The customisation of 'religion' in the context of Iran

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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 became shrines and important sites for pilgrims. Examples of these include the shrines of Hazrat-e Ma‘asoumeh in Qom and Imam Reza in Mashad. Other tombs were developed to a smaller scale and are generally called ‘Maqbarahs’, which mainly embraces those of the descendants of twelve Imams (Imamzadehs) and spiritual Sufi figures. Maqbarahs attract a great number of pilgrims, mainly from rural areas.

It is interesting that pilgrimage to both Imams’ shrines and Maqbarahs and its associated expressions and perceptions lie at the centre of Shi‘ite experience of religion, although they are rarely mentioned in the relevant core sources of Shi‘ism. The rituals that take place around Maqbarahs are more or less similar to those conducted in the Imams’ shrines, though they are often found to be less spiritual. Rituals include the emotional recitation of prays (provided or approved by the ‘religious’ authorities), the circling of the tomb at least three times and the sacrifice of animals to the tomb. In performing these rituals, pilgrims hope that their wishes (‘nazr’) or prays are accepted by Allah via a connection mediated by the spirit of the Imam, Imamzadeh or spiritual Sufi figure.

Taking inspiration from a social constructionist approach, participant observation and thirty semi-structured interviews in three Maqbarahs in north-west Iran, this project aims to understand and identify the meaning of ‘religion’ (and of course ‘non-religion’) attached to Maqbarahs and their material culture as well as the changes they have experienced through time and space, particularly during the last thirty years.

Key Words: Social constructionism, religion, pilgrimage, Iran

Bibliography