

The Phenomenon of Sacredness in The Formation of Iranian Religious Identity

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Abstract

This article examines the identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran, with a particular focus on its religious identity. It also explores aspects such as the formation of Iranian religious identity, its impact and consequences on society, and the influence of the Islamic Revolution on this identity. The article engages in a scholarly and academic discussion of the Shiite factor and the phenomenon of the deification of the individual as determinants of identity in Iran.

Keywords: Iran, identity, religious identity, national identity, Shiite factor, sacredness.

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1. Introduction

The concept of "sanctity," considered one of the central categories of religion and religious relations, has long been a primary subject of various theoretical approaches and scholarly debates. This concept serves as an important methodological factor in understanding humanity's religious thought, faith-based views, and spiritual values. Etymologically, the term "sanctity" traces back to the Latin words "sacer" ("dedicated to God," "related to divine power") and "sanctus" ("exalted," "worthy of respect and reverence"). This concept is inextricably linked to expressing the supreme status and absolute significance of a creative force or divine being. For this reason, the term "sacred" is often interpreted as a semantic equivalent of the concept of "divinity."

From a historical-etymological perspective, the concept

of "sacredness" is rooted in the Latin word "sacer," meaning "set apart" or "removed from the ordinary world." In early religious beliefs, sacred objects or phenomena possessed a special status distinct from everyday life, and various religious prohibitions and restrictions were applied to them. In primitive societies, the phenomenon of sacredness often manifested in conjunction with feelings of fear, anxiety, and caution. Consequently, humanity's initial emotional response to objects, places, or events deemed sacred was characterized more by feelings of fear and avoidance than by positive reverence. In this respect, sacredness in the early stages of human religious thought was seen not merely as an object of veneration, but as a form of religious identity shaped as a complex sociocultural phenomenon associated, to a certain degree, with danger and the unknown.

An analysis of the historical-etymological development

of the concept of "sacredness" reveals that its formation and semantic evolution date back to periods far more ancient than the emergence of world religions. The fact that this concept is found in the languages of various peoples and ethnic groups demonstrates its broad cultural and historical scope. However, a deeper study of the semantic foundations of these terms shows that their roots are inextricably linked to the ancient layers of the Indo-European language family.

Specifically, in ancient Iranian-Persian traditions, the concept of sanctity was expressed through the term "spenta," which embodied meanings such as divinity, purity, and goodness. Also of particular importance is the term "Aməša Spənta" (Pahlavi form: Amešāspand), found in the Pahlavi language and in the texts of the Avesta, which is considered the sacred source of Zoroastrianism. This phrase, meaning "Holy" or "Bounteous Immortals," was used to denote a group of divine beings interpreted as guardians of goodness, divine mercy, and cosmic order. Thus, in the religious and philosophical thought of the ancient Iranian peoples—that is, in their religious identity, which was a part of their national identity—the concept of "sanctity" was formed in close connection with the ideas of divine power, goodness, and eternity.

In turn, as the need and aspiration for a sense of "sacredness" have grown, the criteria for sacredness have not been limited solely to the sphere of religious phenomena. On the contrary, this concept has also been applied to various objects and events of special significance in the socio-cultural life of humanity. In particular, determinants of identity such as "person," "space" (a unified historical territory), "emblem" (symbols), and "reality" (wars, historical battles) have emerged as factors that shape the content of sacredness. Thus, sacredness is considered not only a phenomenon related to religious beliefs but also a complex socio-cultural phenomenon expressed through a system of images, symbols, and signs that hold a significant place in the spiritual experience and collective memory of a society.

2. Results

The concept of sacredness, a crucial component of Iranian religious identity, is the product of a historical synthesis of pre-Islamic Zoroastrianism (author's note: we substantiated this with the Avestan texts cited above) and the ideology of Twelver Shi'ism. This synthesis is characterized by the profound influence of Persian

cultural heritage on Islamic rituals, symbols, and religious practices. As a result, in Iranian society, Shi'ism has been established not only as a form of religious belief but also as a system of sacredness intrinsically linked with national-historical memory and cultural-national identity.

It is worth noting that at the apex of Iranian society and its system of governance, Islam stands not merely as a belief, but as a complete ideological foundation. Here, religion serves as the national identity, referred to as a "high-level identity," acting as a unifying factor that transcends class, ethnic, and regional divisions to help form a single in-group identity.

The ideological and cultural foundations of Twelver Shia Islam serve as a crucial conceptual cornerstone in shaping the identity politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Rituals such as Ashura ceremonies, Friday prayers, events commemorating martyrdom, the unique Shia tradition of "seeking blessings" (tabarruk), and other religious practices create collective experiences with a strong emotional impact, reinforcing social cohesion and a sense of group belonging. At the same time, these rituals help to forge a moral-heroic identity within Iranian society, which portrays itself as a defender of the downtrodden and oppressed peoples. As a result, the sense of in-group pride, solidarity, and moral superiority is strengthened.

The Iranian politico-religious system interprets the belief in the occultation (ghaybah, or hidden state) of Imam Mahdi—a central element of Shia eschatology—not merely as a religious dogma, but also as a socio-psychological factor that shapes society's hopes for the future and its collective expectations. This process, realized through emotional and cognitive mechanisms, serves to strengthen cultural identity and support political legitimacy. Consequently, the psychological stress and discontent arising among a populace experiencing various economic, political, and social hardships can be transformed into a tool for mobilization directed toward religious and ideological goals.

From a historical perspective, such ideological and psychological dynamics were among the key factors in the formation of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Discontent with the monarchical system, combined with the concepts of justice, martyrdom, and salvation offered by Shia ideology, generated a large-scale socio-political mobilization, ultimately paving the way for the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a

Shia theocratic system.

Theoretically, these religious ceremonies and symbolic practices function as mechanisms that enhance the salience (importance and relevance) of identity. They bring the sense of belonging to the Shia group to the forefront of individual consciousness, serving to prioritize religious identity in a person's social self-perception. Simultaneously, symbolic politics, supported by cultural centers, educational institutions, and the state, integrates ideological narratives into the practices of daily life, transforming abstract political ideas into tangible cultural norms and forms of behavior.

This process is similar to the mechanisms of intergenerational political socialization, where the younger generation is not only taught the fundamental principles of the state ideology but is also guided to perceive themselves emotionally, culturally, and socially as successors to Shia historical memory and the traditions of the sacred struggle. In this way, religious faith, historical memory, and political ideology combine to serve the process of reproducing and strengthening Iran's national-religious identity.

3. Discussion

The mass chaos at the funeral of Iran's first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, can serve as an example of the phenomenon of deifying a person within the Iranian religious identity that we are discussing. So, what influenced these events, and what factors acted as their determinants? Let's examine these processes: On June 3, 1989, Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, the founder and leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, passed away in Tehran. According to official sources, the funeral ceremony was scheduled to be held on June 6 at the Behesht-e Zahra (بهشت زهرا) cemetery, located in the capital, Tehran. The funeral procession began with millions of Iranians in attendance. However, the proceedings descended into chaos due to the immense crowd. Gridlock occurred on the roads throughout the cemetery, and as a result, the coffin was transported by helicopter. Upon arrival at Behesht-e Zahra, the ceremony spiraled completely out of control, resulting in widespread disorder.

This was because thousands of mourners, following the Shia tradition of "tabarruk" (seeking blessings from an object or garment considered sacred), attempted to tear off pieces of Khomeini's shroud. In the ensuing chaos, the deceased's body fell from the coffin several times and

was even exposed. To bring the situation under control, the ceremony was temporarily halted; the body was placed in a specially protected metal coffin, transported by vehicle to the cemetery, and buried. According to reports, more than 10 million Iranians participated in this ceremony, which is regarded as one of the largest mass gatherings and disturbances in Iranian history.

In turn, this event is seen as an instance of spiritual reverence exceeding its bounds in Shia religious rituals, as well as the sanctification and deification of the revolutionary leader's personality—akin to the cult of personality surrounding Stalin in the USSR. Furthermore, it serves as an example of the interplay between religious factors and the political elite. In the Shia faith, such mass veneration, combined with the values of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, is also viewed as the elevation of a political leader's persona to a religious and spiritual level. Thus, Khomeini's funeral went down in history as a socio-cultural expression of the cult of the leader in Iran, demonstrating just how crucial the concept of sanctity is to Iranian religious identity.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the research findings indicate the phenomenon of sanctity holds a central place in the formation of Iranian religious identity. This phenomenon, which emerged from the historical and cultural synthesis of pre-Islamic Zoroastrian traditions and Shia ideology, manifests as one of the key determinants shaping the religious, political, and national identity of Iranian society.

The analysis shows that in Iran, the concept of sanctity is not merely confined to religious belief but is a complex socio-cultural phenomenon intricately linked with historical memory, national symbols, political ideology, and the system of social relations. Furthermore, the Iranian experience demonstrates that the phenomenon of sanctity, in some cases, extends beyond the boundaries of religious reverence to influence the processes of sanctifying political leaders. This confirms that in Iran's political culture, the phenomenon of sanctity holds not only religious but also socio-psychological and ideological significance.

In general, the phenomenon of sacredness in Iranian religious identity was formed as a result of the integration of historical heritage, religious beliefs, and political ideology. It holds significant theoretical and practical importance for understanding the country's modern

socio-political development, national identity, and mechanisms of state governance. Therefore, studying the phenomenon of sacredness as a distinct scientific category in the research of Iranian religious identity allows for a deeper understanding of the country's internal social processes and foreign policy behavior.

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