

Religious practices in the Turco-Iranian world: continuity and change

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Eyüp Sultan

A stroll along the southern bank of Istanbul's Golden Horn takes us in brief succession to major centres of the three religions of the old capital. First we reach the district of Fener, once peopled by prosperous Greeks and still the site of the Greek Orthodox patriarchate. The next place of interest is the old Jewish quarter of Balat. Then, where the Golden Horn bends to the north, we arrive in the Muslim neighbourhood of Eyüp, with its famous Ottoman cemeteries on wooded hills overlooking the entire city. Eyüp owes its name, and these old cemeteries their location, to the city's most sacred Muslim grave here, the illustrious *türbe* (shrine) of the saint Eyüp Sultan, believed to have been a companion of the Prophet and a leading participant in the first Arab siege of Constantinople. This shrine has, ever since the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul, been the city's most important place of pilgrimage (*ziyaret*). It was at this shrine that each new sultan was formally invested with his regalia. Succession to the throne was not valid until formalised by girding the sword of the Prophet in the spiritual presence of Eyüp and, through him, the Prophet himself. [\[1\]](#)

The *türbe* of Eyüp Sultan is still a highly popular object of pilgrimage and religious devotion. Over the past quarter century, the number of visitors has visibly kept increasing. Many of these visitors are rather like ordinary tourists; they visit the shrine out of a cultural or historic interest or just for a cheap family outing in a beautiful, quiet part of the city. The visit is at the same time a devotional act, and people bring their children to instill in them respect and a sense of awe in face of the sacred. It is common for parents to bring newly circumcised boys to the shrine and to have a *Mevlud* recited or perhaps an animal slaughtered there on their behalf. Groups setting out on the Meccan pilgrimage often make a first stop at Eyüp to pay their respects to Istanbul's major saint and, perhaps, to pray for a safe journey. There are also visitors who come for a more specific purpose and request some form of supernatural intervention by the spirit of Eyüp Sultan. They may invoke his blessing or support in problems of health or worldly difficulties and make a vow (*adak*) promising the sacrifice of a chicken or sheep if their wish is fulfilled – or bring a sacrifice at once to speed up fulfillment of the wish. Neither Turkey's secular establishment nor its orthodox religious authorities look kindly on this commerce with the dead.

Pilgrims at the shrine of Eyüp Sultan,
April 2003.

The festive dress of the two boys
standing with their father at the
hacet penceresi indicates that
they will be circumcised this day.



The *müftülük* of Eyüp, the local branch office of Turkey's official religious bureaucracy, has put up a signboard that tells visitors how to behave and, especially, what not to do. It declares the visiting of graves to be a *sunna*, i.e. a practice that goes back to the Prophet, and it instructs them to greet the deceased (by half-loudly pronouncing *as-salam alaykum*) and to recite fragments of the Qur'an for the benefit of his spirit. Then follows a long list of 'superstitious' practices that are emphatically declared to be non-Islamic and objectionable, such as lighting candles or placing 'wishing stones' on the tomb, tying pieces of cloth to the shrine or to the trees in front of it, throwing money on the tomb, asking the dead directly for help, circling seven times around the trees in the courtyard or pressing one's face against the walls of the *türbe* in the hope of a supernatural cure, tying beads to the shrine and expecting supernatural support from them, sacrificing roosters or turkeys as a vow to the shrine.^[2] The list is probably an inventory of common local practices the authorities wish to prevent from re-emerging. The same or very similar practices can of course be observed at shrines all over the region, and in fact throughout the Muslim world.^[3]



Ziyaret, the visiting of graves of spiritually potent people, is a widespread practice that cuts across the dividing lines between Sunni and Shi'a and heterodox communities in the Turco-Iranian region. There are good reasons to consider it as the central ritual among the Muslims of this region, in spite of its contested status. Both the state authorities and the ulama, the guardians of orthodoxy, have often adopted ambivalent positions towards *ziyaret*, rejecting it as oppressive superstition or a survival of pagan practices but embracing it as a source of legitimacy. We find a range of different meanings attributed to the practices associated with these sacred sites, some of them more 'orthodox' and politically acceptable than others.

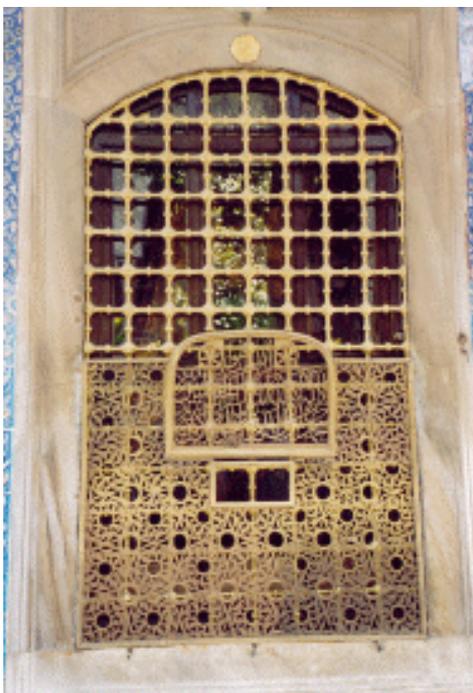
The *türbe* of Eyüp was, like all other shrines, closed down by the Republican regime in 1925 and the position of shrine guardian, *türbedar*, was abolished. However, it was reopened, along with some twenty other *türbe* of great Turkish personalities in 1950, even before the Democratic Party took over from the Republican People's Party.^[4] During the 1950s, Prime Minister Menderes made several very public visits to the shrine of Eyüp and had sheep sacrificed there as a vow or thanksgiving, in a transparent effort to further boost his standing among the pious.^[5] These were not state visits, however. For official purposes the legitimatising functions of Eyüp's *türbe* have been transferred to Atatürk's shrine in Ankara, the Anıt Kabir ('Memorial and Grave'), which Turkey's statesmen and military commanders visit to vow their allegiance to the new state religion, Kemalism, and where people who perceive Kemalist values to be under threat come to appeal to the spirit of the founding father.^[6] The practice of *ziyaret* thus persists even among those who reject traditional religion and its form has remained remarkable similar — although people don't light candles on Atatürk's grave or fasten pieces of cloth to the windows.

In sheer numbers of people involved in it, *ziyaret* to 'traditional', religious shrines remains an important practice. Relevant statistics are lacking and there are surprisingly few studies of the phenomenon, but the practice has experienced a clear revival in Turkey and the countries of the former Soviet Union after the ban on this and related practices was gradually lifted. *Ziyaret* is especially important in the Sufi orders but

is by no means restricted to the members or sympathisers of the orders. It is sometimes said to be a typically ‘female’ practice, and the core ritual of ‘popular’ religion as opposed to the formal, ‘scriptural’ Islam of the mosque, which is allegedly the domain of men. Many holy graves do in fact appear to draw more female than male visitors, and *ziyaret* definitely plays an important part in women’s religious life, but one should beware of too simple dichotomies.^[7] Both women and men participate in mosque-centred, ‘scripturalist’ Islam as well as in the devotional practices associated with *ziyaret*. Within each of these spheres, there may exist specifically ‘male’ and ‘female’ styles of performance (as has been shown by the Tappers for another ‘popular’ ritual practice in Turkey, the *Mevlud*).^[8] One may also notice differences in *ziyaret* practices according to social class or degree of education, and there is a wide variation in the meanings individuals attach to the *ziyaret*.

The signboard put up by the *müftülük* of Eyüp warned against ‘magical’ practices at the grave, based on the belief that the spirit of the deceased is present and may respond to requests for supernatural assistance. Whereas some Muslim reformists are against all visits of graves, the *müftülük* proclaims these to be a *sunna*, a practice initiated by the Prophet himself, and enjoins the visitor to salute the spirit of the deceased and to recite some passages from the Qur’an for its benefit. This moderately reformist position does not explicitly comment on the question of communication with the deceased (Does the spirit hear the *salam*? Is there a way in which it can respond?) but declares certain means of requesting intercession illicit — it is especially *beliefs concerning the effectiveness of these means* that are said to be superstition.

Whatever the effect of this warning on people’s actual beliefs, some practices have at least been affected. No strings and pieces of cloth are tied anymore to the metalwork of the *hacet penceresi*, the ‘wishing window’ (Tanman 1996) in the courtyard, through which the visitors could see the tomb and direct their silent requests to its denizen. The visit has become streamlined, groups moving through the space inside between the *hacet penceresi* and the tomb, without being allowed to touch anything. I noticed a similar cleansing of *hacet pencereleri* elsewhere in Turkey, where previously these had been covered with little strings of cloth reminding the saint of requests (*hacet ba•ı*). Animal sacrifice, far from being banned, has become extremely well organized in Eyüp, with substantial facilities for hygienic slaughter and cooking available and a store where live animals for sacrifice can be bought — all of this at some distance from the shrine itself, however, so that there is no visible link between vow and sacrifice.



The *hacet penceresi* of Eyüp Sultan's shrine

‘Popular’ and ‘high’ Islam: misleading categories

Many observers have contrasted ‘popular’ and ‘high’ versions of Islam — a variant of the anthropologists’ well-known pair of ‘little’ and ‘great tradition’ — in which the former is characterised by ecstatic, magical and mystical practices, the veneration of saints and a fascination with the miraculous, whereas the latter is *shari`a*-oriented, based on scriptural learning and sober performance of the canonical duties.^[9] Gellner’s well-known model of Muslim society (1981), which is still very influential in the Anglo-Saxon world, is a radical version of this dichotomy. The history of the Muslim world, according to this model, consisted of cycles in which ‘high’ and ‘popular’ Islam were dominant in turn, until the time when modernisation began eroding the social foundations of popular Islam and ushered in an inexorable and irreversible shift towards urban-based, scripturalist reform Islam. In a later essay (1992), Gellner attempted to account for the Islamic resurgence of the 1980s in the light of this model and to explain Islamic scripturalism as a functional equivalent of the secularisation that accompanied modernisation in Western Europe. The model has been much and rightly criticised,^[10] but the ‘popular’ versus ‘high’ dichotomy retains a strong attraction, and with it the assumption that popular practices will slowly wither away.

One problem with the concept of ‘popular Islam’ is that it is implicitly defined in contrast to a ‘high’ Islam that may be conceived in a variety of ways: as ‘official’ or ‘state’ Islam, *shari`a*-oriented Islam, scripturalism, the religion of the mosque, madrasa and `ulama, or that of the urban middle classes. These are by no means the same. Sufism, especially in its ecstatic forms, and the visiting of shrines are commonly bracketed under ‘popular’ Islam, although we may find highly learned urban `ulama with official positions engaging in these practices. The shrine of Eyüp Sultan used to be the most favoured site of Ottoman state Islam, and it is not a coincidence that the major Shi`i centres of scriptural learning arose around the sacred shrines of Najaf and Qom.^[11] *Ziyaret* is neither inherently part of ‘popular’ religious practices nor of ‘high’ Islam. It is rather the case that people visiting graves may engage in a wide variety of practices and hold an even wider variety of attendant beliefs. Some of these are no doubt more ‘magical’ than others, and it may well be that modernity has brought about a certain disenchantment of these aspects of pilgrimage and other religious practices. Urbanization has inevitably led to a decline of beliefs and practices related to the agricultural cycle, and the availability of modern health care has provided an often effective alternative to ‘spiritual’ healing.

The mother of all Muslim pilgrimages, on which all others to some extent model themselves, is the *hajj*. The various rituals of the *hajj*, with the circumambulations of the Ka`ba, the kissing of the Black Stone, the stoning of Satan at Mina and animal sacrifice, resemble practices elsewhere that observers would probably describe as ‘popular’ religious practices — but those in Mecca are part of the uncontested core of ‘high’ Islam. Before the Wahhabi conquest of the holy cities, the *hajj* used to be moreover complemented with a visit to the Prophet’s grave in Medina, where one offered prayers and in case of need called for the Prophet’s intercession, but this, like all visiting of graves, is strongly discouraged by the puritan Saudi rulers. Wahhabi-inspired Muslim discourse condemns all non-canonical practices as *bid`a* and thereby expounds a strict dichotomy resembling that between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ Islam. Elsewhere, however, we find that such a distinction makes little empirical sense.

The re-emergence of Islam in the public sphere in late Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia is a case in point. Unofficial mosques (as opposed to the state-sponsored mosques) tended to be close to cemeteries;

these mosques or open spaces near holy graves were the sites where people gathered for congregational prayers. *Ziyaret* and mosque worship were closely associated, and the association remained when more space opened up for Islamic practices.^[12] As Olivier Roy claims, in the Central Asian republics both the official ulama and the unofficial ones of ‘parallel Islam’ come from the same social environment, that of rural Sufi families.^[13] To such families, the study of Islamic texts, the veneration of saints and the performance of mystical exercises do not represent alternative versions of Islam but are part of one integrated whole. The major conflict within Islam is between more puritan, ‘Wahhabi’ trends and the more ‘traditional’ established ulama, who can lay equal claims to representing ‘high’, learned Islam. As in other parts of the Turco-Iranian world (and unlike the Arab world or Pakistan), the puritans do not appear to make major inroads.^[14]

Canonical and non-canonical rituals

To avoid the term ‘popular’, I shall speak of ‘non-canonical’ practices to refer to the entire range of rituals besides the canonical ones of prayer, fast, hajj and sacrifice. Heterodox groups such as the Alevis of Turkey and the Ahl-e Haqq of Iran tend not to perform the canonical rituals of Islam but some of their non-canonical rituals are hardly distinguishable from those of their Sunni neighbours (while others are unique to them).

Prayer

Visible participation in prayer (*salat, namaz*) has greatly increased in the cities of the entire region. In all cities there are many more mosques than three or four decades ago, and more people take part in the joint prayers, both the Friday prayer and the five daily prayers. To some extent this may be due to the mass migration from the countryside (where traditional piety was more entrenched) to the cities, but changes in state policies have probably been more influential: the relaxation of strict secularising regulations in Turkey and the (former) Soviet territories, the dominance of political Islam in Iran and Afghanistan. It is only a minority of the (male) Muslim population who regularly take part in the Friday prayers, also where Friday is not a working day (as in Iran and Afghanistan). Attendance at the mosque for the other prayers is significantly lower; most of those who do perform the five daily prayers do so at home or at work. Reliable statistics, for understandable reasons, do not exist but it appears that those who regularly perform their prayers are a minority everywhere.

Among Iran’s Shi`is it is common to combine the noon and afternoon prayers, and again the sunset and evening prayers, so that one prays only three times a day. Before the revolution, the Friday prayer was either not performed at all (the noon prayer being performed instead) or was an unimportant event.^[15] Immediately after the revolution, the Friday prayers were turned into occasions of major political significance, mass meetings where the revolutionary clergy communicated policy matters to the assembled believers. Khomeini personally appointed the Friday prayer leaders to the major cities, and these became powerful men.^[16] Unlike the Sunni world, where all major mosques have Friday prayers, in post-revolutionary Iran there is only one place for Friday prayer in each city and town. Tehran’s Friday sermon and prayer, broadcast live on television, remains a major vehicle for communication and populist mobilization, although revolutionary zeal has, after 24 years, subsided and attendance declined.

Fasting

The rules about fasting during Ramazan are the same among Sunnis and Shi`is, but there are certain cultural differences between Turkey and Iran. In the large cities of Western Turkey, a casual visitor may not even notice when it is Ramazan, for many restaurants and cafés remain open in the daytime. In many towns of Central and Eastern Turkey, on the other hand, there is strict social control and no one would eat,

drink or smoke on public. The end of the day's fast, at sunset, is in many towns announced with a gunshot. Towards sunset, families gather at home, restaurants fill up and people wait jointly, plates with food ready in front of them, for the gunshot.^[17]

Travellers (over a certain distance) are exempted from the obligation to fast — with the understanding that they will fast an extra day later. In Iran especially, the number of travellers appears to increase considerably during Ramazan, roadside restaurants do brisk business, and in the neighbourhood of bus stations people openly smoke and drink. More than in the neighbouring countries, too, people stay up very late at night, when eating is allowed, and if possible sleep for much of the day. Ramazan is everywhere a month of enjoyment as much as of self-negation. The daily fast is compensated for by a festive atmosphere in the evenings, with lots of food and amusement. The pious may go to the mosque for the supererogatory *taravîh* prayers, which are performed in congregation after the evening prayer.

The end of the fasting month is the occasion for one of the two major annual festivities, the *`eid-e fetr* or *seker bayramî* ('candy feast'). The most important aspect of the feast is perhaps the social visiting taking place and the offering of special sweets to the guests. People spend a few days visiting all their relatives and friends, more or less in order of relative status.

Sacrifice

The other major festival is the Feast of Sacrifice (*`eid-e qorban, kurban bayramî*), which takes place at the time of the *hajj* to coincide with the sacrifice performed by the pilgrims in Mecca. Pious families who can afford it buy a sheep well in advance of the date — one should grow attached to the animal, so that its sacrifice is felt as a real loss. The animal is kept near the house, it is lovingly washed and well fed, and often it is carefully ornamented with ribbons and paint. In the morning of the feast, after the men have performed the festival prayer in the mosque, the animals are slaughtered, and the meat is divided among relatives and friends and the needy. In many of the poorer villages, this used to be the only time of the year when people would eat meat. In the cities, where meat is available in butcher's shops all year round, the festival has lost much of its special character. In the larger cities, moreover, it is no longer possible to keep an animal at home and slaughter it oneself, which has created a greater distance between sacrifice-giver and sacrifice.

The hajj

Revolutionary developments in transportation have drastically changed the nature of the *hajj*. What was once an arduous journey that took the pilgrims along many other sacred sites and that could take many months — pilgrims from Central Asia would travel to Istanbul first and thence along Konya, Damascus and Jerusalem to Mecca and Medina; those from Iran travelled by way of Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf — has become a streamlined tourist operation. The numbers have increased accordingly.

After the Islamic revolution, Iranian leaders attempted to revolutionize the *hajj*, challenging the Saudi rulers' control of the holy cities and aiming to turn this largest international convention of the modern world into an instrument of anti-hegemonic struggle.^[18] In the 1980s, the *hajj* was repeatedly marked by loud demonstrations by the Iranian contingent of hajjis, culminating in a bloody confrontation in 1988, in which the Saudi authorities bloodily suppressed the demonstrations and killed many Iranians. In the 1990s, the Iranians' revolutionary fervour significantly decreased.

Non-canonical rituals

Among the non-canonical rituals, there are those that are specific to Shi`a Islam, such as the commemorations of the martyrdom of Husayn and the other imams, the distinctive rituals of the Ahl-e Haqq, Alevis, and similar groups, and rituals that are performed in one form or another throughout the region. Those associated with pilgrimages and commemorations of saints' deaths are the most widespread of these. Somewhat reminiscent, but *sui generis*, is the *Mevlud* or commemoration of the Prophet's birthday, which especially in Turkey has become a ritual of central importance. Another important category, finally, consists of the devotions and rituals of the various Sufi orders. All these categories will be briefly surveyed below.

Mevlud, `Ashura and saints' days

The Prophet's birthday was for the first time celebrated in the 12th century, more than five centuries after the Prophet's death. The practice is therefore suspect in the eyes of the Wahhabis and other puritans, but it is one of the most beloved celebrations among the devoutly pious, the centre of a complex of devotional practices focussing on the Prophet and his family. There are numerous narrations of the Prophet's birth, most of them inspired by mystical cosmologies in which Muhammad is the human embodiment of a prophetic essence that emanated from the Divine. Both these narratives and the celebrations are known as *Mevlud* or *Mevlid*. In Turkey, the most celebrated text is the Ottoman *Mevlud* of Süleyman Çelebi (14th-15th century). Each year this is recited and partly sung, accompanied by wonderful music, in the major mosque of each city and broadcast live on radio and television. In the Kurdish regions, people may read a Kurdish or Zaza *Mevlud* in their private homes (but this was until recently a clandestine activity, on which little is known).

Readings of the *Mevlud* are not restricted to the birthday celebrations but take place in many different contexts throughout the year. One may organize a recital in fulfilment of a vow, on the occasion of a circumcision, on the fortieth day after a relative's death, during a pilgrimage. There are male and female *Mevlud* gatherings, the former tending to be more austere and the latter more emotional; frequently, however, both men and women take part. It has often been observed that the *Mevlud* invites women to identify with the mother of the Prophet and to establish emotional rapport.^[19]

Among Shi`ites, the most emotional occasion of the year is the commemoration of Husayn's martyrdom on the 10th of Muharram (`Ashura). In the days and weeks leading up to this day, there are numerous gatherings where mournful accounts of the events at Kerbela are recited (*rowzehkhani*), bringing the participants to tears.^[20] People go out on the streets in mourning processions, carrying heavy standards and insignia symbolizing the passion at Kerbela or mock coffins representing Husayn, and severely beating their chests (*sinezani*) or whipping their backs with iron chains (*zenjirzani*). The stricter ulama have always been adverse to these loud and excessively emotional expressions of grief, but failed to curtail them after the revolution. Passion plays (*ta`ziye*), often mentioned in the literature, were already a rarity before the revolution and appear to not to have been revived.^[21]

Rowzehkhani gatherings are, like the *Mevlud* readings in Turkey, not restricted to the first days of Muharram but may take place throughout the year, on various occasions. There is a greater variety of texts that are recited than in the *Mevlud*, and many *rowzehkhan* (preachers) improvise and make their own versions. Besides the passion of Husayn, they may also focus on the martyrdom of the other imams.

The Alevis of Turkey profess loyalty to the twelve Shi`i imams too but do not have elaborate mourning rituals, apart from a fast during the first days of Muharram, in which some of the older generation engage.

Husayn's martyrdom is mentioned in some of the sacred songs (*deyi*, *nefes*) sung in Alevi communal rituals, but veneration for Husayn and the other imams has never been much developed in village Alevism. The situation is somewhat different in the Bektashi order of dervishes, which represents a learned version of Alevism and has a rich literary tradition in which the Kerbela motive is more developed.

Unlike countries like Egypt and Pakistan, where each major shrine has annual commemorations of the saint's death, such saint's days are rare in the Turco-Iranian world. The most prominent case coming to mind is the Haji Bektash festival in the village of the saint's shrine; this is a recently invented ritual (significantly, its date is based on the official solar calendar rather than the Islamic lunar year). Begun in the 1960s as an anti-establishment manifestation, it was in the 1980s co-opted by the state. It remains the largest gathering of Alevis, a combination of pilgrimage, cultural festival and political manifestation. [22]

Alevism, Ahl-e Haqq and their transformations

The Alevis of Turkey and the Balkans and the Ahl-e Haqq of Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan are distinct but in many ways similar communities, constituting significant minorities (10 to 20% of the population) in their respective countries. Originally they were rural communities, and the core ritual of both religions, the *cem* / *jam*, was a gathering of all adults of the village in which some specially prepared food is blessed and communally consumed. The participants were initiated, and the gatherings presided over, by hereditary religious specialists (*dede*, *seyyid*), who are highly venerated. The singing of religious poetry (*deyi* / *kalam*), to the accompaniment of plucked string instruments, is a central element of the ritual; these songs constitute the major corpus of Alevi and Ahl-e Haqq doctrine. The esoteric meanings of rituals and doctrines were kept hidden from outsiders, which was facilitated by the archaic language of much poetry. [23]

In the case of the Ahl-e Haqq, modern adaptations of traditional practices were initiated relatively early, in the early 20th century, due to the efforts of a reform-minded seyyid, Hajji Ne`matollah Jayhunabadi. He began systematizing the doctrines and narrative traditions that had until then been handed down in the form of disparate collections of poetry and verse epics, composed in archaic Gurani, a language few understood. Oral exegesis of this verse tradition had always been necessary; Hajji Ne`mat was the first to write an accessible work in Persian that presented part of the Ahl-e Haqq tradition in more systematic form. His son and successor, Nur Ali Shah, continued his work and produced important works that presented previously secret Ahl-e Haqq doctrines to the wider public, be it in an interpretation that glossed over the non-Islamic elements and presented them as essentially an esoteric form of Shi`ism. Whereas the Ahl-e Haqq had previously been closed, mostly rural communities that did not proselytise, Hajji Ne`mat and his successors found new followers outside these circles, among the urban educated public, and they organized this following much like a Sufi order. Theirs is a most remarkable example of scripturalization and rationalization of a largely oral religious tradition. These reforms did not replace the older traditions. Most Ahl-e Haqq communities in fact rejected them, most fiercely so the Kurdish Ahl-e Haqq of Guran, who insist on their own heterodoxy. [24]

Alevi ritual was banned in Turkey in 1925, along with the Sufi orders and other 'popular' practices. The ban was more effective in some regions than in others; in the 1980s, when a revival of Alevism set in, there were not many people who remembered how the *cem* had been celebrated in their village. [25] Peter Bumke, who studied Alevi villagers in Dersim in the 1970s, observed that Alevism was "a religion that is not practised." This was an overstatement; many women and some men continued visiting local *ziyaret* (see e.g., Ferber and Grässlin 1988) and some *dede* kept the tradition alive with small circles of devotees, but among the young there was then a strong tendency to think of Alevism as an oppositional *political*

tradition, not a religious one. This changed in the 1980s, partly due to the severe repression of the left and partly as a response to the imposition of a conservative brand of Sunni Islam by the state. Political associations being banned, Alevis established cultural associations that placed emphasis on Alevism as a cultural and religious identity and sponsored a revival or re-invention of Alevi ritual. New assembly halls for the *cem* ritual, *cemevi*, were established in the large cities, some of them near the shrine of an Alevi saint (e.g., Karaca Ahmed in Istanbul), others in reopened old Bektashi convents, many others in nondescript buildings in urban neighbourhoods with a heavy Alevi population.

Alevism used to be (and to some extent continues to be) a social stigma, and many Alevis have attempted to hide their backgrounds once they had moved to one of the large cities. As a result, their memories of beliefs and practices as they had been in the village faded, and this is perhaps exactly what made their reconstruction possible. There had always been wide regional variations in Alevi practice and belief. Together with some *dede*, Alevi intellectuals began in the 1980s to redefine what Alevism was. *Cem* rituals as performed in the big cities of Turkey (and, not to forget, Western Europe, where Alevi associations were at the forefront of the revival) were newly invented adaptations to a new situation, combining elements from different local traditions, reflecting the composition of the congregation. In an ongoing process of negotiation (due to the participation of *dede* representing different traditions), a certain degree of standardization is emerging. A flood of new books and journals reflects the efforts to reinvent Alevism. Collections of Alevi religious poetry had long been available in print; their numbers multiplied, but more importantly, many intellectuals made contributions towards a systematization of Alevi belief. Traditional Alevism was based in closed rural communities and consisted of local, largely orally transmitted traditions; the new Alevism is based in modern urban associations and is transmitted in written form.^[26] As is the case with the Ahl-e Haqq, Alevism has experienced a rapid process of rationalization and scripturalization.

The Sufi orders

The lasting significance and influence of the Sufi orders has become ever clearer in the past decades as their official suppression in Turkey and the (former) Soviet Union was relaxed. In Turkey, the Naqshbandiyya had been most successful in surviving underground and it resurfaced as by far the most influential non-state network — or rather, a number of mutually independent networks — leaving the second largest order, the Qadiriyya, far behind. Two other large Islamic networks, the Süleymanci and the Nurcu movements, are also rooted in the Naqshbandiyya, although the founder of the latter, Sa`id-i Nursi, advocated a devotional Islam without the trappings of a formal order. In the Soviet Union, the infrastructure of the orders was more effectively destroyed.^[27] Recently there have been major efforts to restore something of a Naqshbandi tradition, not least because the post-Soviet regimes perceive the endorsement of a Sufi worldview as the best strategy of opposing radical Islam.^[28]

The Naqshbandi revival in Central Asia meant primarily a resumption or reinvigoration of pilgrimages to shrines associated with this order, notably the shrine of Baha`uddin Naqshband near Bukhara, which was reopened by the Uzbek government. A network of *pir-murid* (master-disciple) relationships appears not to be in place, and there have been no reports of, for instance, congregational Sufi rituals. Sufism appears to attract interest mostly for its historical association of the region (which gave birth to various major orders) or as an expression of devotional piety.

This is perhaps somewhat similar to the revival of the Mevleviyye, the order of the whirling dervishes, in Turkey. This received an impulse from the government-sponsored celebration of Jalaluddin Rumi's 700th years' death anniversary in Konya, in 1973. Rumi was celebrated as a great Turkish mystic, and while the

order remained formally banned, its distinctive music and whirling dance were patronized as cultural performances (and had in fact been allowed since the 1950s). Several teams of Mevlevi musicians and dancers were established, appealing to a general cultural interest (as well as nationalist pride) in the order as representing a distinctly Turkish mode of Islamic spirituality. To at least some of the musicians and dancers, theirs is a spiritual discipline rather than a form of folklore. However, there is no systematic spiritual instruction; the Mevleviyye was never revived as a formal Sufi order.

The Cerrahiyye, which has also drawn some tourist attention because of its visually interesting *devran* (a spiralling movement made by the dervishes during the congregational ritual), represents a more successful case of re-emergence. Led by a shaykh who claims to represent an unbroken chain of transmission, this small order succeeded in attracting relatively many highly educated new members, notably including numerous women. The shaykh established a branch of the order in the USA in the 1970s, which may have contributed to making this a particularly 'chic' order.[\[29\]](#)

The resurfacing of the Naqshbandiyya was most spectacular, because it rose so rapidly to prominence. Whereas in the 1970s only few observers were aware that the order was in fact still functioning, in the 1980s its economic power and political influence became transparent. Of the four or five major branches of the Naqshbandiyya, the Iskenderpasa congregation (so named after the mosque in the Fatih district of Istanbul that is its centre) has been the most influential. The shaykh of this branch, Mehmed Zahid Kotku, had been instrumental in the establishment of the first Islamic party and the extent of his influence was noticeable in the growing mass following of this party and its successors (MNP, MSP, Refah). Upon his death in 1980, he was the first Sufi in the Republic to be given something resembling a state funeral. The late prime minister (1983-89) Turgut Özal openly admitted that his family was affiliated with this branch; the economic and political liberalization of the Özal years enabled it to considerably expand.[\[30\]](#) Kotku's successor, Esad Cosan, established a firm presence in the print and electronic media. His growing influence aroused some anxiety among the Turkish military; Cosan spent his last years in exile in Australia, where he died in 2001. In the Kurdish provinces, there are strong regional Naqshbandi networks that have considerable influence because of the large numbers of votes they control in elections. Some of these also have a presence in western Turkey, especially in Istanbul.[\[31\]](#)

The number of those who regularly take part in congregational mystical exercises are but a small fraction of the followers of any Sufi order, especially in Turkey, where these practices are still formally banned. Many more perform such exercises privately. The Naqshbandiyya strengthened a sense of community and solidarity through the practice of *sohbet*, personal communication (verbal or non-verbal) with the shaykh or one of his deputies. As a form of moral teaching and spiritual direction, *sohbet* typically took place in small informal gatherings. Kotku and especially Cosan took recourse to modern media to reach much larger numbers of followers. The video CD has more recently become the medium of choice, both with Naqshbandis and with Fethullah Gülen's Nurcu branch, because it provides mass reproduction of the intimacy of small group meetings, a digitised (though non-interactive) version of *sohbet*.

The Sufi orders in Shi`i Islam have never aroused the same scholarly attention as the orders of the Sunni world.[\[32\]](#) Certain scholars have presented Sufism and Shi`ism as alternative versions of Islamic spirituality and played down the importance of a distinctive Shi`i Sufi tradition. Nevertheless, Sufi orders have had a prominent presence in Iranian society, and have constituted important vessels for Iranian spirituality, developing mostly outside the religious establishment. Of the three major Shi`i orders, the Khaksar order is the most 'popular', close to the tradition of wandering dervishes and maintaining an intriguing relationship with the Ahl-e Haqq. The Dhahabiyya is relatively marginal, present in only a few cities. The Ne`matollahiyya, however, divided into a number of branches, had implanted itself

successfully among the cultural and political elite of the *ancien régime*. The clerical revolutionaries did not look kindly upon organized Sufism anyway, and they were especially suspicious of those who had been too close to the previous government. Leading members of the order settled abroad and helped to spread the order in Western Europe and North America. Those remaining behind reached various forms of accommodation with the new regime.^[33] The Sufi orders weathered the revolutionary storm and continued functioning — although one gets the impression from van den Bos' study that membership and the degree of members' involvement have seriously declined. The Ahl-e Haqq, including even its most heterodox branch, reached similar political accommodations with the regime and also continues largely as it was, with minimal lip service to the Islamic revolution.

Conclusion

Throughout the Turco-Iranian world, religious performance has visibly increased during the past few decades. Both canonical and non-canonical ritual activities appear to have been reinvigorated, and there are no indications of a shift from the latter towards the former. Sufi ritual, including pilgrimages, appears as vigorous and omnipresent as ever, and the Wahhabi type of puritanical reform appears to hold little attraction for the people of this region. Among the Alevis and Ahl-e Haqq we noticed a trend towards rationalization and scripturalization of religious practices. In Sufi ritual practices we noticed a decline of the 'magical' element, while the idea of spiritual communication — with a living shaykh as in *sohbet* or with the spirit of a deceased one as in *ziyaret* — remains of central importance.

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Notes

[1] See Kafadar 1994 for a description of the sword-girding ceremonies and the religious authorities officiating there in various periods. On the historical role of the complex of Eyüp Sultan more in general, see Eyice 1995.

[2] I thank my colleague Mark Vandamme for drawing my attention to this instructive signboard.

[3] For some observations of devotional practices at Eyüp as well as other shrines in Turkey, see Olson 1991 and 1994, Nancy Tapper 1990, and Marcus 1992.

[4] Jäschke 1972, pp. 104-5 (this is an authorized and updated translation of Jäschke's German article of 1951, which at p. 163 gave an incomplete list of nineteen reopened shrines, not including Eyüp). The 1925 ban of Sufi orders and accompanying measures, including the closing of tombs, are discussed in Jäschke 1951, pp. 60-3.

[5] In 1959, upon his return home from England after a plane accident, Menderes went to Eyüp and had ten sheep slaughtered there, see Ero•ul 1990, p.147. Various other high-profile visits to the shrine are mentioned in studies of the period; contemporary critics considered these visits as an abuse of religion for political gain. I thank Umut Azak for this and other references.

[6] See Michael Meeker's description of the construction of this Republican *türbe* and of formal ceremonies enacted in its courtyard in Meeker 1997, pp. 168-74. Although this is not the thrust of Meeker's argument, he brings out clearly that we have here a secularised version of the *ziyaret*.

[7] Empirical studies that document the stronger participation of women in *ziyaret* include Olson's and Nancy Tapper's articles mentioned above (Turkish Sunnis); Marcus 1992: 130-9 (idem); Ferber and Grässlin 1988 (Kurdish Alevi); Einzmann 1977 and Wieland-Karimi 1998 (both Afghanistan). Donaldson (1938: 58-68) discusses pilgrimages in Iran extensively but does not mention a predominance of women, and indeed in my own experience men were almost equally represented in the *ziyaret* that I witnessed there. Yalçin-Heckmann's tribal Kurdish women (1998) constitute an interesting contrast, for *ziyaret* is practically unknown among them.

[8] Tapper and Tapper 1987.

[9] This dichotomy is presumed in two important older works focussing on 'popular' Islam, Donaldson 1938 and Kriss and Kriss-Heinrich 1960-62.

[10] The model was informed by Gellner's own work in Morocco; some of its weaknesses concerning that country were pointed out by Henry Munson; for a more general critique, see Zubaida 1995.

[11] The centrality of the shrines in Qom, Najaf and Mashhad to the religious life of both learned and uneducated pious Iranians is brought out clearly in Mottahedeh 1985.

[12] Poliakov 1992: 109. Especially chapters 13 and 14 of this remarkable study provide a fascinating overview of the accommodations of the authorities with formally banned religious practices towards the end of the Soviet period. See also Ro'i 2000, which is based on an exhaustive study of Soviet archives and records numerous instances of the failure of the ban of pilgrimages.

[13] Roy 2000: 151. Cf. Olcott 1995: 35-7 for a description of some of these links between Soviet official Islam and Sufi Islam (especially the Naqshbandi order). Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985 remains a most important study of Sufism under Soviet rule but its focus is more on conflict than on the complex patterns of accommodation.

[14] Roy 2000: 154-7. The relatively puritan currents of Afghanistan and ex-Soviet Central Asia, though commonly called 'Wahhabi' by their detractors, are in fact considerably more flexible towards *ziyaret* than the real Wahhabis of Arabia, although they attempt to delegitimize 'traditional' ulama. Under the Taliban, *ziyaret* and Sufi practices were apparently neither encouraged nor suppressed. See also the observations in Wieland-Karimi 1998, which strongly indicate that Sufi attitudes remained strong in Afghanistan well into the 1990s and even warlords participated in them.

[15] There are surprisingly few references to Friday prayer and sermon in the pre-revolutionary period. Yann Richard (1980: 77) mentions Friday sermons in villages only in passing and does not mention them at all where he discusses prayer in general. Michael Fischer (1980: 100) speaks of the Friday sermon as 'not a didactic event in Iran' and 'not important events' before the revolution.

[16] See Arjomand's and Richard's observations on the central place of the revived Friday prayer in the

institutionalisation of the revolution (Arjomand 1988: 167-9; Richard 1991: 240-8).

[17] Observations on the fast in a Turkish village in: Delaney 1991: 294-8.

[18] Richard 1991: 258-60. The pre-revolutionary thinker Ali Shari`ati had provided young Iranians with a revolutionary interpretation of the Meccan pilgrimage in his *Hajj*.

[19] Tapper and Tapper 1987; Delaney 1991: 317-9; Marcus 1992: 125-30.

[20] The best description of these gatherings are to be found in Thaiss 1972 and Mottahedeh 1985: 345-56.

[21] See also Richard 1980: 78-83 for the various rituals associated with `Ashura. Richard devotes relatively much attention to the *ta`ziye* play but appears to base himself exclusively on older literature (as do the other authors of whom I am aware).

[22] Norton 1995; Zarcone 1995; Massicard 2000.

[23] Authoritative statements on Alevi and Ahl-e Haqq belief and ritual in: Kehl-Bodrogi 1988; Kehl-Bodrogi et al. 1997; Mélikoff 1992, 1998; Minorsky 1920-21; Mir-Hosseini 1994a-b. See also Bruinessen 2000.

[24] Mir-Hosseini 1994a-b describes the tension between these groups and the accommodations the Islamic republic made with both.

[25] This is perhaps more true of the Kurdish than of the Turkish Alevis. Shankland (1999) claims that the *cem* had always been practised in the village he studied, but he began his research after the revival of Alevism; his uncritical adoption of Kemalist ideological views on Alevism makes one sceptical of his other claims. Mélikoff 1995 gives a detailed description of the proceedings of the *cem* in Central Anatolia but this appears to refer to practices of the past.

[26] Bruinessen 1996; Kehl-Bodrogi et al. 1997; Olsson et al. 1998; Massicard 2000.

[27] *Pace* the claims of Alexandre Bennigsen, who always perceived more organisation than there really was (Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejey 1981; Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985). This work is now superseded by Yaakov Ro`i's archival study, that contains much material on places of pilgrimage (officially closed since 1958) and ongoing practices as well as on the remnants of Sufi networks (Ro`i 2000).

[28] Babadjanov 1998; Schubel 1999.

[29] Atacan 1990 is an interesting sociological study of the Istanbul branch.

[30] Özal's brother Korkut later published a memoir of his years with Kotku (in Özdalga 1999: 159-85). Observations on the political and economic ventures in which this branch of the Naqshbandiyya engaged in Hakan Yavuz' contribution to the same volume. More generally on the business ventures of Sufi orders and Nurcu networks: Bulut 1995.

[31] On the resurgence of the Naqshbandiyya in Turkey, see: Zarcone 1992 and various contributions in Özdalga 1999.

[32] The high quality of the existing studies, however, compensates for their small number. Richard Gramlich's monumental three-volume study of the Iranian orders (1965-81) is a work of unparalleled scope and depth. Historical and anthropological studies by Lewisohn (1998-99) and van den Bos (2002) adequately complement this work and document post-revolutionary developments.

[33] These accommodations constitute the chief subject of van den Bos' unique and interesting study (2002).