Introduction

Popular Religious Practices and Perceptions in the Middle East and Central Asia

Mary Elaine Hegland

Abstract: People at the popular level often hold religious perceptions and engage in religious practices that make sense to them within their own existential situations, even if they fall outside orthodoxy. Although political leaders and religious authorities may attempt to mould people's religious perceptions and practices according to their own ideas and interpretations of religion, people frequently find ways to evade or ignore such pressures, to rationalise their deviations or to continue to live and think according to their own self-generated religious frameworks. The authors of the articles in this special issue provide examples of how people's actual practices and religious beliefs arise out of their own personal situations and histories though at odds with the pronouncements of religious specialists.

Keywords: Georgia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, lived religion, pilgrimage, rituals, saints, Turkey

In today's troubled Middle East world, many political leaders, religious authorities and even family members, relatives and neighbours attempt to wield religious authority, identity, rules and laws to sway people's attitudes and influence behaviour. Adherents to a religious tradition are often pressured to believe or practise religion in certain ways. Yet, they do not necessarily practise and believe what religious and/or political authorities teach or rule, or what others around them say they should.

The authors in this collection are concerned with religious practices and perceptions at the popular level, what laypeople – rather than religious authorities – think and do regarding religion. Furthermore, they make clear that there is rarely only one interpretation of a religious text or tradition available

to guide religious practices and perceptions. Even within particular religious traditions, authorities differ in opinions and recommendations, allowing, in effect, for people to pick and choose according to their own situations and wishes. When people find that their life circumstances and experiences do not fit well with the rules of the authorities, they may find ways to negotiate, adapt, neglect or even seek alternatives to the expected beliefs and behaviours. These dynamics lead to the specific ways in which people live their religions and organise their spiritual lives.

Through ethnographic research, sometimes over an extended period, the authors of the articles in this issue have been able to work closely with people in the field, learning about their actual religious lives through observation, discussion and participation in their religious activities. Using the holistic approach typical of cultural anthropology, the authors look not only at the religious activities of their research partners but also at how their religious lives fit into their lives as a whole. Given their unique life histories and experiences, people may judge authoritative religious pronouncements and traditions as lacking or inappropriate for themselves and resist them as impositions. The resistance may vary from mild adjustments to quiet disbeliefs and personalised eschatologies to outright dissimulation and deceit. Even within one community, a great variety of ideas about spirituality, theology, God, supernatural forces and the afterworld may exist. All in all, the authors' research findings convincingly illustrate how varied and dynamic religious practices and perceptions can be, even within an apparently unified religious tradition. No matter how divergent these practices are, the individuals who craft them creatively to fit their needs can find justifications for their own actions and ideas.

Through his research among men of a rural community in the Trabzon area of Turkey, Erol Saglam was able to understand how they could apparently, without discomfort, laugh about bawdy stories and talk about disobeying norms their preacher had just elaborated in a sermon. Indeed, the preacher himself joked about the clever – and thus excusable – use of reprehensible behaviour. Saglam concluded that these Sunni Muslim men generated their Islamic piety and identity through their everyday 'aesthetic' religious practices, such as religious recitations and prayers, rituals of intercession by a sheikh, as well as labour and donations to build mosques. They constituted their pious selves through 'delegation and exteriorities', Saglam argues, rather than by internalising and following Islamic norms. However, while demonstrating their Muslim piety and identity through their external acts, they are 'hollowing' out the public proclamations of Islamic norms in their actual everyday behaviours and interactions.

Elene Gavashelishvili conducted anthropological research among childless people in Georgia whose strategies for the attainment of their heartfelt wish for children did not meet with the approval of the authorities of the Orthodox Church. Although the Orthodox Church leaders defined women's central role as bearing and raising children, they did not approve of 'unnatural'

means of conception, such as in vitro fertilisation and surrogacy. In contrast to the Turkish men whom Saglam encountered, Georgian women who faced reproductive challenges wanted to follow the rulings of the highly respected Patriarch. Therefore, these women had to find ways to align their reproductive actions with strategies that allowed them to convince themselves that they were not disobeying religious teachings and to enlist God's help in their efforts. Combining medical interventions with religious cult practices, they made pilgrimages to sites where miracles are thought to occur and performed the recommended rituals, they consulted with religious authorities and they insisted that their artificially conceived children would be brought up as good Christians. In her article, Gavashelishvili convincingly emphasises the creative ways in which these Orthodox Catholic women manipulate the symbolic and practical opportunities their culture offers to both attain their goals and to defend their decisions as being in accordance with God's will.

Aidarbek Sulaimankulovich Kochkunov discusses several complications in rituals and religious expressions among Kyrgyz people since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the following resurgence of early regional religious customs, as well as Islamic notions and practices. Here, too, people have several worldviews and traditions from which to craft spiritual outlooks and rituals: the early Tengrism and the cult of 'ancestor worship'; practices from the Soviet period; and the various recently expanding interpretations of Islam. According to Aidarbek, many of the contemporary rituals became opportunities for the integration of groups at different levels and for politicians to build networks and reputations. In several case studies from different areas of Kyrgyzstan, however, Aidarbek also shows how different individuals within a kin group may favour diverse practices from the palette of possibilities so that conflicts among relatives increase. People are creatively picking and integrating various aspects of traditions into their lives and goals in present Kyrgyzstan. In some rituals, such as propitiatory rites for rain, people integrate traditional veneration of nature deities with Islamic beliefs and practices, basically asking for assistance within two different religious complexes. Through establishing ceremonies and monuments to local leaders and heads of kin and tribal groups, the 'cult of ancestors' is even integrated into the current 'modern socio-political development of the country'. Through all such efforts, Aidarbek states, the Kyrgyz people are reasserting national consciousness and identity. Aidarbek's rich descriptions of religious practices and beliefs provide a valuable introduction to the spiritual traditions of Kyrgyzstan.

Like Aidarbek in Kyrgyzstan, Erika Friedl and Reinhold Loeffler have conducted decades-long ethnographic fieldwork in one area in south-western Iran. In their article they comment on the large pool of religious ideas and practices available to the local tribal/rural population, ranging from centuries-long accumulations of traditions to a great variety of individual notions, all within the folds of Shi'a Islam. They focus on the surprising diversity of local perceptions about death, dying and what may come afterwards. Their

phenomenological approach, although solidly based on ethnographic inquiry, centres less on individual variations in beliefs and practices than on the choices in ideas people find in their culture regarding eschatology. Local people's theology, as expressed in their lived religion as much as in their so-called traditional beliefs, reflects the particular challenges they experience in their lives. Complex and logical, it sheds a new light on familiar Shi'a notions about God, death and the beyond.

William Beeman presents materials on the African-Iranian healing ritual, the *Zār*, that he has been collecting in the Persian Gulf area over some decades. Most likely originating in East and North Africa, the ritual of spirit possession is practised by male and female specialists to help individuals whose problems cannot be solved by conventional medical or religious means. The ritual is based on the belief that a variety of malevolent or harmful spirits (identified as jinn) can inhabit individuals in the form of 'winds' and cause illness. In trances brought about by drumming, music and dance movements, the *Zār* specialists attempt to learn what the wind jinn require to calm or evict them from their hosts' bodies. To be successful, they must be skilful performers, adept at music, rhythm, dance and verbal work, as well as good organisers and directors. One wonders about the acceptability of this ritual complex at the fringe of mainstream religious activities for the Shi'a authorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, *Zār* healing ceremonies are confined to few places in Iran, mostly among relatively marginalised people in the Persian Gulf region. Their practitioners and participants locate themselves and their practices within Islam, pointing to the Qur'anic validation of belief in jinn and their own status as observant Muslims. It is encouraging to see the recently increasing attention to African Iranians, their traditions and cultures, and how they have influenced and enriched Iranian society and culture.

During a visit to Iran in 2005, Ashraf Zahedi was able to meet ten Catholic Filipina women who had to convert to Islam when they married Muslim Iranian students in the Philippines and came back to Iran with them. The focus of this exploratory research is on the strategies the women adopted to adapt to the requirements of Shi'a Islam and to deal with the discomfort they experienced as brides coming into a new culture, language and religion. As some of them were spouses of government officials, they needed to attend Shi'a rituals and to display Islamic identity, despite their continued self-identification as Catholics and their longing for their own Catholic culture and practices. The Philippines Embassy assisted in forming two associations, and the women were eventually able to meet other Catholic wives from the Philippines and hold their own religious/social/cultural gatherings. The companionship and support of fellow Catholics and Filipina friends helped them to tolerate their migrant conditions and to live out their Catholic identities that otherwise they had to keep rather confined to their own hearts. The necessity of accepting a double identity as Filipina Catholics and Iranian Shi'a Muslims led them to employ various cognitive and practical strategies, such as picking and choosing among rituals,

passive resistance, and combining festive parties with Bible meetings. They managed to create acceptable social and emotional spaces despite pressures from Islamic Republic laws and regulations and their social environments, balancing their imposed Shi'a public identities with their private Catholic ones depending on the current company.¹ In contrast to their mothers, the seven children of mixed marriages between Catholic Filipinas and Shi'a Iranian men Ashraf interviewed in 2017 were quite comfortable with the Shi'a rituals because they had grown up in Iran and were generally appreciative both of their mothers' sacrifices and their double cultural and religious heritage.

The research with the Filipinas posed two ethical problems for the author that have implications for all the other authors too: considering the precarious and vulnerable positions of the respective research populations, how can the anthropologists protect their informants' identities? How much information should they withhold to keep them safe? In addition, the following question arises: how much information and analysis should the anthropologist neglect or curtail to avoid displeasing informants who may read – and judge – publications about themselves? Anthropologists have suggested different answers through their practices – even sharing drafts for commentary or developing joint publications with their informants – but the problem of who decides what to say and how, and what is to be privileged, for example the informant's self-presentation or the insight of the researcher, persists. The articles in this collection, dealing with the quintessentially private sphere of religious ideas and practices, provide examples of these difficulties.

A number of recent anthropological publications about Iran have dealt with young people who do not adhere to the Islamic Republic's views on how they should live their lives. Anthropological works that delve into the lives, thoughts and practices of pro-government figures and families are less available. Such research presents special problems: government employees and state supporters owe their status to their observable performances of piety and loyalty to the Islamic Republic. They will be hesitant to talk about their private attitudes and how they might negotiate state rules and expectations in their daily lives. Rose Wellman's contribution describes the religious/political culture of the Basij family with whom she lived while conducting anthropological research. Financially supported by the government for the loss or wounding of a family member in the Iran-Iraq War, these families are known for their support of the government's religious agenda. Yet, although modesty requirements for contacts between unrelated males and females and gender avoidance are stipulated on religious grounds, family members do not always follow them strictly. In Wellman's case, close proximity – living with a family, sharing their meals and developing trust in daily encounters – transformed her status in the family to the extent that she became 'almost *mahram*', that is almost like a family member who does not have to observe strict modesty rules in the house. (However, the family asked her to avoid gossip and to support the family's self-presentation by putting on a scarf when outsiders came into

the house.) Moreover, Wellman observed, some members in this pious family ‘flexed’ the rules by abstaining from wearing headscarves and shaking hands with marriageable male cousins. Even these pro-government Shi’a Muslims tempered legalistic rules according to context and audience.²

Finally, this issue includes two contributions that are not specifically related to the topic of popular religious practices and perceptions. One of them is by Ellen Vuosalo-Tavakoli, Mahmoud Ghasempouri and Younes Yaghobzadeh, addressing traditional bird-trapping systems in Iran and the human management of the sustainable use of agroecosystems, pointing at the vitality of the community cohesion for the survival of a traditional and workable method of liaising between humans and nature. The other is on the Yezidis of Armenia, an ethnoconfessional Kurmanj-speaking Kurdish group living in the Ararat mountain valleys. Pastoral nomadism (mainly sheep breeding) and agriculture are facing profound changes today, resulting in a unique and complex economic and cultural situation which Hamlet Melkumyan and Roman Hovsepyan have addressed in their research.

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Notes

1. I am borrowing here from Constance Cronin’s (1970) conclusion about Sicilian immigrants to Australia (‘Australian in Public, Sicilian in Private’) and Nayereh Tohidi’s (1996) findings about Azerbaijan gender politics (‘Soviet in Public, Azeri in Private’).
2. See Wellman (2017) for more on her research among these pro-Islamic-Republic-government people.

References

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