

4^e

CONGRESS

Middle East and Muslim Worlds
Studies

28 June- 2 July 2021



Panel 68

COVID-19 and the socio-political dimensions of religion in contemporary Iran

Iran has been one of the most affected countries by the COVID-19 worldwide and experienced rapid growth of cases before the disease spread to Europe and the US. Since February 2020, the Iranian government has introduced restrictions on the use of public space as a key policy measure to curb the virus's spread. With the first confirmed cases of the infection being reported, ironically enough, in the 'Holy City' of Qom, religion was already brought to the stage. Religious places including mosques and shrines were not locked until only one month later after a series of struggles that even led to public protests in some cases; and their continued closure for most of Ramadan (March-May 2020), as well as their partial reopening under the contextual-based social distancing policies initiated by the government, have complicated the issue further. The scene is now particularly marked by post-revolutionary dynamics of religion, culture, power, and media. By inviting multidisciplinary contributions from both Iranian and European scholars in political science, philosophy, and religious studies, the present panel seeks to address the situation in Iran during the COVID-19 crisis with special attention to socio-political dimensions of religion. The speakers will examine the distribution of power and responsibility within the Iranian political system in light of the ambivalent roles of religion, the production of alternative modes of religiosity not only in Iranian homes but also in the public spheres, the salience of Islamic theologies of science and healing in Iranian social movements, the historical background of theological debates about the interplay between religion and politics, and the perceptions of holy places in Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope these contributions will provide new insights and grounds for understanding the multidimensional landscapes of religion in contemporary Iranian society.

Person in charge : Akbari Rasool (PhD Graduate, Department of Comparative Religions and Mysticism, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran)

Discussant: Rieck, Katja (Project Lead, The Orient-Institut Istanbul, Turkey)

Program

Ashraf Emami, Ali (Associate Professor, Department of Comparative Religions and Mysticism, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran)

Religion and science: understanding the COVID-19 through Ibn Arabi's typology of the universe

With the global spread of COVID-19, we have witnessed both traditional and scientific perspectives in Iran. Proponents of the traditional view, sometimes discernible in the legislature and some religious education centers in Iran, have caused the growth of anti-science currents and thus impacted a wide range of citizens in the society. The author suggests that based on a correct understanding of the Book and Tradition, it can be seen that science and religion have not had an inherent conflict from the beginning, and the conflict that has arisen is related to an incomplete understanding of religion

and not essential to religion itself. Relying on the Qur'an, it can be seen that God has given a divine image to human agency in the system of creation. This paper argues that Ibn Arabi's theory of names has provided a space for open theism in approaching the world, which can always answer theological challenges, especially in times of evil appearing in the universe. This theory, without wanting to diminish the value of experimental sciences, seeks to present a picture of the universe with three dimensions or interconnected circles (Truth, Man, and the Universe). According to this view, everything that happens in the Universe is related to Man, on the one hand, and to Truth and its power, on the other. In the meantime, the world is the arena of conflict among divine names that appear due to the authority and power of Truth. The COVID-19 and its vaccine can also be interpreted as manifestations or subsets of some divine names.

Gerami, S. M. Hadi (Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic and Qur'anic Studies, Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, Iran)

The historical background of contemporary debates about the interplay between religion and medicine in Iran

One of the most important contemporary controversies in the Iranian Shi'a community is related to the validity and status of Islamic-traditional medicine and its relationship with modern medicine. The traditional currents that have their roots in the seminary mainly aim at sponsoring a medical tradition based on Islamic and sometimes philosophical writings related to natural reason. Interestingly, this trend has even found supporters among some academic physicians; and even the Faculty of Traditional Medicine has been established at the University of Tehran. On the other hand, a large number of specialists in modern medicine and even some seminary clerics, such as Rasoul Jafarian, have strongly opposed and challenged this trend. Jafarian has criticized this issue on grounds of its historical roots in the Islamic Middle Ages and what he calls the 'decline of Islamic civilization' and the spread of superstition and occult-writing. These controversies, particularly via their presentations by scholars like Rasoul Jafarian, are important because they reveal the historical roots of serious contemporary challenges between religious tradition and modern science. However, the main shortcoming in the works of people like Jafarian is that their studies date back to the early Middle Ages, i.e. the fourth century AH. Nonetheless, the study of historical reports and dialogues between Shi'a Imams and their companions from the first to the third century AH reflects the deeper and older historical situation of this kind of controversy between medical knowledge and religion in the early era of the rise of Islam. The present article tries to examine these historical controversies and their impact on the religious discourse at the time of the Infallible Imams. It aims to show the extent to which these contemporary discourses are related synchronically or diachronically to the older forms of controversy.

Kraus Josef (Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Masaryk University, Czech Republic)

Religion and Politics in Iran during the COVID-19

Iran has been one of the most affected countries by the COVID-19 worldwide and experienced rapid growth of cases before the disease has spread to Europe and the US. The proposed contribution introduces the audience to the situation in Iran during the COVID-19 crisis with special attention to the political communication of main actors and bodies. Since the distribution of power and responsibility within the Iranian political system might seem a bit unclear to a foreign observer, it is challenging to track, explore and explain the reactions of different actors towards the crisis and towards each other. The problem of different information coming from different parts of political representation caused confusion and polarization of the public. There is a high polarization of Iranian society caused by that making almost no difference from communities in Europe or other regions. But the Iranian example is still unique due to the specific political system and the role of religion in Iranian politics and for society. That is why the other outcome of this contribution deals with the role of religion and religious sentiment during the COVID-19 crisis in Iran. Closing down religious places in Iran provoked not only religious organizations and a conservative part of Iranian politics, but also an essential part of Iranian society. Several religiously

motivated demonstrations occurred, and due to the so-called second wave of COVID-19 epidemic during autumn 2020, the mosques and shrines have remained open. That caused even higher polarization of Iranian society now being divided between two camps – the one in favor of open mosques and public faith practicing and the one feeling frustrated by a state lockdown of almost everything except mosques.

Sohrabifar Vahid (Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy of Religion, University of Religions and Denominations, Iran)

The perceptions of holy places in Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed different aspects of human life. Such overt changes as quarantine and limitations on social relations have been widely discussed; however, the pandemic has exerted great impacts on some more or less covert aspect of our lives. One of the less-noticed aspects of its impacts is the theological interpretations about the holy places. With its major religious population, Iran has faced the pandemic where among many challenges and concerns, the pandemic raised a great dilemma about the holy shrines: whether they should be closed or remain open. According to one influential idea, holy shrines must be kept open because of their significance for healings and blessings. Hence, it is unreasonable to close such Dar al-Shifa (House of Healing) in times of pandemic when people need them. On the other hand, a relatively new interpretation has appeared which approaches the notion of the holy differently. According to this viewpoint, holiness should be understood in terms of the spiritual dimension of human beings without any necessary effects on our physical health. The mundane world has its own rules and the shrine of Imams is no exception. Finally, the second interpretation became dominant and many faqīhs issued fatwās regarding the religious obligation of observing health advice and national measures. As a result, even in holy places, the religious ceremonies were canceled or abandoned during the lockdowns. Although this transformation of the idea of the holy or sanctity had had some contexts in Shi'a theological thought, it would not have occurred without the force of the widespread pandemic in Iran today.