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Styles of 'religion', 'non-religion' and 'spirituality' in post-revolutionary Iran: the 'ironic' impact of 'Islam' on people's 'religiosity'

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ABSTRACT

By changing the definition of 'religion', the Iranian Revolution of 1979 has posed serious challenges not only to Iran's role in the Middle East and its relations with the 'West', but also to many social theories, such as differentiation, modernization and secularization. Indeed, there is no shortage of work on how post-revolutionary Iran has 'Islamized' its constitution and institutions. However, there is little work on the impact of the 'Islamization' process on people's 'religiosity'. This article is a response to this vacuum and takes as its central question: What has been the impact of the Iranian revolution on aspects of students' 'religiosity' under the rule of an Islamist state? This question is tackled by drawing on the theoretical approach of 'social constructionism' towards 'religion', adopting Glock and Stark's multi-dimensional model of 'religious commitment' and using quantitative research methods to examine the styles of 'religion' in 2001–02 among the students of a major national, research university: The University of Tabriz. A careful analysis of 'religious commitment' among a sample of 365 students provides evidence of the 'individualization of religion', 'spirituality' and 'secularization' rather than collectivism, 'shari'a'-orientation and the rendition of 'Islam' as a political ideology or 'Islamism'.

Introduction

The 'Islamic' Revolution toppled the deeply militarized 'secular' regime of the Shah under the banner of 'religion' and the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini to the shock of the 'western' intelligent services and scholars. The result was the establishment of the 'Islamic Republic' in February 1979. These events dramatically changed not only the geo-political dynamics of the Middle East, but also brought about serious questions and challenges for social theory, in particular the theories of differentiation, modernization, rationalization, secularization and the theory of the ultimate decline of 'religion' as a socio-political force. Indeed, none of the classical social theorists could have dreamt of what would happen in Iran following the revolution.

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The newly established 'Islamic Republic' with a theocratic structure eventually embraced a constitution that recognizes 'Shi'ism' as an official religion, assigns an 'absolute authority' to the Islamic leader as a Shi'ite jurist who, among many other things, appoints the head of the Judiciary and the members of the Guardian Council, which ensures the consistency of legislation with 'shari'a'.¹

Ironically, the same constitution also embraces Articles (e.g. Articles 15–42) that guarantee freedom of expression and press as well as free and fair elections, which are intended to secure the 'Republican' part of the establishment. This has paved the way for divisions within the various camps of the establishment, arguably between the two main factions of so-called 'Reformists' (eslah-talaban), on the one hand, and 'Principlists' (osoulgarayan), on the other. While the former argues for the primacy of the Articles related to the 'Nation's Rights' (Chapter 3), the latter emphasize the significance of the Articles related to 'Absolute Authority of the Islamic Jurist', mainly Article 110. It is interesting that both groups resort to their own definitions of 'Islam' in their arguments. The former regards their definition of 'Islam' consistent with the contextualized notions of 'civil society' and the 'rule of nation' (hakemiyat-e mardom), as elaborated in depth by Kamrava² and Holliday,³ while the latter's characterization of 'Islam' considers these Articles conditional and subject to the Articles related to the 'Absolute Authority of the Islamic Jurist'; a struggle that continues.

The rule of God, de-differentiation and de-secularization

Given the turn of events in post-revolutionary Iran, it is not very surprising that, overall, Iran scores the lowest among a selected 11 'non-North Atlantic' countries in terms of 'differentiation' between social institutions⁴ – or 'Secularity I', in Charles Taylor's terms⁵ – as investigated by Künkler and Madeley.⁶ With the exception of Religious Persecution (RPI),⁷ Iran on average has scored the highest (81.6%) in terms of Government Involvement in Religion (GIR), Government Favouritism of Religion (GFR) and Government Regulation of Religion (GRR), followed respectively by Egypt (76%), Pakistan (74.6%), Indonesia (62%), Morocco (60.3%), China (59.3%), Turkey (55.3%), Israel (52.3%), India (50%), Russia (45%) and Japan (11.3%), according to the latest various datasets between 2003–2008.⁸ As we see, among Muslim majority countries, Iran and Turkey sit on opposite sides of the spectrum in terms of government interference in 'religious' affairs and the theory of 'differentiation' and/or 'Secularity I'.

¹Firoozeh Papan-Matin (trans.), [The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran], *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 1 (2014): 159–200.

²Mehran Kamrava, 'The Civil Society Discourse in Iran', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 28, no. 2 (2001): 165–185.

³Shabnam Holliday, 'Khatami's Islamist-Iranian Discourse of National Identity: A Discourse of Resistance', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 1 (2010): 1–13.

⁴José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁵Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁶Mirjam Künkler and John Madeley, 'Appendix: A Quantitative Take on the Incidence of Taylor's Three Secularities in the Eleven Country Studies' in *A Secular Age Beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. M. Künkler, J. Madeley and S. Shankar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 396–413.

⁷For the variable of Religious Persecution (RPI), Indonesia has the highest possible score of 10 (greater than 100,000), followed by Egypt (7: 5001–10,000), Pakistan (6: 1001–5000), Iran (4: 101–500), Turkey (3: 21–100) and Morocco (2: 11–20).

⁸Künkler and Madeley, 'Appendix: A Quantitative Take', 397–98.

One important question here is: Where does this leave us with the Iranian population and Muslim individuals themselves? Breaking this question down: What has happened to people's 'religiosity' since the 'Islamic Revolution' of 1979 (or in Charles Taylor's terms 'Secularity II')? Does the high degree of 'religiosity' at the governmental and institutional levels mean that Iranian individuals at the societal level have also scored highly in terms of 'religious commitment', as defined by 'Islamic' belief, practice, experience and religious particularism, in the post-revolutionary era? This article is an attempt to provide an answer to these questions by focusing on the 'religiosity' of undergraduate students at the University of Tabriz studying in 2001–2002. While various personal reasons have meant that the results of this important survey are only now being published, the gap in time provides an opportunity to take a more long term view of the shifting trends in Iranians' religiosity by comparing the results with other surveys that have since been carried out; in particular, the World Values Surveys. This also offers us the advantage of assessing Iranian religiosity within the wider context of the Middle East and North Africa.

Impacts on people's religiosity

Some academic works have attempted to answer these questions listed above. Godazgar⁹ and Serajzadeh,¹⁰ adopting different theoretical and methodological approaches, examine the impact of 'Islamization' on education through fieldwork conducted in schools in a rural area (Firuraq) surrounding the city of Khoy in north-west Iran and in the capital city of Tehran, respectively, in 1995–96. They arrive at the conclusion that the 'Islamization' of schools has been unsuccessful. Godazgar concludes that teachers mostly embrace 'non-Islamic' responses to policies regarding gendered social interactions and relationships: '... the significance of ideological currents and policies for educational change often turns out to be different from what was intended. In some cases, the effect is virtually the opposite of the intention, with results that could be considered paradoxical and/or tragic'..¹¹ Serajzadeh concludes that the pupils 'tended to be highly religious', but this is more evident in the area of their beliefs and feelings than that of their Islamic practices and pursuing 'shari'a' codes.

Along similar lines, Kazemipur and Rezaei conclude that Iranians are more concerned with 'personalized religion' than with an 'organized' one.¹² In drawing this conclusion, they largely rely on the 'Survey of National Values and Attitudes' dataset conducted by the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance among more than 16,000 women and men from 28 provinces in the same year as this project was conducted, i.e. 2001. This article is important, because the conclusions are drawn from a dataset that is not restricted to the University of Tabriz or the north-west of Iran, but one taken from across the country. It is interesting that we have arrived largely to similar conclusions, even though we have adopted entirely different theoretical and methodological approaches, including using different variables for measuring the dimensions of 'religious commitment'. In addition to

⁹Hossein Godazgar, *The Impact of Religion on Educational Change in Iran: Islam in Policy and Islam in Practice* (Lampeter and New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

¹⁰S. Hossein Serajzadeh, 'Croyants non pratiquants: la religion et la jeunesse iranienne et ses implications pour la théorie de la sécularisation', *Social Compass* 49, no. 1 (2002): 111–132.

¹¹Godazgar, *The Impact of Religion*, 236.

¹²Abdolmohammad Kazemipur and Ali Rezaei, 'Religious Life Under Theocracy: The Case of Iran' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 3 (2003): 347–361.

these works, Godazgar,¹³ Khosrokhavar¹⁴ and Velayati¹⁵ have reported the ‘unintended consequences’ (in Weber’s terms) of ‘Islamization’ in relation to other social settings: ‘consumer ethics’, leisure, and women’s migration from rural to urban areas respectively.

Furthermore, there have been a number of publications on ‘religiosity’ in Iran since 2001–02 published in the Persian language, such as Tavassoli and Morshedi,¹⁶ Faraji and Kazemi,¹⁷ Modiri and Azadarmaki,¹⁸ Nikkhah and Zahirinia¹⁹ and Mirfardi et al.²⁰ The findings of these research projects are largely consistent with those of this research. Indeed, these works do provide empirical evidence for our argument that contemporary Iran has continued on the path towards the individualization of ‘religion’, ‘spiritualism’ and ‘secularization’ in both wider and deeper levels since 2001–02. This is confirmed also by the latest available surveys about ‘religiosity’ in Iran. The importance of the survey results presented here is that not only do they provide a further snapshot of what seems on the whole to be a consistent and gradual ‘religious’ shift within the Iranian context, but it does so in a period that is unique within post-revolutionary Iranian history, namely at the height of the ‘Reformation’ period; and in a setting (the university) that played a central role in this political movement. Moreover, it benefits from a specific and more in-depth study of religiosity, as opposed to its study in relation to other social phenomena, such as social media,²¹ migration²² and leisure,²³ and extends the scope of such studies to north-west Iran. In addition, it has uniquely adopted a distinctive ‘social constructionist’ theoretical approach to ‘religious commitment’ as well as research questions and methods. This research may also provide a foundation on the basis of which future ‘religious’ transformations can be measured, assessed and analysed. Indeed, as we will see, these surveys distinguish Iran remarkably from other Middle Eastern countries in terms of ‘religious commitment’ and changes in its dimensions.

Iranians’ religiosity from surveys

For the purpose of this article, we have chosen the ‘World Values Surveys’ (henceforth WVS) as well as two further surveys specifically related to Iran: the survey of the ‘Group for

¹³Hossein Godazgar, ‘Islam Versus Consumerism and Post-modernism in the Context of Iran’, *Social Compass* 54, no. 3 (2007): 389–418.

¹⁴Farhad Khosrokhavar, ‘The New Religiosity in Iran’, *Social Compass* 54, no. 3 (2007): 453–463.

¹⁵Masoumeh Velayati, *Islam, Gender, and Development: Rural-Urban Migration of Women in Iran* (Lanham and New York: Lexington Books, 2011).

¹⁶Gholamabbas Tavassoli and Abolfazl Morshedi 1385 [2007]. ‘Investigating University Students’ Religious Commitment and Trends: The Case of Amirkabir University of Technology’ [in Persian], *Majalle-ye Jame’eshenasi-e Iran* [Journal of the Sociology of Iran] 7, no. 4 (1385 [2007]): 96–118.

¹⁷Mehdi Faraji and Abbas Kazemi, ‘Investigating the Status of Religiosity in Iran: With Special Reference to the Surveys of the Past Three Decades’ [in Persian], *Faslname-ye Tahqiqat-e Farhangi* [Quarterly of Cultural Research] 6, no. 2 (1388 [2009]): 79–95.

¹⁸Fateme Modiri and Tagi Azadarmaki, ‘Gender and Religiosity’ [in Persian], *Jame’e-shenasi-e Karbordi* [Journal of Applied Sociology] 51, no. 3 (1392 [2013]): 1–14.

¹⁹Hedayatollah Nikkhah and Mostafa Zahirinia, ‘Investigating the Extent of Hormozgan University Students’ Religious Commitment and its Effective Factors’ [in Persian], *Farhang dar Daneshgah-e Eslami* [Culture in the Islamic University] 9, no. 4 (1392 [2014]): 685–704.

²⁰Asghar Mirfardi, Mariam Mokhtari and Abdollah Valinejad, ‘The Extent of Religious Commitment and its Relationship with the Usage of Social Media’ [in Persian], *Jame’e-shenasi-e Karbordi* [Journal of Applied Sociology] 66, no. 2 (1396 [2017]): 1–16.

²¹Mirfardi, Mokhtari and Valinejad, ‘The Extent of Religious Commitment’.

²²Velayati, *Islam, Gender, and Development*.

²³Khosrokhavar, ‘The New Religiosity in Iran’.

Analysing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran' (henceforth GAMAAN) and the 'Survey of Social Attitudes in Iran' (henceforth SSAI). Appendix 1 shows the datasets produced by these surveys in relation to the four dimensions of 'religious commitment' in Iran within the Middle Eastern context: belief, experience, practice and consequences (Islamism versus pluralism). Yet, before we report these datasets, we would like to caveat them by highlighting some limitations that cannot be ignored: the presence of other individuals in some of the interviews conducted for the WVS and the exclusion of Iranians who do not use social media by the GAMAAN survey (i.e. around 30% of the population). The presence of other individuals will clearly influence answers to sensitive questions, such as belief in God, the rejection of which is a capital offence in Iran. This may explain why the WVS 2020 reports that 99.1% of Iranians believe in God, while only 1.3% identify with 'atheism' (see Appendix 1). Moreover, excluding those who do not use social media from the GAMAAN survey may introduce age biases in the sample. Furthermore, there are reverse correlations between social media use and 'religiosity'.²⁴ Therefore, the effect of these two factors is likely to underestimate the 'religiosity' of Iranians.

As Appendix 1 shows, the closest survey to our research, time-wise, is the WVS conducted among 2532 respondents from 28 provinces in Iran in January-February 2000.²⁵ The degree of 'belief' is very high for both measures: belief in God (98.9%) and belief in life after death (94.8%). In addition, there is much less loyalty to the institution of 'religion' compared to 'spiritualism' overall, even compared with other Muslim countries. The obvious example in this regard is the percentage of those 'praying outside religious services per week' (64%) compared with 'praying at religious services per week' (26.4%). Moreover, in the dimension of 'practice', 4.4% being 'non-religious' or 'atheists' combined with a considerable number of respondents who refused to answer this particular question (13.4%) seems quite remarkable. In terms of 'consequences', the respondents of the WVS seem to have more confidence in the 'Reformist' President Khatami's government at that particular juncture with 75.8% describing financially cheating the government as being 'never justifiable'. Furthermore, if we arguably assume 'a different ethnicity' is mostly concomitant with 'a different religion', a great majority of Iranians would not mind having neighbours from a different ethno-religious background. As we will see later, none of findings of the WVS conducted in 2000 is inconsistent with the findings of our research conducted in 2001–02.

Comparing the available data from the WVSs related to Iran between 2000 and 2005,²⁶ there are slight increases in the respondents' 'religious commitment' with respect to Mosques catering to their spiritual needs (from 60% to 64.5%) and their weekly attendance at religious services (from 26.4% to 33.8%). Yet, there is a dramatic decline in confidence in the government in terms of the unjustifiability of financially cheating the government (from 75.8% to 52%). These shifts seem plausible. While WVS 2000 was conducted at the height of the 'Reformation' era, WVS 2005 was conducted at the end of that era, i.e. the transitional last two months of Mohammad Khatami's presidency (June-

²⁴Mirfardi, Mokhtari and Valinejad, 'The Extent of Religious Commitment'.

²⁵R. Inglehart, C. Haerpfer, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al., eds., 'World Values Survey: Round Four—Country-Pooled Datafile Version', <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV4.jsp> (Madrid: JD Systems Institute, 2014a).

²⁶R. Inglehart, C. Haerpfer, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al., eds., 'World Values Survey: Round Five—Country-Pooled Datafile Version', <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV5.jsp> (Madrid: JD Systems Institute, 2014b).

July 2005) when people were perhaps disappointed by his failure to bring about structural changes and were perhaps slightly affected by the forthcoming President, Mahmood Ahmadinejad's, populism.

However, using the surveys at our disposal, as summarized in [Appendix 1](#), if we focus on a more long-term trend between 2000 and 2020, we find a dramatic decline in various aspects of 'religious commitment'. The findings of the GAMAAN survey are even more radical than those of the WVS and these differences can be explained by their different methodologies. The latter is a 'Pen-and-Paper-Personal-Interview' survey, which has used a combination of stratified and simple random sampling methods to determine sample sizes for each region, thus representing a more balanced picture of the Iranian population in terms of age, literacy, urban/rural origin, and gender. The former has adopted a multiple virtual snowball sampling method targeting those who use social media, which amounts to around 70% of Iranians, but crucially a group that is mostly young and/or educated.²⁷ Overall, however, the surveys give a clear idea of where contemporary Iran stands in terms of religiosity at the moment. In the belief dimension, there is a considerable decline in belief in God (78.3%) and a dramatic decrease in belief in life after death (37.3%) among the youth and the educated. Indeed, these findings of GAMAAN is consistent with those of Godazgar, which found a 'disenchanted' (in Weber's terms) and 'non-transcendental' (in Taylor's terms) view of the Twelve Imams as the successors of the Prophet (according to Shi'ism) and the Prophet himself in some cases.²⁸

With regard to the 'experience' or 'spiritualism' dimension, GAMAAN reports that around one-third of respondents indicated that they had grown up in families 'believing in God but not religious', which one may associate with 'spiritualism' as it goes beyond institutional or organizational 'religion'. It also seems compelling that 10.3% of respondents purely identified themselves as either 'Spiritual' or 'Mystical (Sufi)', without any further identification. Having said this, the most dramatic shifts have occurred in the dimensions of 'practice' (shari'a) and 'consequences' (Islamism versus pluralism), when we compare with earlier surveys carried out in the post-revolutionary (i.e. 2005 and 2000) and pre-revolutionary periods.

In terms of 'practice', around one-third of the population have identified themselves as 'non-religious' (22.2%) in their everyday life or 'atheist' (8.8%). In addition, about three-quarters of the population do not attend weekly religious services, such as the Friday prayer. More importantly, since 1975, the proportion of people who are committed to the most important practices of 'shari'a', i.e. five-times-a-day prayer and fasting during

²⁷While both the WVS and GAMAAN cover all 31 Iranian provinces, the percentage of sample size from rural areas is much higher in the WVS: 26.0% versus 3.5%. Their target population is also different. While the WVS has interviewed any person older than 16 years old whether literate (95.8%) or illiterate (4.2%), the latter has targeted only literate people above 19 years of age using social media. As a result, whilst 70.2% of the WVS sample size have higher education degrees (versus 29.4% with school diplomas), it rises to 85.4% (versus 14.6%) for GAMAAN. In addition, while the sex-distribution in the WVS is balanced (male: 51.1% v. female: 48.9%), this is not the case with GAMAAN (male: 68.1% v. female: 31.9%). In terms of anonymity and privacy, while the GAMAAN claims that their survey has been conducted entirely anonymously, the WVS acknowledges that there have been other people present in some of the interviews. For more details, see C. Haerpfer, Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano J., M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al., eds., 'World Values Survey: Round Seven—Country-Pooled Datafile Version', <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp> (Madrid & Vienna: JD Systems Institute & WVSA Secretariat, 2020) as well as Pooyan Tamimi Arab and Ammar Maleki, 'Iran's Secular Shift: New Survey Reveals Huge Changes in Religious Beliefs', [https://www.Iran's secular shift: new survey reveals huge changes in religious beliefs \(theconversation.com\), 2020](https://www.Iran's secular shift: new survey reveals huge changes in religious beliefs (theconversation.com), 2020) (accessed May 04, 2021).

²⁸Hossein Godazgar, 'From "Islamism" to "Spiritualism"? The Individualisation of "Religion" in Contemporary Iran', *Religions* 11, no. 1 (2020), <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/11/1/32/pdf> (accessed May 19, 2023).

Ramadhan, have declined dramatically: more than three times in relation to prayer (from 83% to 27.4%) and twice in relation to fasting (from 81% to 40%). Interestingly, the 40% figure for fasting is reported by the “Iranian Students’ News Agency (ISNA)”,²⁹ which is financially supported by the government. In addition, although the previous-years’ surveys do not record any data for Iran with respect to whether ‘religion’ is seen as about this world or another, a comparison of the 2020-data on this with other Muslim majority countries is remarkable. A significantly greater proportion of Iranians define ‘religion’ as ‘this-worldly’ (46.2%) and about ‘doing good to people’ (72.2%) compared with all other Muslim majority countries. For example, in the case of Turkey, the WVS 2018 data for these measures reads 34.2% and 43.4%, respectively.

For the ‘consequences’ dimension, the WVS reports a dramatic shift between the years 2000 (the height of the ‘Reformation’ era) and 2005 (the end of ‘Reformation’). Whilst nearly 76% of the population considered financially ‘cheating’ the government ‘never justifiable’ in 2000, this decreased to 52% five years later. This figure remains much the same (52.6%) in 2020 with the so-called ‘moderate’ government of Hassan Rouhani, although GAMAAN reports more dramatic and detailed changes in attitude towards ‘Islamic government’ and ‘Islamism’ in 2020 (see Footnote xii in Appendix 1).

The most significant change has occurred in relation to the mandatory veiling of women in public. Despite the Shah’s explicit discouragement of veiling (and sometimes mandatory unveiling, for example with female state employees at work), 75% of respondents ‘preferred veiled women’, compared to only 7% who did not do so in 1975. According to GAMAAN, in 2020, 72% of respondents opposed mandatory veiling, whilst 58% did not believe in such a thing as ‘Islamic veiling’ (hejab-e eslami) at all and only 15% believed in it. GAMAAN’s statistics in this regard is consistent with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance’s acknowledgement that 70% of Iranians oppose compulsory Islamic veiling.³⁰ This figure itself represents a steep increase from 49.8% in 2014.³¹ In addition, in terms of religious identity, Iranians are much more inclined towards diversity and less inclined to identify themselves simply as ‘Shi’a’ or ‘Muslim’ in 2020 compared with 1975 (compare Footnotes xxviii and xiv in Appendix 1).

In summary, according to the surveys outlined in Appendix 1, we can conclude that contemporary Iran is experiencing a significant shift in the various dimensions of ‘religious commitment’, which is overall associated with the individualization or privatization of ‘Islam’, ‘secularization’, and withdrawal from ‘shari’a’ and ‘Islamism’. As we will see, these findings are very much comparable with those of our research overall. That is, Iranians have continued to shift their position on how they define ‘religion’ or ‘non-religion’ in a more or less consistent trend since at least 2001–02, when this research was conducted.

²⁹Tamimi Arab and Maleki, ‘Iran’s Secular Shift’.

³⁰BBC, ‘Criticizing Compulsory Veiling and Confrontation with Women on Iran’s Live TV Show’ [in Persian], *B.B.C. Persian*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/www.bbc.com/persian/iran-54190771.amp> (accessed April 30, 2021).

³¹Erin Cunningham, ‘Women in Iran Are Pulling off Their Headscarves—and Hoping for a “Turning Point”’: Dozens Have Staged Individual Protests Against the Mandatory Veil, Risking Arrest for Removing Them in Public Squares’ *The Washington Post*, March 8, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/women-in-iran-are-pulling-off-their-headscarves-and-hoping-for-a-turning-point/2018/03/08/bb238a96-217c-11e8-946c-9420060cb7bd_story.html (accessed May 04, 2021); Golnaz Esfandiari, ‘Conservative Cleric Calls Iran’s Veiling Policy Wrong-Headed’, *Radio Free Europe: Radio Liberty*, June 02, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/conservative-cleric-calls-iran-veiling-policy-headed/27049428.html> (accessed May 04, 2021); and Faegheh Shirazi, ‘The Veiling Issue in 20th Century Iran in Fashion and Society, Religion, and Government’, *Religions* 10, no. 8 (2019): 1–32, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/8/461> (accessed May 04, 2021).

Before we report our findings and draw conclusions, first we give a brief account of the social context of our fieldwork and the theoretical framework used (social constructionism). The emphasis here is that our conceptualization of 'religion' or 'Islam' is not fixed and generic. Our methodological approach exploits this conceptualization of 'religion' and its various dimensions in order to identify shifts and trends in the styles of 'religious commitment'.

Students' religio-political life and "Reformation"

In the absence of independent political parties for most of Iran's history, the university student movement has become 'the political spokesman for ideological and political trends in society and a vanguard of socio-political protest' during both pre- and post-revolutionary Iran.³² The strongest voice against the Shah's regime within the universities came from non-Islamic, leftist groups, which were often rooted in guerrilla movements functioning outside of universities and serving as recruiters for them.³³ But all these non-Islamic associations were 'cleansed' from Iranian universities shortly after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 during a two-year period of closure (June 1980–October 1982), known as the 'Cultural Revolution'. The 'cleansing' of 'secular' students within universities was carried out by members of the Islamic Student Association in each university as the 'arm of the state'.³⁴ This was in fact the beginning of the relation of students' movements with the establishment.

This relationship continued until 1997 when Khatami (1997–2005) was elected president in a landslide election, despite a lack of religious authority support and financial and logistical infrastructure. With two-thirds of the national population under thirty, university students (about 1.15 million in approximately 210 universities), alongside the Islamic Student Associations, played a significant role in this result by functioning as informal social networks and using universities as spaces for political organization and mobilization.³⁵ This was indeed a huge shift in post-revolutionary student movements' religio-political life, during which the movement distanced itself from the establishment, and this was in fact the rebirth of student activism. But it did not take place without a backlash.

The increasing tensions between 'Reformist' universities and the 'Islamist' establishment culminated in university demonstrations in July 1999 following the closure of the 'Reformist' daily newspaper *Salam*. The demonstrations and rallies were violently suppressed in some major cities and universities, especially in the universities of Tehran and Tabriz.³⁶ In Tabriz, the University was invaded violently by members of ultra-conservative forces, including seminary students. During this invasion, several students and University

³²A. Akbar Mahdi, 'The Student Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis* 15, no. 2 (1999), 7.

³³Ervand Abrahamian, 'The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963–1977', *MERIP [Middle East Research and Information Project] Reports*, 86, March–April (1980): 3–15.

³⁴Mahdi, 'The Student Movement', 10.

³⁵Ali M. Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change* (London: Gingko Library, 2019), 98–113; and Mahdi, 'The Student Movement', 14.

³⁶BBC, 'Iranian Student Protests: Five Years on', *B.B.C. News: International Version*, July 09, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3879535.stm (accessed December 14, 2007); Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy*, 86–113; and Homa Katouzian, *The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 273–4. For further information about the significance of students in Iranian religio-political life, see Economist, 'Iran's Rebellious Students Go Underground', *Economist: Middle East and Africa*, July 09, 2009, http://www.economist.com/world/mideastafrica/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13988558 (accessed July 26, 2021).

officials were injured. In addition, a seminary student was killed under mysterious circumstances. These events seemed like the revenge of 'Islamists' (Islam-garaha) or 'Principlists' (osul-garaha) for their bitter failure in the May election of 1997. This research was conducted only two years after these events, i.e. 2001. It was in fact the end of Khatami's first term and the beginning of the university students' realization of and disappointment with his failure to stand up to the 'Islamists' in order to defend the Republican part of the Constitution and bring about structural change,³⁷ on the one hand, and facing claims of becoming increasingly 'non-religious' (bi-din) by the 'Principlist' authorities,³⁸ on the other. Thus, the so-called 'problem' of 'non-religiosity' among students was not confined to the University of Tabriz; university students throughout the country faced this charge.

Religious commitment: theoretical and methodological considerations

Without wishing to deny the significance of other contributions, for the purpose of the data analysis, we have adopted 'social constructionism', as elaborated by Beckford.³⁹ According to 'social constructionism', the styles, meanings and uses of the terms 'religion', 'non-religion' and 'spirituality', and thus 'sacralization' and 'secularization', are contextual and change across time and space. They are far from being unitary, homogenous, fixed, universal and generic concepts and phenomena. Iran is not an exception in this regard. For instance, what counted as 'religion' or 'Islam' in Iran in the pre-revolutionary era is different in the post-revolutionary period and, indeed, in other Muslim majority countries.

Among other factors, such as global forces, power and 'authorizing discourses' play a critical role in shifting and creating conceptual definitions and regulating what might be legitimately called 'religion' and what is not entitled to be. Asad mentions some such practices by the medieval Church in the history of western society, such as rejecting or accepting 'pagan' practices; authorizing shrines and certain miracles and relics; requiring confessions for certain 'sinful' thoughts and conducts; regulating religious Orders and hierarchies; and denying them to approach what the 'religious authority' called the 'heretical'.⁴⁰ However, as Weber illustrates, the role of power and 'religious authority' in maintaining or shifting the boundaries between the 'religious' and the 'secular' is neither limited to the pre-Reformation era nor to Europe, nor is its impact always guaranteed to be as intended.⁴¹ In the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber argues that the emergence of the 'spirit of capitalism' was in fact an 'ironic' result of the application of the Protestant ethic. Weber also suggests that Confucianism lost its status among the Chinese when it became the official religion of the State, because people started to hold 'Confucianism' responsible for the shortages in their lives.⁴²

³⁷ Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy*, 114–45, 275.

³⁸ Aftab, 'Mesbah Yazdi's Proposal for the Islamisation of Universities' [in Persian], September 16, 2005, *Aftab News: Politics*, 2; Frances Harrison, 'Iran's Liberal Lecturers Targeted', *B.B.C. News*, September 05, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/5316634.stm (accessed December 17, 2006); Robert Tait, 'Iranian President Calls for Purge of Liberal Lecturers', *The Guardian*, September 06, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/06/highereducation.iran> (accessed on September 06, 2006); and Faraji and Kazemi, 'Investigating the Status of Religiosity in Iran', 80.

³⁹ James A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴⁰ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 37–8.

⁴¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London and NY: Routledge, 2001); Max Weber, *The Religion of China* (Cambridge: The Free Press, 1968).

⁴² Weber, *The Religion of China*.

For social scientific research purposes, the best strategy, in Beckford's view, is to explore the diversities of definitions for 'religion' used in diverse social settings, in order to identify the most popular usages and definitions and to assess changes and continuity in the given social context over time. From his point of view, it is important to recognize that the 'social construction' of the notions of 'religion' in everyday life may methodologically lead to interpretations about 'patterns' of belief, thought, practice and emotion, which could also be statistically measurable.⁴³ These definitions and patterns or styles are 'contextualized', 'constructed' and 'used' in social life whether individually or collectively. It is also important to make sure that the diversities of the definitions are warranted by the considerations of different independent variables such as age, gender, marriage, education and social class.

For the purpose of this research, we confine the 'social construction' of the styles of 'religion' to Glock and Stark's model.⁴⁴ Although this model may now be regarded as somewhat dated, its contribution to literature and research on 'religiosity' is undeniable.⁴⁵ In opposition to single- and double-dimensional studies of religiosity, Glock proposed the need for a multi-dimensional approach to studying religion and proposed five broad and comprehensive dimensions.⁴⁶ Although this model was primarily developed in a Christian context, it has been welcomed by the Islamic ulama. In the translation of Willaime's *Sociologie des Religions* to Persian, Abdo'l Rahim Govahi (the translator) quotes the high ranking Islamic philosopher Allameh Mohammad Taqi Ja'fari in reference to the significance with which Glock and Stark's model is regarded by certain Islamic clerics: '[i]t seems that this model is one of the most excellent categorizations about various styles of religiosity. Therefore, it has a first-rank necessity for researchers to pay attention to it. The sociology of religion would surely be incomplete without this model' (Allameh Ja'fari in Willaime 1998: 81).⁴⁷ In addition, this model has officially been approved by the office of the 'Supreme Cultural Revolution Council' (SCRC),⁴⁸ which was set up by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1984 as a cultural and educational policy-making body and is dominated by ultra-conservatives and 'Principlists'. Indeed, we believe that this establishment approval has most likely been effective in terms of gaining the approval and being able to organize the practicalities of conducting this research project.

Glock and Stark characterize people in terms of five patterns: religious beliefs, practices, experiences, knowledge and consequences.⁴⁹ However, since religious (Islamic) education is obligatory in Iran in both general and higher education, during our pilot study our

⁴³ Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion*, 17.

⁴⁴ Charles Y. Glock, 'On the Study of Religious Commitment', *Review of Recent Research on Religion and Character Formation* (Research Supplement to *Religious Education*, July-August), 42, no. 4 (1962): 98–110; Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965); and Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock, *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment* (Berkeley: University of California, 1968).

⁴⁵ Joseph E. Faulkner and DeJong F. Gordon, 'Religiosity in 5-D: An Empirical Analysis', *Social Forces* 45, no. 2 (1966): 246–54; and James O. Gibbs and Kelly W. Crader, 'A Criticism of Two Recent Attempts to Scale Glock and Stark's Dimensions of Religiosity', *Sociological Analysis* 31, no. 2 (1970): 107–14.

⁴⁶ Gibbs and Crader, 'A Criticism of Two Recent Attempts', 107.

⁴⁷ Jean-Paul Willaime, *Jame'eh-Shenasi Adian* [Sociologie des religions] (Tehran: Tebian, 1998), 81.

⁴⁸ SCRC [The Supreme Cultural Revolution Council], 'A Survey of Religiosity Among Iranian Internet Users: Report of the 18th Scientific Meeting of the Office for the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council', December 04, 2005, <http://www.iranculture.org/dabirkhane/neshast/index.php?id=8> (accessed December 09, 2007).

⁴⁹ Glock, 'On the Study of Religious Commitment'; Glock and Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension*; and Stark and Glock, *American Piety*.

respondents refused to necessarily count 'knowledge' as part of their 'religious commitment'. Therefore, we did not measure the dimension of knowledge as an assessment of their religious commitment. In addition, as Godazgar has observed, Iranian pupils and students were very much motivated by the prospect of higher grades in any module, including religious education, than their beliefs, given the competitive nature of education in schools and universities.⁵⁰ This was not only confirmed by our pilot study but also by the other literature reviewed above. That is, due to the obligatory nature of studying Islamic or religious (for non-Muslims) education for all pupils and students, none of the previously mentioned research has considered 'Islamic knowledge' as an indicator of 'religious commitment' in the Iranian context. We will now consider the remaining four dimensions: beliefs, experiences, practices and consequences.

- (1) The belief dimension contains the expectation that a given person holds and acknowledges some specific religious doctrines. In the Iranian Muslim context, it includes a collection of beliefs, which are called 'Islamic Principles' (usul-e din): to believe in God (towhid), in resurrection (ma'ad), and Mohammad as the last Prophet (nabovvat) and the Qur'an as his miracle.
- (2) The experience dimension includes the expectation that the individual will, at some time, accomplish a direct, subjective knowledge of an ultimate being and establish some sense of direct and individualistic contact with that being or 'divine', particularly in terms of love and fear, outside the objective requirements of an institutional religion. This aspect is comparable with 'spirituality' (ma'anaviat), as distinguished from the 'Gnosticism' often described as the 'spirit of Shi'ism'⁵¹ or in Henri Corbin's description of 'Shi'ism' as 'the sanctity of Islamic esoterism'.⁵² It must be noted that, in order to differentiate between these two types of 'spirituality', i.e. 'spirituality' within Shi'ism and 'spirituality' beyond it, the 'experience' dimension in [Appendix 2](#) deliberately lacks any content that would specifically characterize any element related to 'Shi'ism', such as the notions of 'Imamate' or 'velayat'.
- (3) The religious practice dimension takes into account the persons' acts of worship and devotion, i.e. the acts individuals do to maintain their religious commitment objectives. It is classified into two categories: ritual, which concerns rites that are formal and typically collective sacred practices; and devotion, which refers to personal, informal, relatively spontaneous and typically individualistic acts of worship. This dimension is comparable with the 'Islamic law' or 'shari'a' aspect of 'Islam'.
- (4) Finally, in the case of consequences, certain behavioural standards, which a 'religious' person should observe in their everyday life, are considered. This represents the cumulative effect of the other four dimensions in one's day-to-day social and political life. However, in the context of Iran, it is associated with 'Islamism' as defined and required by the post-revolutionary definition of an 'Islamic religious commitment'. [Table 1](#) shows the application of religious commitment's dimensions to the Iranian context.

⁵⁰Godazgar, *The Impact of Religion*.

⁵¹Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought: The Response of the Shi'i and Sunni Muslims to the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 22.

⁵²Henry Corbin, *En Islam Iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, 4 vols., (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–3), vol. 1: xiv, 181, 186, 210 and vol. 3: 254.

Table 1. Dependent Variable and Its Dimensions in the Iranian Social Context.

	Dimensions		Applications to Iran
Religious Commitment	Belief	Belief in God (<i>towhid</i>), the resurrection (<i>ma'ad</i>) and Mohammad, as His Prophet, and the Qur'an (<i>nabovvat</i>)	
	Experience	Love in God; fear of God; relationship with God (<i>ertebat ba khoda</i>); and gaining favour of God (<i>taqarrob</i>)	
	Practice	Daily prayers; fasting; pilgrimage (<i>hajj</i>); and reciting the Qur'an	
	Consequences	Tax payments; alms-giving (<i>zakat</i> and <i>khoms</i>); veiling; and intolerance of non-Muslim governments and individuals	

As Table 1 and Appendix 2 show, the styles of 'religious commitment' and all their variables are carefully 'contextualized' in relation to Iran. The diversities of definitions have also been addressed by asking questions in relation to independent variables. Indeed, all these variables and indicators are informed (via a pilot study) and acknowledged by our respondents who were born in Iran and had lived there all their lives. Therefore, these 'patterns' do not carry any 'essential properties' and there is no generalization at work. Indeed, this was the main reason behind the elimination of the dimension of 'knowledge' from the Glock and Stark model given that our respondents found that it was 'irrelevant' to the Iranian social context during our pilot study. Furthermore, we made sure that we were not constrained by the framework of the Glock and Stark model, which was originally devised for a different social context. However, our pilot study showed that the Iranian context did not require us to go beyond this model and include further dimensions or characteristics. Therefore, we maintain that our adopted Glock and Stark 'multi-dimensional' model for 'religious commitment', which has been 'contextualized' in relation to Iran, is entirely consistent with a 'social constructionist' approach as elaborated above.

Our main research question is 'What is the impact of the "Islamic Republic of Iran" on the religious commitment of students'. Using a modified version of the Glock and Stark model, fieldwork was conducted at the University of Tabriz, a major research university located in north-west Iran. Therefore, bearing the above dimensions in mind, it was important to identify and understand how students 'construct' aspects of their 'religiosity'. Was their definition of 'religious commitment' associated with a more institutional religion, 'Islamism' ('Islam' as a political ideology) or 'spirituality'? In other words, has the Islamic state succeeded in the project of the 'Islamization of universities' and students? But before addressing these questions, let us give here an account of our research methods.

Measures

Our research strategy was quantitative, with the selected method being written questionnaires, the content of which was informed by our pilot study. But due to Iran's specific religio-political context, some further considerations needed to be taken into account. It was fortunate that, due to the increasing complexity of conducting social scientific research outside the university, the conducting of such research within the university environment had become a prevailing norm among the university authorities, staff and students. Furthermore, the collection of data for this research was even easier as the research was funded by the University of Tabriz. Nevertheless, the authors took a great deal of care to ensure the validity of the research. The second author, who was himself a post-graduate student at the time and had lived in the university campus for six years, had already

established himself among many of the students, and came to be heavily involved in collecting data. Alongside him, a female post-graduate student in social science research, who also lived in the university campus at the time, became involved in collecting data from female undergraduate students under the supervision of the first author.

They interviewed the selected students individually at the students' rooms, without allowing others to be accompanied with the respondent. None of our respondents seemed to be concerned about the issue of anonymity, which appeared to be an accepted norm. This is because there was no experience of trouble among people who had taken part in similar research before. However, anonymity was highly emphasized and guaranteed by the researchers, both in writing on the first page of the questionnaire and in the oral explanation at the start of the interview (see [Appendix 2](#)). In addition, all questionnaires were coded, and no names were printed on them. All respondents remained anonymous throughout the research process. We also avoided wording questions in such a way as to encourage the respondents to self-censor. Furthermore, in order to avoid bias, the researchers were careful to conduct the survey in as calm and peaceful a climate at the university as possible—whenever there was social or political disorder, the survey was left for another time.

The information needed for measuring the abstract variables was collected from as representative a sample as possible. The questions were administered on the basis of the research question and hypotheses, theoretical framework and the definition of the variable concepts. 'Construct validity' and 'content validity' were the selected methods for measuring the logical consistency of the questions with the abstract concept of 'religious commitment', its dimensions, and their comprehensiveness in covering all aspects of this abstract concept.⁵³ The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by 'alternative, independent' specialists in social science research.⁵⁴ Fifteen of the twenty-four questions took the 'closed' form of a six-item Likert scale for 'religious commitment': 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'agree to some extent', 'disagree to some extent', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree'. Two questions took the 'open' form; and seven questions were demographic: sex; faculty or subject of study; father's occupation; marital status; religion or sect; year of entry to the university; and family income. Depending on the nature of the categories, independent variables were measured either in a 'nominal' or 'interval' level.⁵⁵ These were in fact the independent variables with which students' religious commitment were also measured. [Table 2](#) shows their discrete category frequencies, codes and categorical measurements.

Out of the 17 questions related to religious commitment, four related to belief, six to experience, three to practice, and four were questions about consequences. Within the practice dimension, we also asked the students to compare their contemporary practice with when they were at high school or college (see [Appendix 2](#)). This was because the religious authorities were concerned that university students were 'less religious' than their non-student peers. We did this to establish whether students themselves confirmed the issue of change after entering university.

⁵³Thomas R. Black, *Doing Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences: An Integrated Approach to Research Design, Measurement and Statistics* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 298–302.

⁵⁴Thomas R. Black, *Understanding Social Science Research*. 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 75.

⁵⁵Norman Blaikie, *Analyzing Quantitative Data: From Description to Explanation* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 23–5.

Table 2. Category Frequencies for Independent Variables.

IV	C	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	M	CM
Sex	C	Male	Female								N
	CN	1	2								
Subject of study (Faculty)	n	201	164							0	N
	C	Literature	Humanities	Agriculture	Engineering	Maths	Natural Sciences	Chemistry	Educational Sciences		
	CN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8		
Father's occupation	n	33	53	60	87	25	53	23	31	0	N
	C	Un-employed	Deceased/ State Pensioner	Labourer	Farmer	Military	State-employed	Freelance			
	CN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7			
	n	7	29	14	38	8	108	84		77	N
Marital status	C	Single	Married								
	CN	1	2								
Sect	n	331	34							0	N
	C	Shi'a	Sunni								
Year of entry to university	CN	1	2							19	N
	n	3	22							2	I
	C	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001				
Family income ⁵⁶ statistics	CN	1	2	3	4	5	6			185	I
	n	3	22	70	131	91	46				
Mean = 177,500; Standard error (mean) = 9,864.9; Standard deviation = 132,251; Variance = 15 + 1,75 E; Skewedness = 3,197; Steepness = 1,64; n = 180; Range = 670,000; Minimum = 30000; Maximum = 700,000.											

IV = Independent variables; M = Missing data; CM = Categorical Measurement.

C = Category; CN = Code No.; n = Frequency.

N = Nominal-level measurement; I = Interval-level Measurement.

⁵⁶The statistics for family income are based on monthly income in toman – 10US\$ ≈ 800 toman at the time.

As well as the validity, the reliability of the questionnaire also needed to be ensured. Thus, to measure the extent to which we would get similar results if we repeated the interviews at another time, assuming that our respondents had not changed,⁵⁷ the 'Internal Consistency Method' was used, as recommended by Carmines and Zeller.⁵⁸ For them, the most popular measurement of reliability in this method is the estimate given by Cronbach's (1951) alpha,⁵⁹ which we used to confirm the reliability of questions related to 'religious commitment', in general, and its associated dimensions (Appendix 2).

The sample population was taken to be the 7244 undergraduate students studying at the University of Tabriz in the educational year 2001–02 – we deliberately excluded postgraduate students in order to avoid further complication. Since our main variables (belief, experience, practice and consequences) were qualitative, we used the Cochran formula,⁶⁰ for determining the sampling number. A sample size of 365 was estimated. Of the 365 respondents, 164 of them were female. The sample size of 365 was distributed between all eight faculties of the University on the basis of 'stratified random' sampling to ensure that each faculty was proportionally represented.⁶¹ Table 3 shows the population of undergraduate students and the selected sample sizes in each faculty in terms of gender. Given the sample size for a faculty, the respondents from that faculty were selected on the basis of 'systematic random sampling'. In order to identify the sampling distance, the ratio $\frac{n}{N} (= \frac{365}{7244} \approx \frac{1}{20})$ was calculated. Therefore, every twentieth person appearing in front of the associated faculty was approached and invited to participate. This continued until the calculated sample size for each faculty was reached. The research was conducted following a pilot study on a sample of 80.

The intention of the research was to explore the differences between what might be associated with 'Islam' (which may be characterized in the forms of 'belief' and 'practice'), 'spirituality' (manifested in 'experience' dimension) and 'Islamism' (displayed in the form of 'consequences'). It was also important to gauge the direction and magnitude of any changes in the levels of religiosity a quarter of a century after the revolution. The dependent variable was religious commitment (Table 1), which was also correlated with the independent variables of sex; subject of study; occupation of father; family income; marital status; sect (Sunnism or Shi'ism); and year of entrance to university (1996–2001). All received questionnaires and responses to the questions related to both independent and dependent variables were aptly coded, and the data was analysed with SPSS (Version 12). Taking account of the different levels of measuring variables, we used the appropriate statistical method for each level—ANOVA; *t* test; Levene's test for homogeneity of variances; LSD; and Pearson's Correlation test. Details of why such methods were employed for correlations have been explained in the section below.

⁵⁷Black, *Understanding Social Science Research*, 80.

⁵⁸Edward G. Carmines and Richard A. Zeller, *Reliability and Validity Assessment* (London: Sage Publications, 1979), 43–48.

⁵⁹Lee. J. Cronbach, 'Coefficient Alpha and the Internal Structure of Tests', *Psychometrika* 16 (1951): 297–334.

⁶⁰William. G. Cochran, *Sampling Techniques* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1977).

⁶¹Black, *Doing Quantitative Research*, 118, 120–121.

Table 3. The Student Population of and Sample Sizes for Each Faculty in Terms of Gender.

Faculty	No. of students	Male	Female	Sample size	Male	Female	%
Literature	657	241	416	33	12	21	9.0
Humanities & Social Sciences	1060	630	430	53	32	21	14.5
Agriculture	1198	644	554	60	28	32	16.5
Engineering	1717	1401	316	87	71	16	23.8
Mathematics	491	272	219	25	14	11	6.9
Natural Sciences	1042	430	612	53	22	31	14.5
Chemistry	455	173	282	23	9	14	6.3
Educational Sciences	624	271	353	31	13	18	8.5
Total	7244	4062	3182	365	201	164	100

% = Percentage of the total respondents from each faculty.

Students' "religious commitment"

Our findings show that students were less concerned with the practice and consequences dimensions than with the belief and experience aspects of religious commitment, placing less importance on objective obligations to their 'religious' commitment (i.e. 'shari'a' aspects) and on the religio-political community ('Islamism'). Table 4 shows the range and mean of the four dimensions of religious commitment.

To give a comparative measure between the four, the scales are standardized from zero to fifteen and represented on a bar chart (Figure 1).

Comparing the standardized averages for the different dimensions of religious commitment, inspired by Glock and Stark, we find that the ranking of 'religiosity' among students in descending order are: belief, experience, consequences and, finally, practice. This shows that students were more concerned with the individualistic belief and 'spirituality' aspects of 'religious commitment', manifested in the 'experience' aspect, than the dimensions that were submissively required by the 'authorizing discourses' of the Islamic establishment. In other words, they were more interested in the individualistic sensations of the 'divine' than the Islamic practices, such as prayers and fasting, required by institutional Islam and Islamic authority. This is entirely consistent with Godazgar's,⁶² Serajzadeh's⁶³ and Kazemipur and Rezaei's⁶⁴ (2003) findings, according to which Iranians were more concerned with 'personalized religion' than an 'organized' one.

This is also clear when we compare the ritual practices of our respondents at university with their high school period. To do so, we use a one-tailed *t* test. The *t* test is chosen because we compare the mean of the same participants in two conditions at two points in

Table 4. The Range and Mean of the Four Indices (Dimensions) of Religious Commitment.

Dimension	Range	Mean	n
Belief	4–24	22.1	360
Experience	6–36	29.4	358
Practice	3–18	12.6	362
Consequences	4–24	17.07	354
Religious commitment (total)	17–100	81.3	365

n = the number of responses.

⁶²Godazgar, *The Impact of Religion*; and Godazgar, 'Islam Versus Consumerism and Post-modernism'.

⁶³Serajzadeh, 'Croyants non pratiquants'.

⁶⁴Kazemipur and Rezaei, 'Religious Life Under Theocracy'.

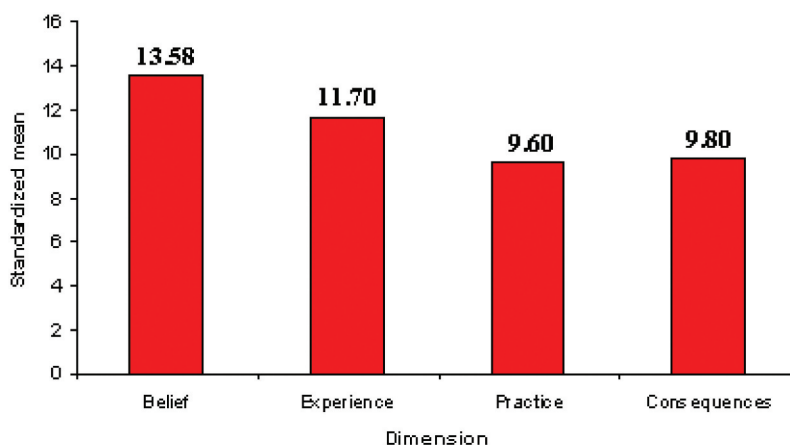


Figure 1. The standardized mean for the dimensions of religious commitment.

time⁶⁵ – the dependent variable of ‘ritual practice’ is ‘interval’ and the independent variable is ‘nominal’ and double-dimensional (two means are compared); and we choose the one-tailed *t* test method because the region of uncertainty is only in one tail of the distribution for directional hypotheses⁶⁶ – i.e. the claim that the university students had become “less-”or ‘non-religious’. We find that students remained faithful in performing their daily prayers in the individualistic (forada) form as they had done in their high-school period—i.e. there was no significant difference between university and high school in terms of individualistic prayers ($t = 1.57, p > .116$).

Nevertheless, using the same method, it is clear that there were significant differences between their high school and university practice in terms of collective prayers ($t = 9.075, p < .001$) and Friday prayers ($t = 9.372, p < .001$) as well as the other individualistic practices of reciting the Qur’an ($t = 5.89, p < .001$) and fasting ($t = 4.154, p < .001$). That is, there was not only a reduction in their involvement in collective practices highly encouraged by the Islamic political ideology, but also a reduction or shift from ‘religion’ to ‘non-religion’ with regard even to some private aspects of ‘shari’a’ (such as fasting and the recitation of the Qur’an) that might be associated with ‘secularization’ at an individual level, rather than an institutional one. In other words, the students’ definitions and ‘constructions’ of ‘religious commitment’ did not fit well with the meaning of ‘Islam’ defined, authorized and demanded by the ‘Islamic authority’. This result is also confirmed by other similar research projects conducted in other parts of the country.⁶⁷ Together these results show that the ‘individualization of religion’ alongside ‘secularization’ have been a feature of Iranian society since at least 2001–02.

We also investigate any possible relationship between the students’ ‘religious commitment’ and general demographic characteristics (Table 5).

⁶⁵ Alan Bryman and Duncan Cramer, *Quantitative Data Analysis with SPSS 12 and 13: A Guide for Social Scientists* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 186.

⁶⁶ Blaikie, *Analyzing Quantitative Data*, 182.

⁶⁷ Faraji and Kazemi, ‘Investigating the Status of Religiosity in Iran’; Modiri and Azadarmaki, ‘Gender and Religiosity’; Nikkhah and Zahirinia, ‘Investigating the Extent of Hormozgan University Students’ Religious Commitment’; and Tavassoli and Morshedi, ‘Investigating University Students’ Religious Commitment’.

Table 5. The Correlation of Dependent and Independent Variables.

Independent Variables	Demographic characteristics	Dependent Variable		
		Religious Commitment		
		Method*	F/t/r	p**
	Sex	t + L	-5.08	0.001
	Subject of study	A + L	0.68	0.68
	Father's occupation	A + L	0.803	0.568
	Family income	P.C.	-0.011	0.881
	Marital status	t + L	1.55	0.120
	Sect	t + L	1.40	0.161
	Year of entry to university (1996–2001)	A + LSD	2.756	0.019

* We often used two methods for measuring the correlations, the results of which were more or less the same. The data shown for correlation coefficients and significance are only related to the first method listed.

**Significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

A = One-way ANOVA test; L = Levene's test for homogeneity of variances; LSD = Least Significant Difference test.

P.C. = Pearson's Correlation test; t = One-tailed t test.

Males and females exhibit significant differences from each other. In order to compare the mean values for religious commitment between men and women, we use the one-tailed t test and find that the difference is statistically significant ($t = -5.08$, $p < 0.001$). This is also confirmed by Levene's test for the homogeneity of variance ($F = 13.85$, $p < 0.001$). Levene's test 'is a one-way analysis of variance on the absolute (i.e. ignoring the minus sign) deviation scores within that group. . . . In this case the one-way analysis . . . [is] done on only two groups'.⁶⁸ While the mean of religious commitment for males is 78.15, for females it is 85.34. Therefore, we may conclude that females were more 'religious' than males. This is the case for all dimensions of "religious commitment" and their relevant indicators. These results are consistent with the findings of Nikkhah and Zahirinia,⁶⁹ Mirfardi et al.⁷⁰, Modiri and Azadarmaki,⁷¹ and Tavassoli and Morshedi⁷² – in the case of the latter two research projects, women scored slightly lower averages than men only in practices related to collective religious rituals, such as attendance in mosques or Friday prayers. On the other hand, Serajzadeh finds no meaningful differences between men and women regarding 'religious commitment'.⁷³

We use the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test the significance of differences between the mean values of the religious commitment variable for different categories of university entrance years.⁷⁴ This method is used because the dependent variable of 'religious commitment' is 'interval', and the independent variable is 'nominal' and multi-dimensional—the mean values of more than two unrelated samples are involved.⁷⁵ We find that there were significant differences in 'religious commitment' between different entry years, ranging from 1997 to 2001 ($df = 334$, $F = 2.756$, $p < .019$). Having rejected the null hypothesis of equal means by using the ANOVA F-test, Fisher's LSD (Least Significant Difference) test is used to

⁶⁸Bryman and Cramer, *Quantitative Data Analysis*, 177.

⁶⁹Nikkhah and Zahirinia, 'Investigating the Extent of Hormozgan University Students' Religious Commitment'.

⁷⁰Mirfardi, Mokhtari and Valinejad, 'The Extent of Religious Commitment'.

⁷¹Modiri and Azadarmaki, 'Gender and Religiosity'.

⁷²Tavassoli and Morshedi, 'Investigating University Students' Religious Commitment'.

⁷³Serajzadeh, 'Croyants non pratiquants'.

⁷⁴Blaikie, *Analyzing Quantitative Data*, 201.

⁷⁵Bryman and Cramer, *Quantitative Data Analysis*, 180.

Table 6. LSD Test Results for the Relations Between the Different University Entry Years in Terms of Religious Commitment.

Groups	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
1996						
1997			*	*		*
1998		*				
1999		*			*	
2000				*		*
2001		*			*	

*# shows a significant difference between two associated groups at $p < 0.05$ level.

compare treatment group means.⁷⁶ Table 6 shows the result of this comparison between different university entrance years in terms of religious commitment.

According to this test, students who had entered the University in October 1997 had significant differences in religious commitment with those who had entered in October 1998, 1999 and 2001. Likewise, students who entered the University in 1999 and 2000 had different religious commitment compared with those who entered in 2000 and 2001, respectively. It is interesting that these differences between different entry years are significant in the dimensions of 'experience' ('spirituality') and 'practice' ('shari'a')—there is no significant difference in the dimensions of 'belief' and 'consequences'. Nevertheless, students who entered the university in October 1997 (the final year students)⁷⁷ had the lowest degree of religious commitment (a mean of 74.18 versus 81.30 on average). These findings are similar to those of Nikkhah and Zahirinia⁷⁸ and Tavassoli and Morshedi⁷⁹ who also find significant differences in the extent of students' religiosity in terms of their entrance years in Hormozgan University situated in south Iran and Amirkabir University of Technology in Tehran, respectively. According to these findings, with few exceptional entrance years, students were overall inclined towards 'individualization' and 'pluralization' (especially, in Tavassoli and Morshedi) of 'religion' and, from some perspectives, towards 'non-religion' or 'secularization' and this is particularly evident with final year students.

In order to assess the homogeneity or difference of variance between Shi'ite and Sunni students, Levene's test is adopted.⁸⁰ As the resulting p -value of Levene's test is more than the critical value of 0.05 ($F = 0.002$, $p > 0.966$), the null hypothesis of homogenous variances is accepted, and we conclude that there is no significant difference between Sunni and Shi'ite students in relation to religious commitment overall. This lack of difference is also confirmed by the t test ($t = 1.40$, $p > 0.161$). However, Shi'ite students score higher in the dimensions of 'practice' and 'consequences' than Sunnis (a mean of 82.05 for Shi'ite versus 78.50 for Sunnis). Figure 2 shows students' religious commitment in terms of sex, sect and university entry years.

⁷⁶Rupert G. Miller, *Simultaneous Statistical Inference*, 2nd ed., (NY & Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1981), 90.

⁷⁷The 1996 entrance were those students who had failed previous exams and, as a result, had their period of study extended. There were only three such students which is too few a number to make any statistical conclusions.

⁷⁸Nikkhah and Zahirinia, 'Investigating the Extent of Hormozgan University Students' Religious Commitment', 697.

⁷⁹Tavassoli and Morshedi, 'Investigating University Students' Religious Commitment', 112.

⁸⁰Bryman and Cramer, *Quantitative Data Analysis*, 177, 182–3.

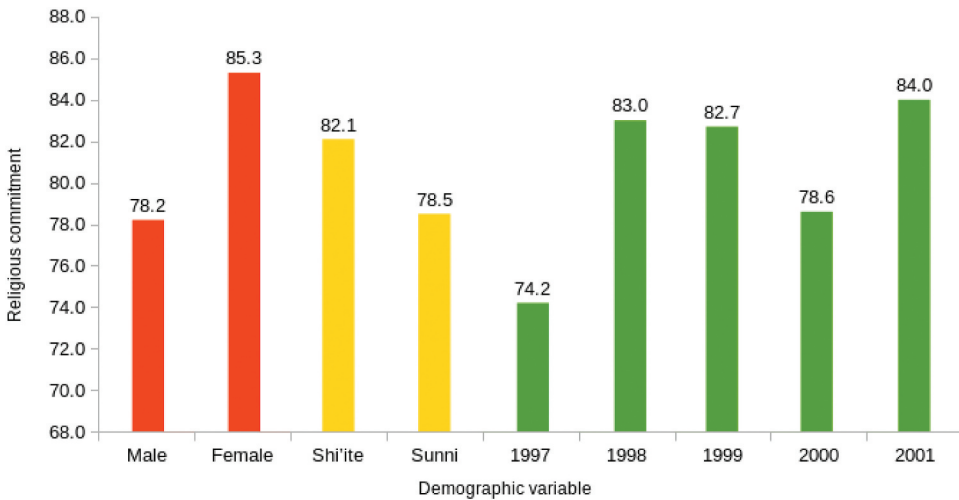


Figure 2. Students' religious commitment in terms of demographic characteristics.

Moreover, using different statistical methods, it is clear that other independent variables are not significant in determining religious commitment: marital status (t test: $t = 1.55$, $p > 0.120$; Levene's test: $F = 2.10$, $p > 0.148$); subject of study (one-way ANOVA: $F = 0.68$, $p > 0.68$; Levene's test: $F = 0.44$, $p > 0.87$); and fathers' occupation (one-way ANOVA: $F = 0.803$, $p > 0.568$; Levene's test: $F = 2.207$, $p > 0.053$). In addition, since both variables of religious commitment and family income are 'interval',⁸¹ their relationship is measured by Pearson's Correlation coefficient,⁸² which shows no significant difference between them ($r = -0.011$, $p > 0.881$).

Discussion and conclusions

In response to the question 'what is the impact of the "Islamic Republic of Iran" on the religious commitment of students?', this research illustrates that students did harbour a certain amount and account of 'religiosity' while studying at university, but such an account was certainly different from that defined and expected by the post-revolutionary 'Islamic authority'. While they expected (and still expect) university students to be faithful to the collective, and particularly the ritualistic, aspects of religiosity, our research finds that students were more likely to adopt its individualistic facets in a selective way. They were specifically less concerned with the collective and political ('Islamist') aspects of their religious commitment (ritual and consequences dimensions) than with the private and personal ('spiritual') manifestations of religious commitment in their everyday lives (belief and experience aspects). While the levels of belief and experience are high and different from one another, the levels of practice and consequences are low and nearly the same. In other words, the Islamist-emphasized interrelationships between the consequences dimension, as an explicitly socio-political field, and practice (particularly rituals) not only affected

⁸¹Blaikie, *Analyzing Quantitative Data*, 25–6.

⁸²Blaikie, *Analyzing Quantitative Data*, 91.

both dimensions evenly, but also lowered practice in the individualistic facets. For example, comparing the students' ritual practices performed at university with those of their high school period, there is not only a significant reduction in their collective prayers and Friday prayers, there is also a meaningful fall in their individualistic, devotional practices of reciting the Qur'an and fasting, which are related to the 'shari'a' aspects. In other words, they were also inclined towards 'non-religion' or 'secularization' with regard to some aspects of 'shari'a'.

We conclude that having lived under 'Islamic' governance for their whole lives, the students' religiosity tended towards individualistic faith and 'spirituality' as opposed to the religio-political as well as 'shari'a' aspects of consequences and practices, in general. Therefore, the definition of 'Islam' by the religious authority, as manifested in the form of a political ideology or as 'Islamism', has not been successful. This post-revolutionary definition has not been adopted and has led to the weakening of the pre-revolutionary definition of 'Islam', characterized mainly by 'shari'a', and the emergence of an individualistic form of 'religiosity' that might be associated with 'spirituality' beyond the frontiers of an institutional religion. Indeed, under the influence of changes in law, politics, the economy and other societal conditions as well as being exposed to global forces such as satellite TV and internet, Iranian students exhibit a different style of 'religion'. This style is distinguished from both the revolutionary era in avoiding collectivity and 'Islamism' (rendering 'Islam' as a political ideology) and the pre-revolutionary construction of 'Islam' that was largely 'shari'a'-oriented. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that the results of this research cannot be generalized to the Iranian adult population as a whole. Nor is it necessarily representative of that age group at the time, given that entrants to Iranian universities were subject to political evaluation (*gozinesh-e daneshju*); such a political evaluation continues to take place.

The 'globalized', 'spiritualistic' and 'individualized' style of 'religiosity' taking shape within the context of post-revolutionary Iran contrasts with that in other Muslim-majority countries. Before providing a brief analysis of this, it is important to re-emphasize that what counts as 'Islam' in any of these societal contexts may change over time; namely its styles may change from one 'religious' dimension to another (e.g. from 'belief' to 'experience', 'practice' or 'consequences' or vice versa) or even to 'non-religion'. At the centre of these transformations are 'shifting conceptions and locations of the sacred'.⁸³ Yet, as Beckford highlights,⁸⁴ these developments and re-locations do not occur in vacuum and isolation: they are 'the products of social processes in which the interests of human groups are at stake'. Just as social processes may differ from one Muslim majority society to another, like any other society, the re-location of conceptions and the sacred may also differ from one society to another. Despite the limited data, there are hints of this picture of 'religious' change and continuity in [Appendix 1](#). For example, if we consider those who describe themselves as non-religious and/or atheist in Turkey, we find that the percentage falls from 19% in 2001, just before the AKP came to power in 2002, to 17.1% in 2007, falling further to 14.8% in 2012 at the height of the Party's 'success',

⁸³Demerath in Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion*, 71.

⁸⁴Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion*, 71–2.

before rising to 25.5% in 2018, two years after the so-called 'coup attempts', which shook the country's socio-political order. While, it is difficult to argue for a direct causal link without further research, it is clear that the country's turbulent politics in this period may have had an effect on these numbers. Likewise, if we consider the changing trends for the same variable in Iran, we find a more consistent trend acting at a faster pace. The percentage identifying as non-religious and/or atheist is 4.4% in 2000 at the height of the 'Reformation' era, increasing noticeably to 15.8% just five years later at the end of the 'Reformation' era. Similar speculations can equally be made about the underlying reasons for the changing trends also in other countries.

With these provisos in mind, it does seem to be the case, however, that the changes occurring in Iran are to some extent unique when compared with other Muslim-majority countries, when considering the findings of the WVS. While the changes in the dimensions of 'belief' and 'practice' are positively linked in the case of Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan overall; or the 'practice' dimension remains stable at the very least, while the 'belief' dimension decreases, the same is not the case with Iran, where the drop in the 'practice' and 'consequences' dimensions are more pronounced. That is, Iranians, unlike Turks, Egyptians and Pakistanis, are tending to 'individualize' and 'spiritualize' more, as can be seen by the greater decline in their 'shari'a' practices and the 'consequences' dimensions of religious commitment when compared to the 'belief' dimension. For example, Iran exhibits the lowest degree of shari'a-commitment, manifested in attendance at 'weekly prayer at religious services' in 2018–2020 (26.1%), compared with Turkey (33.8%), Pakistan (46.1%) and Egypt (57%). Furthermore, in relation to 'consequences', Iran shows the highest degree of 'Trust [towards] followers of other religions' in 2018–2020 (63.1%), followed by Egypt (51%), Turkey (32.8%) and Pakistan (31.4%).

When compared with some 'western' societies, such as Portugal, Italy, Spain, Greece, United Kingdom, Netherlands, France and Germany, in which many people distance themselves from traditional religious institutions,⁸⁵ we find a similar pattern in Iran of 'individualism', unfolding from 'religiosity'. That is, some Iranians, similar to some people in these 'western' countries, tend to believe and practice outside the objective requirements of their religious institutions. This contrasts significantly with the early post-revolutionary Iran and most of other Muslim-majority countries, including Turkey, at a 'Secularity II' level, in Taylor's terms.⁸⁶ However, it is interesting that this strong trend towards individualism is not concomitant with the emergence of very powerful spiritual communities in the post-revolutionary Iran due to the critical role of power. That is, although it is very hard to imagine the association of such a robust sense of individualism with non-transcendental 'exclusive humanism', an essential condition for 'Secularity III' according to Taylor, it seems that 'expressive individualism' is occurring in Iran, but this does not necessarily mean that its exponents join powerful spiritual movements, as is the case in some 'western' societies.

By taking a 'social constructionist' approach to 'religion', we have not only been able to identify styles of 'religion' and their shifts in the Iranian social context, but also been able to understand their implications for distinguishing patterns of 'secularity' or 'non-religion'.

⁸⁵Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe, eds., *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013); and Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality?* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

⁸⁶Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

Moreover, this research provides a further example of Weber's theory of 'irony' in relation to the context of Iran. Similar to the decline of institutional Confucianism in China, as Weber elaborated, Iranian students perhaps hold institutional and/or politicized 'Islam' responsible for the perceived shortcomings in their lives. It indicates that the changes in the meaning of 'Islam' and inclinations towards 'non-religion' at the height of 'Reformation', i.e. 2001–02, are a continuation of shifts originating in the pre-'Reformation' era and are in fact the beginning of a much more radical departure from both 'Islam' (not only in the 'shari'a' sense but also in much of its 'belief' dimension) and 'Islamism' (in its religio-political ideological meaning). Indeed, England and Bozorgmehr's report⁸⁷ about the latest presidential 'election' provides solid evidence for this statement insofar as it is very hard to find any room for 'Islamism' at the individual level, especially among the youth, in the fifth decade of the Islamic Republic.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

⁸⁷ Andrew England and Najmeh Bozorgmehr, 'Iran's Balancing Act: Hardliners Weigh Social Freedoms for Stability', *Financial Times*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/b9e87001-f42f-46a9-b23c-6ba6b9373b5e> (accessed June 30, 2021).

Appendix 1

“Religious commitment” in Iran in the context of greater middle eastern countriesⁱ (Available data)

B1 = Belief in God?, **B2** = Belief in afterlife?,

E1 = God’s importance in life?, **E2** = Moments of meditation and contemplation?, **E3** = Think about purpose of life?,

E4 = Does the mosque cater for spiritual needs?, **E5** = Weekly prayer outside religious services?

P1 = Pray 5 times a day?, **P2** = Fast in Ramadhan?, **P3** = Weekly prayer at religious services?

P4 = Religion about this world or another?, **P5** = Religion about ritual or doing good, **P6**: Non-religious|Atheist

C1 = Cheating the government financially unjustifiable?, **C2** = (Dis)agree with mandatory hejab?,

C3 = Neighbour: different religion (not mentioned), **C4** = Trust followers of other religions?

	Belief			Experience (spiritualism) ⁱⁱ					Practice (Shari'a)					Consequences (Islamism v pluralism)				
	B1	B2	B3	E1	E2 ⁱⁱⁱ	E3	E4	E5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6 ^{iv}	C1 ^v	C2 ^{vi}	C3 ^{vii}	C4
Iran																		
GAMAAN 2020 ^{viii}	78.3	37.3	-	-	-	-	-	_ix	27.4 ^x	40.0 ^{xi}	-	-	-	22.2 8.8	_xii	72.4 ^{xiii}	_xiv	-
WVS 2020 ^{xv}	99.1	91.3	99.0	-	-	-	-	-	63.7	-	26.1	43.8	16.5 vs. 72.2	14.3 1.3	52.6 ^{xvi}	-	66.2	63.1
WVS 2005 ^{xvii}	95.5 ^{xviii}	-	95.5	94.6	86.9	64.5	-	-	-	-	33.8	-	-	15.7 0.1	52.0	-	62.0	-
WVS 2000 ^{xix}	98.9	94.8	96.5	-	60.0	64.0	-	64.0	-	26.4	-	-	-	3.1 1.3 ^{xx}	75.8	-	75.8 ^{xxi}	-
SSAI, 1975 ^{xxii}	-	_xxiii	-	-	-	-	-	_xxiv	83.0 ^{xxv}	81.0 ^{xxvi}	-	-	-	0.0 0.0	-	75.0 ^{xxvii}	_xxviii	-
Turkey																		
WVS 2018	94.5	91.8	85.1	-	-	-	-	-	41.1	-	33.8	60.9	52.8 vs. 43.4	24.5 1.0	73.3	-	56.4	32.8
WVS 2012 ^{xxix}	97.8	96.6	95.7	-	88.5	-	-	-	48.6	-	33.2	74.0	64.3 vs. 33.1	14.0 0.8	78.8	-	63.2	34.6
WVS 2007	96.1	-	96.1	94.7	88.9	67.6	-	-	-	-	33.6	-	-	16.6 0.5	74.8	-	66.6	26.6
WVS 2001	97.4	88.2	92.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	37.0	-	-	18.0 1.0	-	-	-	-
Egypt																		
WVS 2018	-	88.1	99.6	-	-	-	-	-	79.5	-	57.0	52.2 vs. 40.9	48.8 vs. 47.6	24.7 0.1	72.9	-	86.6	51.0
WVS 2012	-	-	-	-	81.9	-	-	-	-	-	45.2	62.4 vs. 37.6	40.9 vs. 59.1	-	61.2	-	-	39.0
WVS 2008	99.4	-	99.4	89.6	87.5	68.2	-	-	-	-	55.6	-	-	7.4 -	74.2	-	-	39.1
WVS 2001	100	100	98.3	-	-	89.6	-	-	-	-	42.2	-	-	1.3 -	75.3	-	-	-
Pakistan																		
WVS 2018	97.4	89.3	95.7	-	-	-	-	-	61.0	-	46.1	76.8 vs. 21.6	57.0 vs. 41.4	4.5 0.5	68.1	-	68.1	31.4
WVS 2012 ^{xxx}	100	99.8	98.3	-	82.6	-	-	-	60.9	-	28.9	80.0 vs. 20.0	71.4 vs. 28.6	0.3 0.0	63.7	-	76.2	26.7
WVS 2001	100	100	93.8	-	-	59.8	-	-	-	-	74.1	-	-	8.8 -	79.6	-	-	-
Saudi Arabia																		
WVS 2003	98.9	97.4	97.6	-	-	68.0	-	-	-	-	29.2	-	-	26.7 -	55.2 ^{xxxi}	-	-	-

ⁱThe Middle Eastern countries chosen here are arguably comparable with Iran in terms of geopolitical factors and demographic makeup with a sizable majority officially being Muslims (90–100%).

ⁱⁱDue to the availability of similar and/or further data in these surveys and their implications on the dimensions of ‘experience’, ‘practice’ and ‘consequences’ in our research, this table includes a rather wider set of questions than we have asked our respondents (Appendix 2).

ⁱⁱⁱ“Do you spend moments in prayer, meditation and contemplation?”: the original questionnaire in Persian in the World Values Surveys separates Prayer and Meditation in the case of Iran. Note that “prayer” is used in two different meanings in Persian: (a) religiously obligatory five-times a day prayer, which is called “namaz” (“salaat” in Arabic), that is associated with ‘practice’ or “shari’a” and (b) non-obligatory, but desirable, prayer, which is called “nia’yesh” (“do’a” in Arabic) and equivalent with ‘meditation’ and ‘contemplation’, that can be related to ‘experience’ or ‘spiritualism’. ‘Prayer’ here is used in the latter sense.

^{iv}The Percentage of respondents who identify as “non-religious” compared to those who identify as “Atheist”.

^vThe data shown in this column (“cheating the government financially: never justifiable”) are the average percentages of responses to three questions: “cheating on taxes given the chance”, “avoiding the fare on public transport” and “claiming unentitled government benefits”.

^{vi}Since mandatory veiling is related to Islamism, it is categorized as an indicator for ‘consequences’, rather than ‘practice’.

^{vii}“Neighbour: different religion (not mentioned)” This is related to the question “On this list are various groups of people. Could you please mention any that you wouldn’t like to have as a neighbour?” The list is composed of nine groups: drug addicts; people of a different race; people who have AIDS; immigrants/foreign workers; homosexuals; people of a different religion; heavy drinkers; unmarried couples living together; and people who speak a different language.

^{viii}GAMAAN (The Group for Analysing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran) is, according to its website, a Netherlands-based independent research institute that has conducted an online survey among a refined sample of around 40,000 literate Iranian residents above 19 years of age across all provinces of Iran in June 2020. The results illustrate a massive change in religious attitudes. The literacy rate in Iran was 96% in 2020, while it was 48.1% in 1977 (Financial Tribune, ‘Iran literacy rate at 96%’, Financial Tribune, 5 February 2020, Iran Literacy Rate at 96% | Financial Tribune (accessed on 2 July 2021)).

^{ix}In the GAMAAN survey, the questions related to the ‘experience’ or ‘spiritualism’ dimension have not been included in the way we have done in our research. However, the question on whether they were raised in a “religious family environment” seems to be relevant to our questions about ‘spiritualism’, although the question is about the previous generation of the respondents. While about 61% of respondents reported that they had been raised in a family environment that “believes in God and is religious”, around 32% described their family atmosphere as “believes in God but not religious”. The rest of the respondents (7%) had been raised in non- or anti-religious families. It is also interesting that 10.3% of respondents categorically identified themselves as either “Spiritual” or “Mystical (Sufi)”.

^xAround 60% of respondents reported that they do not pray at all.

^{xi}“Fasting in Ramadhan?”: GAMAAN has referred to the government-supported and Iranian-based ISNA (the Iranian Students News Agency) in reporting this, according to which around 60% of the population suggested that they did not observe fasting in Ramadhan.

^{xii}While this question has not been addressed explicitly in the GAMAAN survey, there are other relevant data that sound very significant and striking. About 71% of respondents opposed the idea of any religious institution, including Islam, being financially supported by the government, compared to around 10% who supported the idea that all faith traditions (not just Islam) should be financially supported by the government and only about 3% who believed that only Islamic organizations are entitled to government financial support. In addition, 68% opposed the idea of legislation being informed by ‘religious prescriptions’ (shari’a) compared to only 14.4% who believed that it should be. Moreover, 56% disagreed that their children should be taught the state-provided Islamic or religious education compared to only 26.6% who agreed. It is also interesting that 53.6% of respondents agreed that their children should be taught diverse religious beliefs in schools compared to only 30% who disagreed with this. It is also quite remarkable that in a country where alcohol is banned, 35.3% said that they drink alcohol either occasionally or regularly and 8.8% said that they had difficulty in

purchasing it compared to 55.8% who reported that they did not drink. Furthermore, when they were asked about any religious change in their lifetime, almost 47% confirmed that they had transitioned from being 'religious' to 'non-religious' and 6% reported having converted to another religious tradition, while around 41% reported that their belief had not changed significantly and around 6% declared that they had become 'religious' after being 'non-religious'.

^{xiii}72.4% of respondents disagreed with mandatory veiling and 58% did not believe in Islamic veiling at all with only 15% believing in it.

^{xiv}Related to the question of religious diversity, the GAMAAN survey asked respondents about their religious beliefs. Their responses are striking, especially if they are compared with the 1975 survey, in which 98.5% identify as "Muslims": Shi'ite Muslim 32.2%; non-religious 22.2%; atheist 8.8%; Zoroastrian (more indicative of trends towards Iranian nationalism than convictions towards orthodox Zoroastrian religious tradition) 7.7%; Spiritual 7.1%; Agnostic 5.8%; Sunni Muslim 5.0%; Mystical (Sufi) 3.2%; Humanist 2.7%; Other 3.3%; Christian 1.5%; Bahai 0.5%; and Jewish 0.1%. It is interesting to compare these identities with the results of the World Values Survey (WVS) wave 4 (1999–2004). According to this Survey, Iran expressed amongst the lowest degree of Muslim identity ("above everything else, I am a Muslim") (61.0%) in answering the question "Which of the following best describes you?" among the Middle Eastern and North African countries surveyed, coming second only to Pakistan where national and Islamic identities overlap to a great extent. Iran is followed by Iraq (62.6%), Turkey (64%), Algeria (66.7%), Jordan (69.8%), Saudi Arabia (73.6%) and Egypt (79.4%).

^{xv}For the data in relation to the World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–2020), see Haerpfer et al., 'World Values Survey: Round Seven'.

^{xvi}Iran still scores very low for the unjustifiability of "cheating the government financially" in the post-Khatami era (52.6%). This contrasts with 84.7% of the same respondents reporting that "stealing property" is "never justifiable".

^{xvii}Note that this Survey was conducted during the last months of Mohammad Khatami's presidency (August 1997–August 2005). For the data in relation to the World Values Survey Wave 5 (2005–2009), see Inglehart et al., 'World Values Survey: Round Five'.

^{xviii}In the World Values Survey Wave 5, The question of "belief in God" in other surveys has been replaced with "How important is God in your life?" This explains why this datum is repeated in the 'Experience' column (E1).

^{xix}For the data in relation to the World Values Survey Wave 4 (1999–2004), see Inglehart et al., 'World Values Survey: Round Four'.

^{xx}It is interesting that 13.4% of the respondents either did not answer this question or responded "do not know" in the World Values Survey 2000. This compares with the 2005 (3.4%) and 2020 (1.2%) surveys.

^{xxi}Due to the lack of datum for "Neighbour: people of other religion?" in this survey, we used instead the datum for "Neighbour: people of other race [ethnicity]?" here on the assumption that the category of 'other ethnicity' is arguably concomitant with 'other religion' in the context of some areas at least.

^{xxii}The Survey of Social Attitudes in Iran (SSAI) was conducted among 4,500 people aged 15 and above throughout all Iranian provinces in winter 1975 (four years before the revolution) by the Prospective Planning Project and the Public Opinion Research Department of National Iranian Radio and Television under the overall supervision of Ali Assadi (see Ali Assadi and Marcello L. Vidale, 'Survey of Social Attitudes in Iran', *International Review of Modern Sociology* 10, no. 1 (1980): 65-85).

^{xxiii}Beliefs in God and life after death seemed to be unquestionable at that time as presumably everyone believed in them. Instead, the survey included questions related to "belief in predestination" and "belief in jinn" to which the respondents answered respectively: 69% Yes (vs. 31% No) and 33% Yes (vs. 67% No).

^{xxiv}'Experience' or 'spiritualism', as an independent variable, especially in the form of outside 'religion', also seemed to be unimaginable at that time. The closest terminology to 'spiritualism' used in the survey is 'piety' (parhis-kari), which was itself associated with 'religious beliefs and practices' and seemed to exist 'mostly' among 'the old, the illiterate and the rural' (Assadi and Vidale, 'Survey of Social Attitudes', 84).

^{xxv}Only 6% of respondents mentioned that they 'never' prayed.

^{xxvi}Only 6% of respondents mentioned that they 'never' fasted.

^{xxvii}75% of respondents "preferred women who wore a veil" compared to only 7% who did not.

^{xxviii}The survey does not include a question directly related to “Neighbours: people of other religion?” or ‘pluralism’. However, assuming that the adopted sample (4500) was representative of the population, as it is claimed, such questions would have seemed irrelevant given the lack of religious diversity at the time: Muslims 98.5%; Jews 0.5%; Christians 0.4%; Zoroastrians 0.3%; and Bahais: 0.3%.

^{xxix}For the data in relation to the World Values Survey Wave 6 (2010–2014), see R. Inglehart, C. Haerpfger, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al., eds., 2014c. ‘World Values Survey: Round Six - Country-Pooled Datafile Version’, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp> (Madrid: JD Systems Institute, 2014c).

^{xxx}Instead of the question of “belief in life after death”, the World Values Survey Wave 6 has only asked “Do you believe in hell?”.

^{xxxi}The question of “cheating on taxes given the chance” has not been asked in the survey related to Saudi Arabia. Note that the World Values Survey has reported only one survey in relation to Saudi Arabia, namely Wave 4 (1999–2004).

Appendix 2

Research questionnaire

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION—SHEET 1

Dear Student,

You are being invited to take part in a research study being conducted and funded by the University of Tabriz. Before you decide whether you wish to participate or not, I will briefly describe the research: why it is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask for clarification and/or further information, and take your time to decide whether you are willing to take part in the study. This research aims to study the various dimensions of religious commitment among the wide range of undergraduate students in terms of sex, sect, marital status, university entry year, subject of study, etc. You have been selected randomly and are being contacted because you are an undergraduate student who can comment on religious commitment and its practice. This research will contribute to both scholarly and public debate regarding ‘religious commitment’ among students. It will also help policy-makers to understand socio-cultural developments. Your involvement in the study, and the information that you provide, will be kept confidential. A personal identification number will be used throughout the process for each participant and all data will be kept anonymous. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. The questionnaire that is being conducted includes some questions about demographic characteristics and dimensions of religious commitment. It will not take more than 20 minutes to complete.

There is no need to write your name and address

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Questionnaire – sheet 2

1. Demographic characteristics:

Sex: Male Female

Marital status: . . .

Religion or sect: . . .

Faculty: . . .

Year of entry to University: . . .

Father's occupation: ...

Family income: ...

2. Religious commitment (alpha = .78)

a) Belief (alpha = .88)

- (1) I believe in a God who always observes my deeds.
- (2) Resurrection, heaven and hell are undeniable facts.
- (3) The Qur'an is the 'word' of God and a guide for human prosperity.
- (4) Mohammad is the last Prophet of God.

b) Experience (alpha = .80)

- (1) I frequently feel that I must establish a relationship with my God.
- (2) I live by fearing God.
- (3) I live by loving God.
- (4) I feel nihilism and meaninglessness in my life and have no spiritual experiences.
- (5) Loving God is an innate feeling within myself and perhaps all human beings.
- (6) There is no fear of death if you believe in God.

c) Practice (alpha = .71)

- (1) To what extent do you pray? ...
- (2) How many days do you fast in the Month of Ramadhan if you are not ill or on a journey? ...
- (3) I will certainly go to 'hajj', if I can afford it.

Ritual practices in university and college/high school

Questions	High Schools	University
The attendance of daily prayers (in individualistic form)	Everyday <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Once per week <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Everyday <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Once per week <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/>
Participation in collective prayers (namaz-e jama'at)	Everyday <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Once per week <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Everyday <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Once per week <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/>
Participation in Friday prayers (namaz-e joma'h)	Almost every week <input type="checkbox"/> Once per month <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Almost every week <input type="checkbox"/> Once per month <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/>
The reciting of the Qur'an	Almost everyday <input type="checkbox"/> Once per week <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Almost everyday <input type="checkbox"/> Once per week <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/>
Fasting in the month of Ramadhan	Everyday <input type="checkbox"/> Most of the days <input type="checkbox"/> Some days <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Everyday <input type="checkbox"/> Most of the days <input type="checkbox"/> Some days <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/>

d) Consequences (alpha = .74)

- (1) Cheating in paying taxes is not right.
- (2) The phenomenon of 'unveiling' must be challenged.
- (3) I do not like the followers of other religions.
- (4) Given financial ability, I give my alms (*zakat* and *khoms*).