiritualism' for gaining some peace. This is confirmed by another informant, a forty-five-year-old housewife, when she refers to 'not returning home with an empty hand', i.e., being answered to for usually mundane requests, as a reason for attending the tombs of *Imamzadehs* or mausoleums.
- (iv) 'Spiritualism' means a direct association and a *'private conversation with God (raz va niaz ba koda)'* and feeling Him, without any mediation (frequency = 2). This meaning of 'spiritualism' may also embrace mundane issues.
- (v) The final form of 'spiritualism' in association with venues is related to so-called 'musical' aspects of 'Islamic' festivals, such as playing drums or the flute, requiem (*nouheh soraei*) or rhythmic recitation of the Qur'an (frequency = 3). It should be noted that playing musical instruments, such as drums and flutes, are considered 'haram' or 'forbidden' in 'Islamic' jurisprudence or *shari'a*. This will be elaborated on in more detail below.

In order to identify and understand the relationship between a chosen venue and 'spiritualism', I have tried to roughly quantify the subjective elements of my informants' interviews in terms of the venues they chose for their 'Islamic' practices in the hope that it may make the comparison more helpful. The highest degree of subjectivity belongs to those who selected or preferred their *private space* at homes for 'spiritual' sensations (frequency = 6) and those who no longer had any *'religious feeling'* or belief at all (frequency = 1). This group's subjectivism may be quantified 100%. The next group that scored highly for subjectivism comprised those who chose *Imamzadehs* with 84% (frequency = 6). The third highest degree of subjectivized practices or rituals belongs to those who had *no preference* in choosing venues (frequency = 10). They treated all venues as equal and their choice depended mostly on the 'quality' and the 'convenience' of the 'Islamic programs' on offer. They scored 70% for subjectivism. Finally, the least amount of 'subjectivism' belonged to those who selected or preferred *mosques* for their 'Islamic' or 'spiritual' practices and emotions with a degree of 50% (frequency = 7).

## 2. Conceptualizations of ‘Saints’ (*awli’ā*)

In addition to ‘Islamic’ venues, ‘modern spiritualized Islam’ in the Iranian context is also associated with the perception and conceptualization of important ‘Islamic’ figures or ‘saints’, such as the Prophet, twelve Imams (for Twelver Shi’ism), their descendants (*Imamzadehs*) and other ‘spiritual figures’, such as Sufis. Imamzadehs and ‘spiritual figures’ are perceived to be remarkably close to the divine, the Prophet and Imams. They are allegedly capable of portraying this closeness by performing miracles, especially curing (physical intercession). These ‘saints’ are also theoretically considered as ‘mediators’ between the divine and ordinary people. From this perspective, there is a commonality between ‘modern spiritualism’ and ‘Sufism’. Indeed, it seems that pilgrimage to ‘*Imamzadehs*’ have become a dominant discourse in present-day Iran.

This research shows that my informants’ understandings and definitions of these ‘spiritual figures’ have become so individualized and subjectivized that some of their ‘constructions’ may even attract dangerous allegations of blasphemy and, as a result, capital punishment. Their contextualized and individualized characterizations of different ‘Imams’ and/or ‘*Imamzadehs*’ can also be controversial, from the perspective of classical ‘Shi’ism’:

- (i) ‘*Saints*’ as ‘ordinary human beings’ (frequency = 6): this group of individuals, who have selected their private spaces in their households for their ‘religious activities’, tended to bitterly desacralize ‘saints’ by calling them ‘ordinary human beings’ and sometimes even insulting them, such as:
  - a. ‘*all Imams were cowards, with the exception of Hussain, who was a brave man, and Ali, who considered all people innocent unless their guilts were proven.*’ (An educated 24-year-old woman.)
  - b. ‘*I don’t even know the Imams’ names, apart from a few ... We don’t hear that Hussain was a “free man” anymore ... and he had nothing to do with people’s religion ... Ali was a violent person ... I laugh when I hear “Hidden Imam” ... Imamzadehs are tools for entertainment by the government.*’ (A 23-year-old male student.)
  - c. ‘*I have no imagination about them. I have not experienced them.*’ (An educated 24-year-old woman.)
  - d. ‘*They were good people, like figures in other religions [implying that they were not special].*’ (An educated 30-year-old man.)
  - e. ‘*I have nothing to do with Imamzadehs, but I like Imams, especially Ali and Hussain for their spiritualistic and humanistic characters.*’ (An educated 45-year-old woman.)
  - f. ‘*They have done something that God has asked them to do [implying that they did not choose to do good things independently from God]. [Therefore] they have no superiority over us. They were people like us.*’ (A 26-year-old female student.)

Indeed, all these conceptualizations mirror the societal conditions of contemporary Iran—of which, this group of informants were brutally critical.

- (ii) ‘*Saints*’ as ‘innocents’, ‘examples’, ‘mediators’ and ‘great personalities’ (frequency = 16): these are usually considered ‘classical’ characterizations of ‘Imams’ and/or ‘*Imamzadehs*’ (without the feature of ‘innocence’ for *Imamzadehs*). These characterizations were usually used by those who choose mosques, *Imamzadehs* and those who gave no preference to any particular venue. In contrast to point (i), these features go beyond features of an ordinary person. Having said this, the subjectivized and individualized conceptualizations of these ‘saints’ are noticeable among these informants too, even among those who chose or preferred mosques over other venues:
  - a. ‘*Imams are mediators [between God and people]. [However,] despite what many people believe, I do not maintain that they had authority to [conduct] miracles*’, an educated 26-year-old Shi’ite woman who preferred mosques stated. This goes against classical and institutional

understandings of Shi'ism, and any such suggestion could result in allegations of apostasy and punishment.

- b. *'Among Imams, I like Imam Hassan [the second Imam]. He was a peace-maker. He was a calm person and did not want anyone to be hurt.'* (An educated 23-year-old man.)
- c. *'I like Imams, especially Imam Hussain. He was a symbol of kindness and sacrifice and fighting oppression. I wish there was an Imam in our time too [implying that the Islamic Leader is not an 'Islamic' figure, but a political one]. Ali was strong but he never used his strength in a bad way. He was not violent . . . Fatemeh [the Prophet's daughter, who is conventionally believed to be 'innocent' but not an Imam] was rich, but she was humble and had a simple life.'* (A 29-year-old woman with a general education background.)
- d. *'I respect Imams and their descendants, even an unveiled seyed [descendant of the Prophet] woman [meaning that she does not care about shari'a] . . . They are symbols of kindness, calmness, forgiveness and patience. They tolerated a lot of difficulties because they wanted us to live in calmness and establish a [spiritual] relationship with God',* an educated 33-year-old female informant said. It should be noted that she does not mention that Imams tolerated such difficulties because of shari'a or the political rule of Islam.
- e. *'I like our Imams and Imamzadehs. Some Islamic beliefs have nowadays changed. People do not respect such figures as much as they did before. They suggest that these saints do not belong to our culture and civilization, as they are Arabs. As we do not have a good relationship with Arabs nowadays, they avoid [respecting] these figures. They have independent personalities and I respect them a lot.'* (An 18-year-old male student.)

Although these informants' conceptualizations of 'saints' mirror the classical understanding of Shi'ite figures in general, their specific and selective characterizations of these 'saints' are indicative of an 'individualized and subjectivised Shi'ism' that is to a great extent critical of both the post-revolutionary 'Islamism' and pre-revolutionary 'Islam', which tended to respect all Imams equally, in the context of the contemporary Iran.

- (iii) *'Saints' as 'saviors and helpers' (frequency = 4):* this meaning of 'saints' seemed to be an emerging trend. Due to perhaps economic difficulties and hardship within society, there was a tendency to the view that there is no use in 'crying' for or 'mourning' Imams' death in their commemorations. If one wants to be 'faithful' or 'spiritual', s/he should help people, as the 'Imams' supposedly did:
  - a. *'They [Imams and Imamzadehs] are good listeners [when one makes a pilgrimage to their tombs] and most hospitable individuals who will help you.'* (A 27-year-old female student.)
  - b. *'They are good mediators in helping people to sort out their problems.'* (An educated 30-year-old man.)
  - c. *'They [saints] are like our fathers and can help us . . . I should submit my project [at the university] by next week and I pray a lot to Imams to assist me in doing so!'* (An 18-year-old female student.)
  - d. *'I have no special feelings to Imamzadehs, but I have a lot of respect for Imam Reza, who saved my life when I was nine-years-old and suffering from a serious illness. My father vowed when I recovered, we would make a pilgrimage to Imam Reza . . . He [Imam Reza] is the kindest, strongest, nicest and the most knowledgeable person.'* (An educated 25-year-old woman.)

As we see, a 'spiritualistic Islam' in relation to the conceptualization of 'saints' in today's Iranian context has taken mainly three forms: desacralization, differentiation between Imams mirrored by the conditions of society and/or making them relevant to their individual circumstances and needs.

### 3. Relationship with 'Saints' (*awli'a*) and 'Religious' Experience

Given the respect that many Iranian Shi'ites have towards their 'saints', especially Imams and their descendants, it is also important to know why, how, when, where and how often they 'socially

construct' their relationship with their perceived 'saints' and how a 'religious' or 'spiritual' experience occurs. Although, some of them may attend a collective ceremony or ritual on certain occasions, such as Ashura and Qadr Nights<sup>3</sup>, they emphasized that they do so in order to have a 'richer' individualistic 'spiritual' experience in such ceremonies—not in order to be a part of a group identity or to take part in collective religious behavior. Interestingly, I did not find a sharp contrast between the experiences of those who selected private spaces and those who chose other venues in this respect. However, the members of the former appeared stricter than those of the latter in avoiding public spaces even during such important occasions. In any case, a great degree of these experiences may be characterized as part of individualized and subjectivized 'spiritualistic Islam':

- (i) '*Facing social or personal problems*' (frequency = 16): The high frequency of 'problems' as a reason for having 'religious' or 'spiritual' experience among this group of individuals indeed illustrates the contextualized feature of these experiences and the difficult social conditions they lived in. Twelve, out of the sixteen, were women. In addition, these individuals tended not to allocate a specific time or occasion for having their 'religious experience' and connecting with the divine or the 'saints'. They did it as they felt they needed. Interestingly, the majority of these individuals is composed of those informants who suggested that they had *no preference* in choosing a specific venue. Some examples of the statements in this regard are as follows:
- a. '*I see sometimes injustices and I wish Imam Ali was here. Since I have no access to him, I go and talk to his descendants, i.e., Imamzadehs.*' (An unemployed, 24-year-old educated woman.)
  - b. '*When I face a problem and I need something, I go to Imamzadehs as I am aware that there are more positive vibes there. This is the case with the Imams' shrines too. There is more hope [in shrines, as opposed to mosques] that your requests will be answered.*' (An educated 33-year-old housewife.)
  - c. '*When I face an issue or difficulty [and] when I need someone, I think of them [Imams]. I ask for help from them from my heart. I request to them to mediate between me and God in order to respond to my needs and problems.*' (An unemployed 23-year-old educated man in obligatory military service.)
  - d. '*It [spiritualism] is not easily describable. It usually comes to me when I face a disaster or I am happy with something. [On these occasions] I say 'al-hamd-o lellah' (thanks to God) a lot. When I get caught up in a spiritual condition [halat-e ma'anavi], I repeat this word [al-hamd-o lellah]. When I see an ill person in my surrounding, I thank God that I am healthy.*' (A 33-year-old educated housewife.)
  - e. '*Whenever I have a problem or I have been given something by God, I connect to God by thinking of Him and thanking Him directly. I sometimes ask the Prophet to mediate too.*' (A 24-year-old woman with a National Diploma, who was unemployed.)
- (ii) '*Special occasions*' (frequency = 11): Unlike the above-mentioned informants, these individuals restricted the definition of 'religious experience' to specific festivals and occasions. Some of them emphasized that they had a lot to do for the rest of their time. Therefore, they could only afford certain times for such a relationship and experience, i.e., in specific occasions that are 'religiously' considered to be important, such as the days of Tasu'a and Ashura (9th and 10th Moharram, when it is believed that the third Imam, *Hussain*, and his seventy-two helpers were martyred), the Qadr Nights and perhaps the Prophet's and/or other Imams' death anniversary ceremonies. These individuals can be found across all selected or preferred venues. In other words, these occasions were considered important for many informants. However, seven informants, out of

---

<sup>3</sup> Many Iranian Shi'ites commemorate three nights of Ramadan (17th, 19th and 21st) by staying up alone or attending gatherings at 'Islamic venues' for prayers and reciting the Qur'an as they believe that the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet on one of these three nights. These nights are called the 'Qadr Nights' (the grand nights) or 'Ahya Nights' (the awake nights).

eleven, belonged to the group of individuals who preferred *Imamzadehs* for having a 'religious' experience on such occasions.

- a. *'I get caught up in "religious experience" during [the months of] Moharram and Ramadhan and [Imams or the Prophet's] martyrdom anniversaries (ayyam-e shahadat). I have no [religious] experience on other days.'* (An 18-year-old female pupil.)
  - b. *'When I get bored, I get caught up in religious sensations. Of course, it may also occur when I am happy too. On these occasions, I feel that I should be grateful to God by thanking Him. [However,] the months of Ramadhan and Moharram are the occasions when I have the most religious experiences.'* (An educated 30-year-old man.)
  - c. *'I usually experience a religious feeling during the days of Moharram, especially Tasu'a and Ashura, and the Qadr Nights and perhaps on some other occasions.'* (A female PhD student.)
  - d. *'I may feel a religious sensation on ordinary days, for example, by thinking about one of our Imams. Yet, it has also happened that I did not have such a sensation even during the [Imams' or the Prophet's] martyrdom days. There was no difference between those days and other days for me. It depends on my conditions at that particular time.'* (An educated 25-year-old housewife.)
- (iii) 'No need for special occasions' (frequency = 3): These individuals' definitions of 'religious experience' may differ from one extreme to another (for example, compare points a and b below). While the former may experience a religious sensation once a year, the latter rules out even a minute for lacking religious experience.
- a. *'You cannot allocate a time for such an experience. Whenever your soul needs it, it comes.'* (An educated 32-year-old man.)
  - b. *'Religious experience has no special time. A human being must see themselves in the presence of God (dar mahzar-e khoda bebinad) all the time. Special days such as those of Moharram are also important because these help us to understand and disseminate the ideas and beliefs of Imams. People get more prepared [for religious experiences] in these days.'* (An educated 48-year-old man.)
  - c. *'I used to have it perhaps everyday [meaning while performing daily prayers], but it is not the case anymore.'* (An educated 30-year-old man.)
- (iv) 'No religious experience at all' (frequency = 3): These individuals were very critical of the condition of society and did not consider themselves to be 'religious':
- a. *'I have no understanding of a religious experience, because I have not experienced it.'* (An educated 30-year-old man.)
  - b. *'It depends on my [individual] condition [bastagi be halam dard]. In Iran, the so-called 'religious ceremonies' (marasem-e mazhabi) are in fact a type of [social] gathering and lack any 'religious' or 'mourning' (azadari) character. For example, in the day of Ashura, you should either stay at home or come out and observe thousands of these groups. I do not attend them. Each is worse than the other. You can hardly find anyone that is genuinely 'religious' ... I know mourning groups (hey'at-haye azadari) that commit unethical things throughout the year, but they [suddenly] become 'religious' in Tasu'a and Ashura ... This is why I have a problem with "religious people". They use "religion" for their own personal and economic interests ... I know an owner of a coffee-house, who is the only one in the city who sits behind his desk with a suit. You know why? Because a famous 'maddah' [the person who performs Shi'ite requiems] frequents his coffee-house. In this way, the status of his coffee-house goes up and he receives more customers and then charges each person 4000 Tomans, instead of the 1500 Tomans that other coffee-houses charge ... This owner respects Ashura more than anyone else. He even gives free food for Imam Hussain's mourners (azadaran) on the Day of Ashura. Why not? He has already made a lot of money out of it ... Religion is an instrument of power to make a lot of money.'* (A 23-year-old male student.)

- c. *'I do not need such things [religious experiences] . . . I could not find anything in them [religious ceremonies] that I was after . . . Formerly, I used to pray to Imams whenever I was upset or I needed something. But I do not need these things anymore. If I have a word to say, I may say it to God [directly], not to his servants [human beings].'* (A 26-year-old female student.)

As we see, 'subjectivized spiritual Islam' has taken a variety of forms ranging from responding to personal needs to no need at all.

#### 4. Constructions of 'Outward Appearance'

It was important to find out the implications of 'spiritualized Islam' on individual behaviors in relation to their outward appearance when the informants wanted to attend an 'Islamic' ceremony and/or having a 'spiritual' experience. Did 'spiritualism' mean making alterations to their appearance? This question was important because it was traditionally a norm that men and women wore black clothes in Moharram (and even a part of the next Islamic calendar month, Safar) and men did not shave their beards on certain 'religious occasions', such as Tasu'a and Ashura. In addition, it was important to assess the extent to which present-day Iran is influenced by a culture of 'simplicity' stressed by Sufism and/or global forces and late modernity. My findings show that individual behaviors are not unanimous and uniform. Although the majority of the informants pursued a subjectivized approach towards choosing how to appear, there were some informants who acted objectively in this regard (frequency = 23 vs. 6). That is, it mostly depended on each individual to choose how to express their 'religious experience' on these 'Islamic occasions'. Indeed, given the high respect of Iranian Shi'ite Muslims to Imam Hussain and the commemoration of his death by changing their usual outward appearance in the past, the greater degree of an individualized approach in this regard was rather surprising.

- (i) *'No change'* (frequency = 7): These individuals changed little in terms of their outward appearance for attending a 'religious' ritual and/or experiencing 'Islamic spirituality':
- a. *'I want to be myself all the time, well perhaps 90% of the time. That is, if I make up my hair and face on ordinary days, I do the same on these special 'religious' days too. I may wear a black shirt one day in Ashura out of respect to Imam Hussain.'* (An educated 23-year-old man.)
- b. *'I do not need to change my outward appearance and wear black clothes [in Moharram due to Hussain's martyrdom].'* (An educated 24-year-old woman.)
- c. *'I do not change my outward appearance. Some people may grow a beard or wear black shirts, but I do not do these things.'* (A 23-year-old male student.)
- (ii) *'Formal, nice and clean'* (frequency = 5): These individuals paid most attention to their appearance on such occasions, as though they were visiting relatives or friends. In fact, it was considered an opportunity to show off, especially when they were attending a 'religious' ceremony in a household. It was interesting that most of these informants later mentioned that they would rather use internet and satellite TV for their 'religious knowledge' than state TV.
- a. *'If there are ceremonies in people's households, I pay attention to my dress as if I am attending a party. Otherwise, I do not change my outward appearance.'* (An educated 45-year-old woman.)
- b. *'I wear pretty and clean clothes as if it is an Eid [she means that she does not change her outward appearance because her religion].'* (An educated 24-year-old woman.)
- (iii) *'Simple and modest'* (frequency = 4): In contrast to the above-mentioned individuals, there were those who wanted to establish a 'religious' experience whether privately or publicly in a clean but simple and modest way. Some of these informants criticized those who attended such 'spiritual' meetings in 'posh' attire 'as if they are going to a wedding'. This group of individuals were perhaps unwittingly influenced by a non-materialistic Sufi culture of 'Shi'ism':

- a. '[Out of respect] if I go to Imamzadehs and mosques, I try to pay more attention to my 'hejab' (veiling). Otherwise, I do not make any changes.' (A 29-year-old woman with an A-level education.)
  - b. '[In Ashura and Tasu'a] I try to wear simple clothes, [although] in my view, [the change] of outward appearance is not important.' (A 27-year-old female student.)
- (iv) 'Appearance in accordance with the character of the religious gathering' (frequency = 7): For such individuals, outward appearance should be consistent with the aim and nature of such a gathering. For example, if they were to attend an Imam's or the Prophet's birthday ceremony, they should appear in bright colors. In the same way, they would choose dark colors, mostly black, and perhaps humble dresses for the commemoration of the death anniversary of the Prophet or an Imam.
- a. 'If there is a formal gathering, I dress formally ... In general, I choose my dress in accordance with the nature of a gathering.' (An 18-year-old pupil.)
  - b. 'Every event requires its own attire. It is not appropriate to wear wedding clothes for mourning and vice versa. I like to choose my clothes accordingly.' (An educated 25-year-old woman.)
- (v) 'Following "Islamic" orders [mainly meaning shari'a or tradition]' (frequency = 6): It would not make that much difference for this group of individuals where and in what type of ceremony they wanted to attend. It was just important to objectively observe the appearance requirements of 'Islam', such as strict *hejab* and wearing black shirts, not just for that certain ceremony but for a period of time, ranging from 10 days to two months during the Islamic months of Muharram and Safar. The latter (wearing black clothes) was viewed as a requirement of tradition, but not the *shari'a*.
- a. 'If it was up to me, I would not change my outward appearance. Yet when I consider others, I wear black clothes ... ' (An educated 25-year-old woman.)
  - b. '... In the martyrdom days, I wear a black shirt. When I was young, I grew a beard too, but I do not do this these days.' (A 54-year-old man.)

As we see, although there is an observable level of objectivity towards the requirements of tradition and culture, rather than those of *Shari'a*, in relation to outward appearance, a greater extent of subjectivized and individualistic 'Islam' is portrayed in this regard compared to the revolutionary and pre-revolutionary eras.

## 5. The Impact of Mass and Social Media

In addition to the diversification of 'Islamic' venues, Iranian TV or radio as well as the internet and a variety of social media contributed to the individualization of 'Islam' among my informants, in cases when they were not able to physically attend 'Islamic' festivals. Indeed, this dimension sheds further light in terms of differentiating between 'modern spiritualism' in late modernity and traditional or medieval spiritualism.

*Internet and social media* (frequency = 7): The usage of internet and social media, including Facebook, was important among some of my informants who valued 'spiritual sensation' (*hess-e ma'anavi*). This was because an individual had more options to pursue his or her own personal desire in terms of what they considered as 'Islamic' in the form of film, documentary, an 'Islamic' figure's homepage, sermons or a recorded festival. They were also described as 'useful tools' for communication purposes.

- a. '[In addition to TV and radio], the internet is also an effective and accessible mass medium in our time and its religious materials are more colorful. For example, our group is active on Facebook and other mass communication apps. We utilize the internet for informing people about our programs or disseminating them. Even those who had already been attending the group's programs and can no longer do so for some reason are now able to follow our programs virtually.' (A 26-year-old male student, who was active in the organization of a so-called 'Mourning Group' (hey'at-e azadari) in his local area.)

- b. *'Since I spend a lot of my time on the internet, I read many things that are disseminated there. For example, I follow the page of a cleric on Facebook, reading his work or watching the videos he disseminates. He does not want to show off. He tries to promote a spiritual Islam by telling the truth. His speeches do not serve the interests of a special group [of clerics] or class. I like such people.'* (An educated 23-year-old man who was an active user of internet.)
- c. *'[Satellite] TV and internet have a completely global role. For example, an individual who lives in Paris can also follow all these [religious] ceremonies easily via [satellite] TV or the internet and vice versa. Of course, if the internet carries our national religious characters, they would certainly be more effective than TV. This is because TV has limits but internet has a global and interactive feature that is more effective than TV.'* (An 18-year-old male student.)

*TV and radio:* In contrast to the internet and social media, views on the usage of TV and radio for 'Islamic' purposes were divided. Thus, in addition to the internet and social media, TV and radio has also contributed to the diversification, subjectivization and individualization of 'Islam'. As we see below, my informants' reflections of what counts as 'Islam' as broadcast from State TV and radio are not the same:

- (i) *'Positive and influential'* (Frequency = 11): These informants did not appear to be critical of State-provided programs, especially those broadcast from TV. They enjoyed watching 'Islamic' festivals or ceremonies, although they preferred to physically attend their favorite ceremonies in person and to be a part of a particular event.
  - (a) *'I would rather satisfy my [religious] emotions by physically attending such ceremonies. However, if the conditions are not there for me, I utilize programs broadcast from radio and TV.'* (A 55-year-old woman from a rural background.)
  - (b) *'... TV has an effective role [in the transmission of religious emotions and experiences]. You see that the TV takes a completely religious form during the first ten days of Moharram. Perhaps if this did not happen, we would not have such religious feelings. In addition to its propaganda mission, it has an informative role too. This certainly has an impact on audiences.'* (An 18-year-old male student.)
  - (c) *'... [Mass media] is very very effective. They remind us of religion when we forget it. Or they sometimes show an event in such a way that we get provoked. They flip us if we are on our own ... Otherwise, these [religious] matters become less colorful and, in my view, gradually disappear. [Having said this] it depends on my state at a certain point whether to physically attend a ceremony and which one to attend or to stay at home and watch a TV program.'* (An educated 25-year-old woman.)
- (ii) *'Negative and/or uninfluential'* (Frequency = 10): These informants were unconditionally critical of any 'religious' program broadcast from State media, including TV and radio. They opposed the alleged 'political agenda' behind these programs.
  - (a) *'Mass media is effective ... , especially in countries, such as Iran, where there are no [official] private channels. Programs are broadcast with the authorization of the government ... Therefore, they easily gain what they want. For example, compare the news in Iran with Turkey. They are fundamentally different from each other. So are the matters related to religion. The government will not allow an intellectual, like Dr Soroush, to come on to say something different from what the religious authority desires ... For example, the series of 'Mokhtarnameh' that the TV broadcast was very different from the book. I do not have a positive view of the religious programs on TV in Iran where power is in the hands of a religious government. By propaganda and TV, they manipulate the nation's thoughts in their own [political] interests.'* (A 23-year-old male student.)
  - (b) *'... I do not watch programs that try to instigate crying. I immediately change the channel. I would like to watch programs that contribute to my knowledge ... For example, if four, out of five,*

channels show religious programs in the night of Ashura and say, for example, they show [Yazid, the Umayyad caliph] cut [Abulfazl, Hussain's brother's] hands . . . and do not say why they did so, I watch the fifth channel that is, for example, a documentary about nature . . . ' (An educated 24-year-old woman.)

- (c) 'I think that I devote three quarters or more of my life for expressing religious feelings. This is because we have Fourteen Innocents (*chahardah ma'asoum*) [i.e., twelve Imams plus the Prophet and his daughter Fatemeh] and two [Islamic] months of Muharram and Safar as well as the martyrdom of the children of our country [implying the Iraq-Iran war] and other countries [referring to the Middle East] . . . which has taken place throughout each year. In every ceremony whether happy (*shadi*) [referring to Imams' birthdays] or mourning ('*aza*), crying is on the agenda. Whenever we turn on the TV, a mourning ceremony is on or a film is shown on war and the martyrdom of our children. All this has made our youth loath war and the majority of them avoid Islamic Republic TV. This is because it shows news of the dead, war, blood and crying. Our children hate crying and sorrow. It is no different on local TV.' (A 50-year-old with a general education.)
- (iii) 'Both positive and negative or partially influential' (Frequency = 7): These informants conditionally approved some such programs, but not all of them. For them, some programs can be so 'negative' that could even 'put you off any religious belief'. These informants watched such programs only if they were not able to physically attend 'Islamic' ceremonies.
- (a) 'Mass media is very effective in encouraging or discouraging individuals to express their religious emotions. They have both positive and negative roles. I try to be a part of the [religious] ceremony itself as much as I can.' (An educated 45-year-old man.)
- (b) 'If [programs] are not biased and delivered in the right [non-ideological] way, they will be useful. Otherwise, they will cause people to escape religion . . . ' (An educated 48-year-old man.)
- (c) 'I may say that they [mass media] are effective forty per cent of the time. They may broadcast something from the religious channel that I do not like. At the end of the day, I am 33 years old and I know what I like about these programs and what I do not . . . ' (An educated 33-year-old woman.)

Two, out of thirty, informants had no preference on whether to use State-provided mass media or to physically attend the festivals in person. For them, it depended on their feeling at that particular time.

## 6. The 'Shi'ite Requiem' ('*Maddahi*') and Language

This aspect of research focuses on the question of how different and diverse my informants, who are from various social backgrounds, 'construct' the definition of the 'Shi'ite requiem' and describe change (and continuity) in the 'religious' language of Shi'ite festivals, especially requiem lyrics (*nouheh*) during Tasu'a and Ashura. It was interesting that nearly all of my informants confirmed changes in the mood and content of these 'Shi'ite' songs, which distinguished them from those of the 'revolutionary' ('Islamism') as well as, the pre-revolutionary era ('Islam'). In both revolutionary and pre-revolutionary eras, all musical instruments, as 'religiously'-forbidden, were avoided. Contemporary 'Shi'ite' rituals have not only reconsidered the 'prohibition' of musical instruments but also attempt to convert the content and tune of requiems so that they are closer to 'non-religious' songs that are theoretically 'prohibited' in 'Islamic', including 'Shi'ite', jurisprudence or *shari'a* as symbols of 'moral corruption'. For my informants, the reason behind this is that festival organizers would like to attract the attention and participation of the youth at their 'religious' ceremonies. It is interesting that, as far as I am aware, no Shi'ite jurist (*foqaha*), whether traditional or political (including the Islamic Leader himself), has yet objected to this. As we will see below, such changes have also contributed to the further fragmentation of 'mourning collectivities' (*hey'at-haye azadari*) and the individualization of 'religion' in the contemporary Iranian societal context. Indeed, responses to change in 'Shi'ite' requiems have taken various contextualized and subjectivized forms:

- (i) *'Shi'ite Requiem' as 'knowledge'* (Frequency = 6): There is a considerable trend among Iranian youth or the second generation after the revolution in questioning the emotional aspects of 'Shi'ite' festivals, particularly their crying segments. These individuals are more concerned with the 'reason' aspects of these festivities than its emotional aspects; e.g., why Hussain 'chose' death if he knew that it was going to happen? What was his message? Or did he really choose death? To what extent are the current narratives authentic? These questions go beyond the traditional simple answer of: 'he sacrificed himself in order to save Islam'.
- (a) *'I would rather know about their [Imams' or the Prophet's] lifestyles, conduct, beliefs, how they treated ordinary people, advices that they gave about the treatment of friends and foes ... It is not enough to listen to their hardships and cry for them. I would rather know what really happened at that time. I do not like exaggerations ... Today's requiems are similar to popular songs and they often ruin your religious feeling if you had one [to begin with].'* (An educated 25-year-old woman.)
- (b) *'The meanings of requiem lyrics are more important than their tune or how they are sung ...'* (An educated 27-year-old man.)
- (c) *'The lyrics of today's requiems are not similar to those of the past. They have lost their previous forms and contents, although I know which ones to choose and which ones to avoid [implying I will choose whichever I like] ... It would be useful if there was a university course in this regard to teach people how to perform a religious requiem academically.'* (An 18-year-old male student.)
- (d) *'What I hear from a [religious] singer (maddah) must correspond to my own personal beliefs. If this is not the case, his requiem will have no effect on me ... They keep mentioning different names in their songs, such as Sakineh. If I do not know who Sakineh is, what do you expect me to do? It would be difficult for me to cry for such a person ...'* (An educated 33-year-old woman.)
- (e) *'I have lost the religious feeling and beliefs of society partly because of the nonsense that 'maddahan' [the performers] present to us. Is it important that Imam Hussain's eyes were big or his body strong? When I hear these things, I become disgusted of any religious person or religion ... I am a living example of the impact of such meaningless things on human beings ...'* (A 26-year-old female student.)
- (ii) *'Requiem' as 'emotions'* (Frequency = 4): Unlike the above-mentioned individuals, these informants highlight the 'true' religious sensations of these festivals which were common mainly during the pre-revolutionary era. Therefore, for them, the state of sorrowness and sadness in these mourning festivals are vital.
- (a) *' ... The traditional requiems (nouheh-ha) contained sorrowness and sadness, but these [contemporary requiems] are like popular [non-religious] music. They [traditional or pre-revolutionary ones] were better. They were mourning festivals in real terms, but nowadays they shout 'Hussain, Hussain ...' and hit their chest, but they are fakes [he meant that they do not believe in what they are saying]. Instead of giving you a religious sensation, mourning like this makes you mad and think that Imam Hussain deserves more than this ...'* (A 54-year-old with a primary education background.)
- (b) *' ... Today's requiems no longer give me any religious sensation. They are normal [non-religious] songs. The previous [traditional] ones were full of sorrowness and affected my soul and mind (rouh va ravan). This is why I like them ... Today's requiems are talking about, for example, Imam's beautiful eyes and eyebrows ... What have I got to do with their eyes and eyebrows?'* (A 29-year-old woman with a general education.)
- (c) *' ... It is important that the [religious] singer (maddah) becomes attentive and enthusiastic in describing what happened in the [religious] stories ... This makes me so attracted to his sayings that I could hardly forget those stories.'* (A 45-year-old woman with primary education.)

- (iii) *'Requiem' as 'spirituality'* (Frequency = 6): These forms of Shi'ite requiems literally emphasize the 'spiritual' aspects of 'Shi'ite' festivals in a way in which they are 'genuine' and 'far from formalism and duplicity' (*ria va tazahor*).
- (a) *'Requiem are of little effect for me [due to their emotional aspects]. If you believe in God by following your heart and wisdom, it would be more effective and sensible.'* (An educated 30-year-old man.)
  - (b) *'The meanings and content of the lyrics are more important to me. When a [religious] singer (maddah) sings nonsensical poems, I automatically feel repulsed by religion (din va madhab) ... Today's requiems do not transfer to me the degree of spirituality that I need (bar-e ma'anavi-e lazem) ...'* (An educated 25-year-old woman.)
  - (c) *'... I try to choose festivities from which I can receive the degree of spirituality that I require (bar-e ma'anavi ke lazem daram). Spirituality usually transfers with meaningful lyrics ... I would rather listen to requiems that are calm and spiritual.'* (An educated 23-year-old man.)
  - (d) *'We need to follow our heart to God. [In this way], we do not even need lyrics to be sung by a [religious] singer, who might not even believe in what he is saying himself.'* (An educated 45-year-old man.)
- (iv) *'Requiem' as 'art'* (Frequency = 5): In contrast to the above-mentioned forms, which describe changes in requiem negatively, some of my informants conditionally viewed the recent developments in the phenomenon of 'requiem' as positive. For them, the 'artistic' aspects of these requiems were attractive. Due to the significant role of art in the subjectivization of 'Islam' in the Iranian context, the impact of art on 'Shi'ite' festivities, in general, will be discussed separately below.
- (a) *'Art, in general, plays a prominent role in [religious] festivities. Certain poems, paintings, calligraphies, photos and so forth that are related to 'religion' have a great impact [on my religious sensations]. I become influenced as soon as I see them and start to think about these pieces of art and their relation to religion. I also praise the director of the 'Mokhtarnameh' series. It was influential ... I do not like the [traditional] Ta'azieh (shabih-khani) and things like that.'* (An educated 24-year-old woman.)
  - (b) *'I would like to listen to calm and cool musical requiems (nouhehs) if they are not accompanied with stamping of the feet on the ground (koubidan-e pa bar zamin).'* (An educated 25-year-old woman.)
  - (c) *'I do not like prayers that I do not understand. However, if a [religious] singer (maddah) sings them with a nice voice, I will get influenced.'* (A 27-year-old female student.)
  - (d) *'The foundation of requiems are lyrics and words and the ways in which they are expressed. Of course, rhythm and music are so important that without them the words would not be able to bring about the desired effect.'* (An educated 26-year-old man.)
- (v) *'Requiem' as 'global Islamism'* (frequency = 1): There was only one informant who thought that Shi'ite festivities are good instruments for converting the world towards the interests of Iranian Shi'ism or 'Islamism': *'If the language of requiems is clear and understandable, it will be excellent. It will attract many audiences. In addition, if they are presented in epic and non-superstitious ways, they will surely be more enjoyable. The advantage of [expressing requiems with] lyrics and words is that if they are translated to other nations' languages, real Islam will be known and will govern the world.'* (An educated 45-year-old man.)
- (vi) *'Requiem' as 'language' and culture* (Frequency = 13): Many of my informants preferred the requiems to be presented in their local language, i.e., Azarian Turkic, rather than Persian or Arabic. They did so not necessarily out of ethnic nationalist desires, which was the case for a few informants, but mainly because of the discourse with which they had grown up.

- (a) 'Of course, I would rather listen [to requiems] in my own language. I relate to them when it is in [Azarian] Turkic.' (A 54-year-old man.)
- (b) 'Well, our religion has a direct relationship with the Arabic language. Its impact is clear in every festivity . . . [However] Iranians have also produced many interesting requiems in their own local languages . . . I believe that religious sensations are different in each language . . . I would not mind listening to a requiem in the Persian language . . . but at that particular moment, I would like to listen to it in my own language in order to internalize it.' (An 18-year-old student.)
- (c) ' . . . I am not biased towards other languages. But the poetic structure of [Azarian] Turkic music in requiems are Bayat [melody], which is different from other languages. It is called 'Okhshama'. I really enjoy it . . . ' (A 26-year-old male student.)

Indeed, the vast diversity of the conceptualization of 'Shi'ite requiems', as demonstrated above, is indicative of a dramatic shift from traditional religious festivities to a 'modern' one, which is far from the 'religious' requirement of the organized Islam practiced before.

### 7. The 'Construction' of 'Art' and 'Music'

The world of 'art', in general, has always been separate from that of 'religion' in both pre- and post-revolutionary Iran, with the exception of some forms of art, which mainly appeared in architecture and calligraphy, that were called 'Islamic art'. According to *shari'a*, reflected whether in the form of 'Islam' or 'Islamism', some aspects of art are religiously forbidden and should be avoided; music is one of them. Playing some musical instruments, like a certain percussion *dayereh*, was described by the ulama as 'slapping the face of Fatemeh, the Prophet's daughter' in the pre-revolutionary period. Despite this, the majority of Iranians enjoyed listening to music or playing it. However, they considered this a part of the 'non-religious' aspect of their life, which they strongly distinguished from 'religious' requirements. That is, the social phenomenon of 'music' strictly divided the definition of 'Islam' from 'non-Islam'. For this very reason, all kinds of music were banned in public in the post-revolutionary era until Ayatollah Khomeini issued a religious decree (*fatva*) allowing some forms of music to play or listen to on the condition that they are played for 'revolutionary' and 'epic' purposes—not for 'gratifying' purposes that are concomitant with 'moral corruption'. This 'revolutionary' music was called '*soroud*', instead of '*musiqi*' or '*taraneh*'. However, so-called 'non-religious' music gradually re-entered ordinary people's lives, although State TV and other elements of mass media are still restricted to broadcast '*soroud*' and to avoid showing any images of music performance on TV. In the fourth decade of the Islamic Republic, as we saw above, it seems that 'music' has entered not only 'non-religious' aspects of people's life, but also the domain of 'religion' itself through the use of flutes and drums as well as a change in the form and content of requiems in 'religious' festivals. Moreover, the name of 'music' (*musiqi*) is not considered as dirty and 'sinful' as before. Indeed, neither of my informants used the term '*soroud*' for 'music'. Nor did the informants avoid listening to 'music' on grounds of it being 'prohibited' by *shari'a*. 'Music' is not considered a 'taboo' and there is no longer such a divide between 'music' and 'religion', although people may still be aware of its prohibition in *shari'a*. This has led to many consequences and has furthered the diversification and individualization of 'Islam'.

- (i) '*Music*' as part of '*religion*' (Frequency = 16): Some of my informants used 'music' in two different ways: 'religious' and 'non-religious'. The categorization of deeply Shi'ite 'requiems' or '*nouhas*' as part of religiously-prohibited 'music' may be considered a sign of 'disenchantment of the world' and a new form of 'spiritualism', which is consistent with 'late-modernity' or 'post-modernity'. Indeed, some of my informants considered 'music', specifically 'calm' ones, as part of their subjective 'spiritual' developments too.
- (a) '*Music and art embrace all aspects of our life [religious or non-religious]. When we go to a mosque or Hussainiyeh, art is the first thing that we confront . . . if music was not important, 'adhan' [call for pray] would not have been performed in a musical way.*' (A 26-year-old female student.)

- (b) *'Music has a lot of impact on [religious] singing (maddahi), but many of the singers (maddahan) are illiterate about music and just imitate other people's work. In my view, music has been oppressed [by the government], but we can use it more and in a better way. With the development of an academic study of the art of music, music can surely play a better and deeper role in our religious sensation.'* (A 26-year-old male student.)
- (c) *'Music has a lot of applications to [religious] singing (maddahi and movlud-khani). Still many singers are illiterate in music ... You may classify music in terms of religious and non-religious. [However] both of them contribute to human souls and spirituality, but in different ways.'* (An educated 45-year-old man with a degree in Islamic Jurisprudence.)
- (d) *'I listen to 'nouhehs' [religious] and music [non-religious] that correspond to my heart. I listen [to them] again and again ... I do not unfortunately have much knowledge of music, but I am really keen to learn more about it.'* (An 18-year-old female student.)
- (e) *'Art has a great impact on my [spiritual] thoughts and feelings ... I may even be influenced with the wordless music of Beethoven.'* (An educated 24-year-old woman.)
- (f) *'[For me] religious ceremonies and gatherings are kinds of art, carnival and celebration. [However] they are categorized into two kinds: some of them are sad, which we may call religious, and others that are not sad, which we may call non-religious. Depending on the conditions at that time, I like both of them.'* (A 23-year-old male student.)
- (ii) *'Music' as 'non-religion' (Frequency = 12):* For these informants, 'music' was a 'non-religious' part of their life. In other words, they mostly used 'non-religious music' in their everyday lives, but they wanted to listen to the 'religious *nouhehs*' on certain days, such as Ashura and Tasu'a. In their view, the latter was distinguished from the former. These informants may be conscious of the prohibition' of 'music' in *shari'a* but were not bothered by it. For them, 'non-religious' music could contribute to 'spiritualism' too.
- (a) *'I am not interested in religious music and, in my view, it has no value. When I listen to it, it reminds me of my own problems, rather than the Imams. In my view, music has no place in religion ... The difference between religious and non-religious music is that the former is sad, and the latter is happy. When I listen to the latter, I become calm and happy. It is 'haram' (forbidden), but it is helpful for me.'* (A 45-year-old woman.)
- (b) *'It is not appropriate to mix music and dance with mourning commemorations all the time, whether they are related to Imams or ordinary people. However, I have no problem with music in ordinary [non-religious] ceremonies and parties. Music is part of our soul and existence. It makes you calm and relaxed. I need it [for this reason]. It can also contribute to your spirituality in a way in which nothing can, but I do not like dancing. I view dancing as a sign of women's slavery through which they provide happiness for men.'* (A 50-year-old woman.)
- (c) *'Religious music and art are specifically related to Imams and saints. Such art reminds us of them and makes us sad. Other [kind of] music is usually, but not always, happy [non-religious]. [Whatever kind they are] I can tell in general that individuals can gain the spiritual status they wish by listening to and using music, art and theatre. They are indeed very influential.'* (An educated 25-year-old woman.)
- (iii) *'Music' as 'destructive' (frequency = 1):* There was only one, out of thirty, informant who described 'music' as destructive. Interestingly, he did not oppose it on the basis of the *shari'a* or objectively: *'Dance and music have very temporary effects (asar-e lahze'i), [but] they have destructive effects on the unconscious part of the human [mind]. For example, they increase a sense of illusion and phantom. Therefore, I do not agree with the use of music and art in religious ceremonies a lot.'* (An educated 27-year-old man.)

It was interesting that, despite the rather antagonistic policies of the Islamic Republic towards art in general, there was also a growing interest in other arts, such as drawing, film and dance, among some of my informants.

## 8. 'Islamic' Architecture

In order to identify and understand any possible correlation between my informants' 'religious' sensation and architecture, they were asked whether a building's architecture was effective in their selection of attendance in that venue. Only two, out of thirty, informants described 'architecture' as uninfluential in absolute terms. The rest of my informants confirmed that a 'religious' architecture was important for experiencing an 'Islamic' sensation or 'spirituality', although it was not described as the only factor.

- (i) *'Spirituality'* (frequency = 19): Nineteen, out of thirty, informants associated 'Islamic architecture' with 'spirituality' in three different forms:
- (a) *'Simplicity'*: Perhaps under the influence of 'Sufism', these informants loathed an 'aristocratic Islam' and its manifestations in any form, including architecture. (Frequency = 10)
- *'... When I am attending a [religious] venue that has a lot of luxuries, I do not usually feel relaxed and calm (ehsas aramesh) and my spiritual feeling (hess-e ma'anaviyam) vanishes.'* (An educated 25-year-old woman.)
  - *'I would rather not attend a venue that is too sumptuous. But if it has style and I feel that I could have a spiritual experience there, I like to go there.'* (An educated 23-year-old woman.)
  - *'A religious sensation could occur in any venue and time... However, if we consider the simple life of the Prophet, it did not involve exorbitant expenses. The Prophet was the leader of the poor and never pursued luxuries. This differentiates the Prophet's Islam from that of Saudi Arabia's rulers.'* (An educated 48-year-old man.)
- (b) *'Old and historical buildings'* (Frequency = 4): These informants associated 'spiritualism' with historical buildings that avoided any of the glamorous aspects of today's world.
- *'The older the religious buildings are, the more spiritual and attractive they are.'* (An educated 45-year-old man.)
  - *'I am personally attracted to religious buildings with an old architecture, although the quality of ceremonies is more important. This is because I feel that they have been built with more sincerity and genuineness.'* (A 25-year-old female student.)
- (c) *'Luminous and colorful buildings'* (Frequency = 5): For these informants, the brighter and more colorful the buildings are, the more effective they are in inducing 'spiritual' feelings.
- *'I would like to choose a [religious] venue that is luminous and lucid. I feel that the more luminous it is, the more spiritual it is... It need not necessary be luxurious. It can also be a simple place... [Of course] luminosity does not create spirituality in me. Spirituality is something related to my heart and is an inner property. The right architecture for me may increase my sense of spirituality.'* (An 18-year-old pupil.)
  - *'Spirituality is a personal matter. It is related to your heart. However, if I am situated in a venue that is more colorful, stylish and aromatic, I would not mind to stay there longer.'* (A 54-year-old man with a primary education.)
- (ii) *'Identity'* (frequency = 2): For two informants the 'Islamic' identity of buildings in terms of their architecture was important.

- *'I am in favor of positive traditionalism in architecture ... The more we distance ourselves from our own customs and culture, the poorer we become in terms of thoughts, beliefs and culture. Our religious identity becomes less colorful too.'* (An educated 26-year-old man.)
  - *'The architecture of a religious building should correspond to Muslims' lifestyles ... The geometric style of Islamic architecture subtilizes and refines my soul.'* (An educated 27-year-old man.)
- (iii) *'Equality'* (frequency = 1): For one of my informants, an observation of gender equality in the *'religious architecture'* of a building was crucial: *' ... The old mosques were big. I like their entrances, minarets and domes. I like the pools in the middle of their gardens. It relaxes me, like my grandmother's house. I like the trees in their gardens too. [However] I do not like their discriminatory separate entrance doors for males and females. While men use the main big entrance, women should enter the mosque through a small door in the corner ... Even inside the building, women have a smaller space than men ... This is not appropriate.'* (A 27-year-old female student in architecture.)
- (iv) *'Subtle architecture'* (Frequency = 3): a few of my informants defined *'religious architecture'* in terms of their greatness and perhaps luxuriousness.
- *'The very existence of a large and pretty mosque is indicative of the greatness of my religion ... I have seen some mosques in Spain and Turkey to which I was very attracted. Since then, I have been thinking about why we do not pay attention to our religious buildings.'* (A 24-year-old woman with a degree in architecture.)
  - *'I do not like buildings with poor architecture. In fact, when I see Imamzadehs with a poor and simple building, I feel sorry for the saint who is buried there and I become sad.'* (A 45-year-old housewife.)

Again, the question of what counts as *'Islam'* in association with *'architecture'* differs among my informants ranging from *'simplicity'* and *'non-luxurious'* to *'luxurious'*.

## Conclusions

Inspired by Beckford's (1989; 2003) *'social constructionist'* theoretical approach towards the meaning of *'religion'*, this research illustrates how the definition of *'Islam'* has changed in the Iranian context during the last forty years. The largely non-ideological institutional *'Islam'* in the pre-revolutionary era became highly political and remarkably organized around mosques throughout the country during the revolution of 1977–1979 and the early post-revolutionary era (*'Islamism'*). On the fortieth anniversary of the Islamic revolution, this research demonstrates that contemporary Iran is experiencing a different definition of *'Islam'* that is associated with *'spirituality'*, as defined by Beckford (2003, pp. 71–72; 2019).

As the findings show, the *'sacred'* has been *'re-located'*, in Beckford's terms, from an organized and institutional *'Islam'* during the pre- and the early post-revolutionary Iran to a profoundly *'fragmented'*, *'subjectivized'* and *'individualized Islam'* or *'spiritualism'* in contemporary Iran. Such a *'re-location'* is easily visible across the various aspects of *'Shi'ite'* everyday life, ranging from the *'diversification of "Islamic" venues'* to *'Islamic architecture'* in the Iranian context, as discussed above. Depending on my informants' age, gender, education, social status and class, and urban or rural birthplace, their experiences of *'spiritualized Islam'* in various dimensions of everyday life has been *'constructed'* in incredibly diverse forms. These forms not only go beyond the requirements of an institutional Islam, such as the objective obedience of *shari'a* and Shi'ite authority, but also dangerously oppose these requirements in some cases, such as those of conceptualizations of the *'Imams'* and *'music'*.

In addition, this research illustrates that there have been correlations between the independent variables of age, gender, education, social class and birthplace, on the one hand, and the individualized *'spiritualistic Islam'*, on the other. The younger my informants were, the more they were susceptible to *'spiritualism'* - while the average age for the people with inclinations towards spiritualism was around 30, it was 36 for the people who were inclined more towards objectivized Islam. It was interesting that

females had more tendency towards 'spiritualism' than men (10 males and 15 females vs. four males and one female), especially when they chose their private space, made pilgrimages to *Imamzadehs* or showed 'no preferences' about venues. That is, men were more inclined to attend mosques. This is consistent with the contemporary contexts of the United Kingdom, Greece, Portugal, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Mexico and Israel, where more women than men leave different traditional religions and join various spiritual movements (Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Fedele 2019). In terms of education, the informants with first degree education and above were more susceptible to subjectivized 'spiritualism', while those with a level of general education and below were more inclined to a rather 'objectivized Islam'. The lower their level of education, the lower their level of 'spiritualistic Islam' was. Furthermore, the informants who belonged to a lower social class and rural backgrounds had a lower level of 'individualized Islam' than those who belonged to (lower-)middle class and urban backgrounds. As Beckford (2003, p. 72) elaborates, this is perhaps because the societal conditions in 'late modernity', which are themselves exposed to global forces (such as satellite TV, internet, social media and migration), play a critical role in shaping these individualized forms and 're-drawing' the frontier between 'religion' and 'spirituality' through changes in social relationships and culture.

In this sense, contemporary Iranian 'spiritualized Islam' is differentiated from the type of 'spiritualism' that takes place *within* the frontiers of an institutional religion, whether 'Islam', such as 'Sufism', or other religions, such as the Christian 'spirituality' observed in Kendal in north-west England (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). For example, 'spiritualism' in the current Iranian context is distinguished from 'Sufism' in the sense that the latter has historically given special, if not the highest, status to 'Imams', especially the first Imam, as the *'awliya elahi'* (divine figures), whilst the former may desacralize them as 'ordinary people' or even as 'violent' or 'cowardly' figures. Or, whilst the former does not restrict itself in terms of the types of 'music', 'Sufism' is conditional to a specific type of music that is associated with 'deep mediation'. Moreover, the link between body, beliefs and emotions is central for 'Sufism' in many social contexts from Asia to Africa, but there is no such essentiality in 'spiritualized Islam' in today's Iran. On the contrary, some of my informants distanced themselves from 'emotions'.

Iranian 'spiritualism' can also be distinguished from the Kendal project, according to which although 'spiritualism' in the context of north-west England (Kendal) takes a form of 'subjectivization', the majority of these 'subjectivized' and 'spiritual' people still consider themselves 'congregational members' who are 'remaining obedient to God, scripture and the church.' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 113). My informants might still believe in God and the Qur'an, but they showed little sign of 'obeying' Him in the sense of pursuing *shari'a* and acquiring its knowledge by visiting mosques and listening to, let alone seeking advice from, 'religious' authority in the way in which it has been reported about Kendal or traditionally occurring during (pre-)revolutionary eras. As we have seen, some of them even went beyond Shi'ite particularism and the recognized boundaries of 'religious' figure by giving examples that are inclusive of all humanity, rather than Shi'ism. In addition, our informants did not identify themselves as part of any collectivity in the way that the people in Kendal did, i.e., 'congregational members'. Moreover, unlike the Kendal project (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 11), this research does not differentiate between 'subjectivization' and 'individualization'. By both 'subjectivization' and 'individualization', I mean that Iranian Shi'ites pay more attention to their own individual *and* subjective desires, needs, wishes and consciousness than the formalist and collectivist requirements of 'political Islam' as well as those of the organized and institutionalized non-ideological 'Islam'. This meaning of 'individualization', associated with 'spiritualism', is fully consistent with Godazgar's (2007, p. 397) findings in relation to the definition of 'individualism' as a key element of 'consumerism' in the current context of Iran.

Finally, I conclude that Beckford's 'social constructionist' approach to 'spirituality', the 're-location of the sacred' and 'cultural turn' from institutional state 'religion' to individualistic 'spiritualism' under

the forces of globalization *and* the societal conditions of theocracy is fully consistent with the findings of this research.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank James Spickard for reading a draft of this manuscript and making useful comments and suggestions.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Abrahamian, Ervand. 1982. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Algar, Hamid. 2011. Emam-e Jom'a. In *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Edited by Ehsan Yarshater. New York: Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, vol. 8, Fasc. 4. pp. 386–91. Available online: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/emam-e-joma> (accessed on 17 December 2019).
- Amid-Zanjani, Abbasali. 2012. Enqelab-i Eslami-i Iran: Elal, Masa'el va Nizam-i Siasi. In *The Islamic Revolution of Iran: Causes, Issues and Political Order*, 2nd ed. Qom: Daftar-i Nashr-i Ma'arif. First published 1392.
- Arjomand, Said Amir. 1989. *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ansari, Ali. 2019. The FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] archives and the Iranian Revolution. Paper presented at Workshop: Iranian Revolution at 40: Source Criticism and Perspectives, Institute of Iranian Studies, St Andrews, UK, May 31.
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ashraf, Ahmad. 1988. Bazaar-Mosque alliance: The social basis of revolts and revolutions. *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 1: 538–67. [CrossRef]
- Atkinson, Paul, and Amanda Coffey. 2001. Revisiting the relationship between participant observation and interviewing. In *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*. Edited by Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein. London: Sage Publications, pp. 801–14.
- Beckford, James A. 1989. *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society*. London: Unwin-Hyman.
- Beckford, James A. 2003. *Social Theory and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beckford, James A., and University of Warwick, Coventry, UK. 2019. Personal communication via email.
- Burns, Robert B. 2000. *Introduction to Research Methods*, 4th ed. London: Sage Publications.
- Corbetta, Piergiorgio. 2003. *Social Research: Theory, Methods and Techniques*. Translated by Bernard Patrick. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Darlington, Yvonne, and Dorothy Scott. 2002. *Qualitative Research in Practice: Stories from the Field*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Eisenstadt, Shmuel Noah. 2003. *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Emery, Christian. 2013. United States Iran policy 1979–1980: The anatomy and legacy of American diplomacy. *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 24: 619–39. [CrossRef]
- Fedele, Anna. 2019. Religion, spirituality, secularism and gender at the Marian Shrine of Fatima. Paper presented at 35th ISSR Conference titled the Politics of Religion and Spirituality, Barcelona, Spain, July 9–12.
- Fedele, Anna, and Kim Knibbe, eds. 2013. *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Foltz, Richard C. 2004. *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped World Religions*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.
- Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Translated by Alan Mark Sheridan-Smith. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. What are the Iranians dreaming about? *Le Nouvel Observateur*, October 16–22.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra, and Dionsis Goutsos. 2004. *Discourse Analysis: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Godzgar, Hossein. 2000. Motale'ye tatbiqi-e ta'rif-e hoviyyat-e melli az didgah-e Dr Ali Shariati va jomhuri-e eslami-e Iran. In *Dr Ali Shari'ati*. Edited by Javad Mizban. The comparative study of the definition of 'national identity' between Dr A. Shariati and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Mashad: Mashad Ferdowsi University Press, vol. 2, pp. 369–95.

- Godazgar, Hossein. 2007. Islam versus consumerism and post-modernism in the context of Iran. *Social Compass* 54: 389–418. [CrossRef]
- Godazgar, Hossein. 2008. *The Impact of Religious Factors on Educational Change in Iran: Islam in Policy and Islam in Practice*. New York, Ontario and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Gray, David E. 2014. *Doing Research in the Real World*, 3rd ed. London: Sage Publications.
- Halliday, Fred. 1999. *Revolution and World Politics*. London: Mcmillan.
- Heelas, Paul, and Linda Woodhead. 2005. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality?* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Johnstone, Barbara. 2002. *Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Keddie, Nikki. 1983. The Iranian revolution in comparative perspective. *American Historical Review* 88: 579–98. [CrossRef]
- Khatami, Ahmad. 2019. Ahmad Khatami: Rasaneh-ha az Khalvat Shodan-I Namaz Jum'ah Khoshhal Nabashand. [Ahmad Khatami: Media Are Not to Be Happy for the Emptiness of Friday Prayer]. Available online: <https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/iran/a-49760966> (accessed on 27 July 2019).
- Kvale, Steinar, and Svend Brinkmann. 2009. *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage Publications.
- May, Tim. 2011. *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*, 4th ed. Croydon and New York: Open University Press.
- Milani, Abbas. 2011. *The Shah*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ritchie, Jane, Jane Lewis, and Gillian Elam. 2003. Designing and selecting samples. In *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. Edited by Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis. London: Sage Publications, pp. 77–108.
- Said, Edward W. 1980. Iran and the press: Whose holy war? *Colombia Journalism Review* 18: 23–33.
- Salam-i No. 2019. Chera in rouz-ha az namaz-i jum'ah istiqbal nemisahavad? Imam jum'ah-haei ke shabihi Taliqani Nistand: Namaz-i jum'ah chehel sal-I ba'ad' [Why Are not Friday Prayers Welcomed Nowadays? Imam Jum'ahs Who Do not Look Like Taliqani: Friday Prayer after Forty Years. Available online: <https://salamno.ir/detail/24133698> (accessed on 29 July 2019).
- Van Dijk, Teun A. 2001. Critical Discourse Analysis. In *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Edited by Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 352–71.
- Volkov, Denis. 2019. The Russian analysis of the Revolution. Paper presented at Workshop: Iranian Revolution at 40: Source Criticism and Perspectives, Institute of Iranian Studies, St Andrews, UK, May 31.



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).