

Religious Participation among Muslims: Iranian Exceptionalism

GUNES MURAT TEZCUR*, TAGHI AZADARMAKI** & MEHRI BAHAR**

*Loyola University of Chicago, USA, **University of Tehran, Iran

Recent research has suggested that secularization, understood either as the decline of religious beliefs or the marginalization of religion in public life, has not occurred in most parts of the world. Islam especially has remained a vibrant force that affects how people make sense of social relations and politics. However, the indicators of religiosity in predominantly Muslim countries have not been studied extensively. Although these societies are assumed to be characterized by high levels of religious belief, research has demonstrated significant variance in mosque attendance rates. In particular, mosque attendance rates in Iran are surprisingly low. This article aims to specify the reasons for the low rates of mosque attendance among Iranians. The data for the article come from the World Values Survey that was conducted in Muslim countries¹ and a survey conducted in Tehran by the authors. The article asks whether the peculiar characteristics of Shi'ism or of Islamic government in Iran are responsible for the low rates of mosque attendance. The survey evidence indicates a strong correlation between frequency of mosque attendance and positive evaluations of political governance. It also reveals that many people with strong religious beliefs do not attend Friday congregational prayers. Consequently, we need to inquire whether the politicization of religion in Iran has been a factor in its 'privatization,' that is, the tendency of pious believers to restrict their prayers to the privacy of the home.

The revitalization of religion as a major social force has been most remarkable—and even controversial—in countries with Muslim majorities or significant minorities. Islamic social and political movements enjoy considerable public support in Middle Eastern countries and have been among the major revisionist forces that challenge the political and social hegemony of authoritarian rulers. Islamic movements pursue agendas of social justice that resonate strongly with the working poor and lower middle classes. Meanwhile, violence, which has been carried out in the name of Islam or against Islam as in the former

Correspondence address: Gunes Murat Tezcur, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Loyola University Chicago, 6430 N. Kenmore Ave., Chicago, IL 60626, USA; Email: gtezcur@luc.edu. Taghi Azadarmaki, Social Science Faculty, University of Tehran, Iran; Email: tazad@ut.ac.ir. Mehri Bahar, Social Science Faculty, University of Tehran, Iran; Email: Baharan12345@yahoo.com.

¹ All four waves of the World Values Surveys are available at < www.worldvaluessurvey.org/services/index.html > .

Yugoslavia, has shattered completely the initial euphoria of the post-Cold War period. The US-led war against terrorism has intensified the discussions of Islam's compatibility with liberal democracy and its relationship to violent political acts.²

In this context, studies exploring patterns of belief and faith among Muslim publics have great relevance for generating valuable insights into the complicated relationship between religion and politics. However, because the indicators of religiosity in predominantly Muslim countries have not been studied in depth, the aim of this article is to contribute to the literature on religious beliefs and political attitudes by analyzing religious participation among Muslims in 10 countries. Our primary interest is in explaining the reasons why mosque attendance rates among Iranians are very low in comparison with that of Muslims in other countries.

The data for Iran come from a survey we conducted in Tehran during the summer of 2003. The survey was conducted with 412 respondents by employing multi-stage area probability techniques. The response rate was 93 percent. The questions asked in that survey allow for a meticulous analysis of the relationship between Islamic religiosity and politics under theocratic rule, because mosque attendance seems to have gained political meaning under the rule of the Islamic Republic. Most strikingly, mosque attendance has ceased to be a relevant indicator of religiosity in Iran. On the one hand, people who attend Friday congregational prayers frequently tend to have positive evaluations of the government. On the other hand, they are not more religious than Iranians who do not show up for Friday prayers.

Revival of Religion

Religious beliefs have proven to be resilient in the modern age, in defiance of the predictions of the once-predominant secularization theory.³ The steady decline in religious beliefs and the privatization of religion that has occurred in Western Europe has been an exception to the trends of vibrant religiosity and participation in most other parts of the world. Religion has remained a major force that influences how people act socially and decide on issues that involve ethical choices. Consequently, questions on the relationship between religious values and democratic norms have been at the forefront of politics in many parts of the world. Mass participation in politics has been accompanied by popular demands for a greater role of religion in public life. These demands often include the replacement of secular laws with religiously inspired laws.

The continuing relevance of religion to social and political affairs in the global age poses a unique challenge to one of the core assumptions of the secularization theory.⁴ As elaborated by Peter Berger, secularization theory posits that the increasing differentiation

² See, for example, Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Perennial, 2003); Steven Fish, 'Islam and authoritarianism,' *World Politics*, 55 (October 2002), pp. 4–37; and Alfred C. Stepan & Graeme B. Robertson, 'An "Arab" more than a "Muslim" democracy gap,' *Journal of Democracy*, 14 (July 2003), pp. 30–44.

³ For a forceful view that argues for the flaws of the secularization paradigm, see Rodney Stark, 'Secularization, R.I.P.,' *Sociology of Religion*, 60 (Fall 1999), pp. 249–273.

⁴ For an overview of recent developments in the scholarship on religion, see Darren E. Sherkat & Christopher G. Ellison, 'Recent developments and current controversies in the sociology of religion,' *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25 (August 1999), pp. 363–394.

of life spheres⁵ and the proliferation of competing explanations of human existence undermine the ‘truth-claims’ of religions.⁶ Accordingly, religion lasts only if it preserves its monopoly over how people make sense of human existence and social reality. Hence, the relativization of truth claims in modernity diminishes the appeal of religion.

However, an influential body of scholarship argues just the opposite, arguing that religious vitality—measured as religious belief, intensity, religious attendance or a combination of these three—is a product of competition among providers of religion in deregulated sociopolitical environments.⁷ According to this literature, religion thrives in places where religious denominations compete with each other to provide more tangible and superior services to people. Demand for religion is assumed to be constant and is not affected by modernization. This argument, which is called the supply-side theory of religion, especially contrasts the high levels of religious commitment in the United States, where a strict separation between state and religion allows for significant degrees of religious pluralism, a situation that contrasts with the steady decline in religious beliefs in most Western European countries, where the religious market is neither competitive nor pluralistic.⁸ Although the supply-side theory of religion is discussed mostly in the Western context, it purports to explain variance in religiosity in other contexts as well. For example, it is argued that the growing threat from Protestantism encouraged the Catholic Church in Central and South America to pursue membership strategies that actively addressed the needs of the rural and urban poor. In turn, these strategies undermined the ruling military dictatorships’ goal of suppressing subversive organizations in countries like Brazil and El Salvador.⁹ The variance in religious attendance among Muslim minorities in the West—as measured by pilgrimages to Mecca—is also observed to be a result of differences in state regulation of religion.¹⁰ The theory points out that in situations when a hegemonic Church becomes a rallying point against an oppressive regime, such as in communist Poland and under the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua, religious fervor and activism remain high despite the lack of competition. Still, the applicability of the supply-side theory of religion in non-Western contexts is under-investigated. Thus, we need to ask whether the impact of religious competition on religious participation is universal or historically and culturally contingent.

On the surface, the supply-side theory of religion seems to have little relevance for understanding the long-lasting dynamism and the spread of Islam. In hardly any country

⁵ The ‘differentiation thesis’ was first elaborated by Max Weber. See his ‘Religious rejections of the world and their characteristics,’ in: H. Gerth & C. W. Mills (Eds) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 323–362.

⁶ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966).

⁷ This view is well summarized in Roger Finke & Rodney Stark, ‘Religious choice and competition,’ *American Sociological Review*, 63 (October 1998), pp. 761–766.

⁸ There are some exceptions to this pattern in Western Europe: predominantly Catholic Ireland has very high levels of religiosity, while religious pluralism in Germany does not translate into a vibrant life. Jose Casanova attempts to go beyond this sharp distinction between Western Europe and the United States by providing an innovative conceptualization of religion in the modern age; see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁹ Anthony J. Gill, ‘Rendering unto Caesar? Religious competition and Catholic political strategy in Latin America, 1962–1979,’ *American Journal of Political Science*, 38 (May 1994), pp. 403–425.

¹⁰ Mark Chaves et al., ‘State regulation of religion and Muslim religious vitality in the industrialized West,’ *Journal of Politics*, 56 (November 1994), pp. 1087–1097.

has the influence of Islam receded in recent times, regardless of the structure of the religious market. Moreover, countries with predominantly Muslim populations tend to have very little separation between state and religion, as is typical in most Western countries.¹¹ Hence, Muslim countries generally do not have unregulated religious markets that promote competition. However, Islam in the global age has been increasingly fragmented, and multiple agencies, including populist preachers, Sufi masters, lay pious intellectuals, and officially sanctioned clergy compete for the loyalties of Muslims.¹² Furthermore, the proliferation of Islamic social movements with extensive social services significantly contributes to pluralism within Islamic denominations.¹³

It appears that the vitality of Islam is caused by a combination of several factors. Some scholars have emphasized the role of top-down Islamic projects sponsored by authoritarian states as an antidote to the appeal of leftist movements, especially in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁴ Increases in state-sponsored religious education and mosques as well as the promotion of Islam as a moral bond that unites the nation strongly contributed to the revival of Islamic beliefs and participation. Others who investigate the appeal of Islamic movements among the residents of urban peripheries underline the effects of social dislocations caused by rapid urbanization.¹⁵ However, most of these studies lack survey data about religious beliefs and participation and do not have explicit comparative perspectives.

Since studies of religious values and behaviors were initially conducted, multiple indicators have been employed to measure different dimensions of religion. In general, these dimensions involve denominational affiliation, intensity of belief, frequency of participation in communal religious meetings, and the importance of religion on social and political attitudes. These dimensions may be mutually reinforcing, negatively associated, or completely unrelated to each other. In Western countries, low levels of religious participation go together with low frequency of prayer.¹⁶ Yet the intensity of belief does not necessarily foster church attendance among adherents of certain denominations such as mainstream Protestants. Likewise, a Muslim whose understanding of Islam has been shaped by Sufism may not attend Friday congregational prayers at all. In this article, we are interested in how the intensity of belief and the public religious participation of Muslims interact.

¹¹ Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, 'Separation of religion and state in the twenty-first century,' *Comparative Politics*, 37 (April 2005), pp. 317–335.

¹² On the plurality of Islamic politics, see Dale F. Eickelman & James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Robert W. Hefner, 'Multiple modernities: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in a globalizing age,' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27 (1998), pp. 83–104.

¹³ The Islamic political movements that mobilize public support through extensive social services include Hamas in Palestine, Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Da'wa and SCIRI in Iraq, and the now-defunct Refah Party in Turkey.

¹⁴ Gilles Kepel explains the rise of political Islamic movements as an intended consequence of the sponsorship by authoritarian states and oil-rich Persian Gulf kingdoms; these movements ultimately developed unanticipated radical platforms that threatened the interests of their sponsors. See Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 61–105.

¹⁵ The activities of Islamic political movements in urban peripheries are well documented. For Turkey, see Jenny White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003); for Egypt, see Carrie W. Rosefsky, *Mobilizing Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Pipa Norris & Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 85.

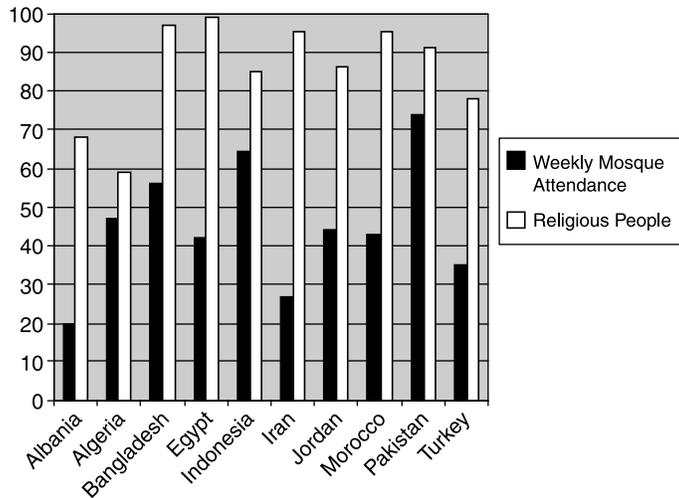


Figure 1. Religious belief and participation in 10 predominantly Muslim countries. *Source:* World Values Surveys.

Religiosity and Religious Participation

Figure 1 shows indicators for religious belief and public religious participation in 10 Muslim countries. Except for Iran, which has a Shi'i majority, all these countries have predominantly Sunni populations. While the majority of respondents describe themselves as being very religious, mosque attendance rates are characterized by significant cross-country variation. In four countries—Bangladesh, Egypt, Iran and Morocco—over 90 percent of the respondents self-described themselves as being religious Muslims. The most striking exception is Algeria, where more than 40 percent of respondents do not consider themselves religious. The relatively low levels of religiosity among Algerians may be a consequence of the civil war between the Algerian army and the Islamic militants that ravaged the country for most of the 1990s. In that war, which witnessed vicious atrocities by all sides,¹⁷ religion was often invoked to justify violence against civilians. Another possible explanation may be related to the legacy of the long period of French colonialism which had promoted secularism. Even Albania, which remained under communist rule for about 45 years, has higher levels of religiosity than Algeria.

The other item in the figure shows levels of weekly mosque attendance among Muslims. In all countries, a substantial number of Muslims do not attend mosques on a weekly basis. In fact, only in Indonesia and Pakistan do more than 50 percent of all respondents attend weekly communal services in mosques. Mosque attendance rates are particularly low in Albania and Iran. Less than 30 percent of respondents visit mosques at least once a week in these two countries. The reasons for the low attendance in Albania most likely are related to the lasting legacy of communism. The Iranian case presents a puzzle. Iran is the only predominantly Shi'i country among these 10 predominantly Muslim countries.

¹⁷ For an explanation of the violence committed against civilians during the war, see Stathis N. Kalyvas, 'Wanton and senseless? The logic of massacres in Algeria,' *Rationality and Society*, 11 (August 1999), pp. 243–285.

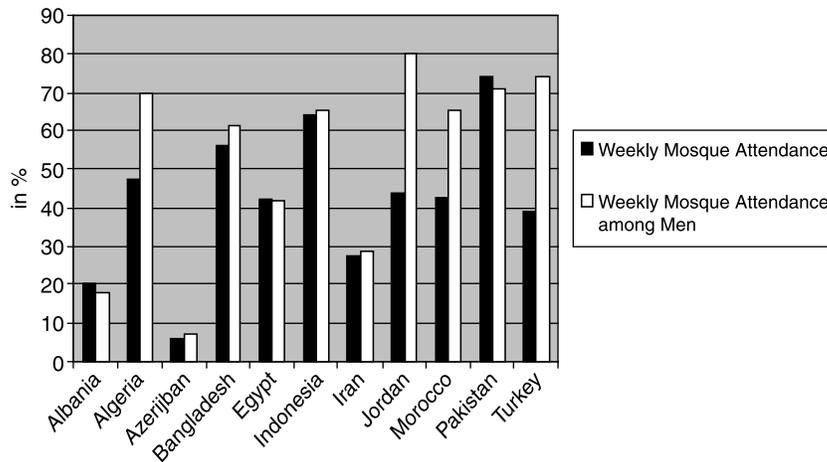


Figure 2. Mosque attendance by gender. *Source:* World Values Surveys.

Additionally, it is the only country where clerics hold ultimate political power and Islamic rules are enforced by the state in almost all aspects of public life.

Before exploring the factors influencing mosque attendance in Iran further, it would be valuable to determine whether men are more likely to visit mosques than women. After all, prayer services in mosques are gender segregated, and for various reasons women might be reluctant to participate in communal prayers. If women did not attend mosque services at all, the gap between religiosity and religious participation would be a result of gender differences. Figure 2 shows mosque attendance rates and gender differences in 11 predominantly Muslim countries. Men are significantly more likely to attend mosques than women in Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, and Turkey. However in Iran, men and women have almost the same rate of mosque attendance. Clearly, gender-based differences are not relevant in explaining the low rates of mosque attendance in Iran.

Shi'i or Iranian Exceptionalism?

Two possible explanations can be put forward to explain the low levels of mosque attendance in Iran: (1) the Shi'i traditions that do not value communal praying as much as does Sunni Islam, and (2) the extensive politicization of religion under the Islamic Republic, a factor that may have led to disenchantment with religion among some Iranian citizens. The second explanation is based on the insights generated by the supply-side theories of religion. By all relevant criteria, religious life in Iran exhibits monopolistic characteristics. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the heavy regulation of religious belief leads to a decrease in religious participation.

Both of these explanations have some plausibility that necessitates a systematic empirical analysis of the patterns of religious participation in Iran. Ideally, longitudinal survey data on mosque attendance levels will help us to detect the change over time. If mosque attendance levels have declined progressively since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 but were high under the previous monarchial rule, then the evidence will support the second explanation. However, data on mosque attendance rates

in the aftermath of the revolution, let alone during the pre-revolutionary years, is very limited. The only study that compares two nationally representative surveys on religiosity of Iranian citizens (one conducted in 1975 and the other in 2001), observes that the percentage of people who always participate in congregational prayers actually declined under the Islamic Republic. The same study reports that participation in Friday congregational prayers is related negatively to other aspects of religiosity.¹⁸ This finding raises the possibility that while Iranians continue to have strong religious beliefs and faith, Shi'ism is being privatized under the theocratic rule.

We propose two competing explanations for the low levels of religious participation in Iran. On the one hand, Shi'i culture may foster an understanding of Islam that does not prioritize participation in communal prayers as much as Sunni Islam does. Some religious traditions such as some mainstream Protestant denominations in the United States hold individual commitment in higher esteem over participation in communal religious activities. This may be the case with Shi'ism. For centuries, Shi'ism has been characterized by a strong emphasis on personal piety, while attending the mosque for Friday prayers was not considered obligatory.¹⁹ A constructive way to test the hypothesis of Shi'ism and mosque attendance would be to compare mosque attendance rates among Shiites of southern Iraq with both Shiites of Iran and Sunnis of Iraq. If Shiites of Iraq were shown to have significantly lower mosque attendance rates than the Sunnis of Iraq, we would be comfortable in concluding that Shi'i traditions place only secondary importance on participation in communal prayers in mosques. If Shiites of Iraq actually were shown to be attending mosques frequently, then we would seek alternative explanations for low mosque attendance rates among Shiites in Iran. Unfortunately, the political circumstances in Iraq do not permit scholars to conduct such a comparative study.²⁰ However, the availability of survey data allows for a systematic analysis of the evolution of religious participation in Iran.

The historical trajectory of Shi'ism in modern Iran reveals the centrality of communal participation and rituals to followers of the faith in recent times. During the last years of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941–79), Shi'ism became a rallying symbol for opposition to the monarchial regime. Under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–89), the revolutionary clergy succeeded in mobilizing the public by reinterpreting Shi'i rituals to fit contemporary political events.²¹ For example, the annual commemoration of the seventh-century massacre of Imam Hossein, the grandson of the Prophet, and his companions by the Umayyad dynasty was transformed into acts of open political defiance of the regime. The suffering and passion of Hossein were reinterpreted to

¹⁸ Abdolmohammad Kazemipur and Ali Rezaei, 'Religious life under theocracy: the case of Iran,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42 (September 2003), pp. 347–361.

¹⁹ One of the best descriptions of Shi'i beliefs and practices in English is Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); on religious obligations, see p. 298.

²⁰ A survey was conducted in Iraq under the auspices of the World Values Surveys in 2004. While it provides valuable information on religious beliefs, cultural values, and political attitudes among Iraqis in the post-Saddam period, it does not have any questions on sectarian affiliations (i.e. Shiites, Arab Sunnis, Kurdish Sunnis, etc.). For more information on the survey, see Mark Tessler & Eleanor Gao, 'Gauging Arab support for democracy,' *Journal of Democracy*, 16 (July 2005), pp. 83–97.

²¹ Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 50–76.

urge pious Shiites to resist the secular and repressive policies of the Pahlavi monarchy.²² The theme of martyrdom in traditional Shi'ism and the memorial services for people killed in street demonstrations provided valuable cultural tools for the clergy in sustaining and expanding public opposition to the regime.²³ In this sense, Shi'ism became a 'world-shaking' force and a cultural medium for revolutionaries in their pursuit of social justice.²⁴

After the consolidation of the Islamic Revolution, Shi'ism became the ultimate source of legitimacy for the regime. The Islamic Republic is founded on the premise that sovereignty belongs to God, and Islam is the ultimate source of all legislation. The most powerful political position in the regime is occupied by the *faqih*, a cleric who has life tenure and is not accountable to the public. Although the cleric-ruler lacks the prestige and influence among fellow Shi'i clerics similar to that which the Roman Catholic Pope enjoys, religious faith and political rights are interwoven strongly in the Islamic Republic.²⁵ Politically active citizens are expected to have impeccable religious credentials, including loyalty to clerical rule, in order to be eligible for a broad range of civil and political rights. In few other places in the world has religion been politicized as much as in Iran.

Under these conditions, political attitudes may affect how people make sense of religion. Previous research has shown that religious Iranians are more likely to espouse Islamic political governance than are less religious Iranians.²⁶ However, religious people who are politically disillusioned and have high levels of apathy may tend to avoid religious gatherings controlled by the regime. At the same time, their enthusiasm for other aspects of religious rituals and participation may continue unhampered. For this reason, a systematic comparison of different indicators of religious participation in Iran would be illuminating. Mosque attendance is just one of the several ways to gauge religious participation; pilgrimage (first and foremost to Mecca) is a core aspect of the Islamic faith, and visits to shrines of holy figures of Islam have a long and illustrious history. This is particularly true for Twelve Imamate Shi'ism, which highly venerates the 12 imams, or religious leaders of the faith, all of whom are direct descendants of the Prophet through his daughter, Fatima, and cousin and son-in-law Ali.

World Values Surveys conducted in Iran do not have any pertinent questions on visits to religious shrines. Instead, we rely on a survey conducted in Tehran in August 2003. The survey provides a scientific sample of Iranian residents living under the jurisdiction of Tehran municipality. As a result, the findings do not necessarily apply to all of Iran, especially Iranians living in small towns and rural areas. While more than 87 percent of Iranians living in towns with fewer than 5000 people consider religion very important, only 74 percent of Iranians living in cities with populations of more than 100,000 do so.

²² Shahrough Akhavi, 'The ideology and praxis of Shi'ism in the Iranian Revolution,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 25 (April 1983), pp. 195–211.

²³ Mansoor Moaddel, 'Ideology as episodic discourse: the case of the Iranian Revolution,' *American Sociological Review*, 57 (June 1992), pp. 353–379.

²⁴ Under different historical circumstances, religion may be a source of rebellion against political authority or may serve to legitimize existing political inequalities. See further Dwight B. Billings & Shauna L. Scott, 'Religion and political legitimation,' *Annual Review of Sociology*, 20 (1994), pp. 173–202.

²⁵ Some leading and high-ranking clerics deeply resent the ascendancy to the position of *faqih* of Ali Khamenehi whom they perceive as their inferior; see Olivier Roy, 'The crisis of religious legitimacy in Iran,' *Middle East Journal*, 53 (Spring 1999), pp. 201–216.

²⁶ Gunes Murat Tezcur, 'Religious values and political attitudes in Iran,' paper presented at the Middle East Association Annual Meeting; San Francisco (November 2004).

Likewise, attitudes toward women's religiosity exhibit significant variation between large cities and small towns. In general, an overwhelming number of the Iranians surveyed agree that women should veil in public. However, large city residents are more likely to dissociate religiosity from the issue of a head covering for women. For example, 64 percent of urban residents in the sample strongly agree with the statement that women should wear *hejab* (head cover); in contrast, 80 percent of Iranians living in small towns with fewer than 5000 people strongly agree with the statement. Additionally, Iranians in small towns attend mosques more frequently than Iranians living in cities. Whereas almost one-third of Iranians living in towns with populations of 5000 or fewer attend mosques every week, only 20 percent of Iranians living in cities with more than 100,000 people do so.²⁷

The Tehran survey includes a question that asks 'How often do you visit the resting place of Imam Reza in Mashed?' Almost 40 percent of respondents said that they visit Mashed for religious pilgrimage purposes at least once a year, while 42 percent have visited Mashed several times in their lifetime; less than 5 percent have never been to the city. These results demonstrate that Shi'ism does not necessarily downplay the communal aspect of religious experience. Pilgrimage remains a central aspect of Shi'i practices in Iran, as well as rituals commemorating the massacre of Hosayn in Kerbala. Thus, Tehranis are very religious and attach enormous importance to visiting Mashed as a pilgrimage center, yet their participation in communal prayers is low.

Religiosity and Friday Congregational Prayers

How can one explain the particularly low levels of mosque attendance among Iranians? We hypothesize that the symbiotic relationship between the mosques and the regime is responsible for the declining mosque attendance rate among Iranians. Under the contemporary Islamic regime, mosques are not just places for congregational prayers but more importantly they serve as places to disseminate political messages. Around 400 Iranian towns and cities have 'Friday prayers leaders' who directly report to and are supervised by the Leader Ali Khamenehi. Since the revolutionary years, the objective of the Friday sermons, delivered by the stated appointed leaders, has been to mobilize the public and to communicate the ruling ideology directly to the people.²⁸ On many occasions, Friday prayers leaders openly express their distaste for the reformist political movement and ally with the ideology of the conservative politicians.²⁹

²⁷ The World Values Survey Iran was conducted in 2000 with a sample of 2532 individuals. Forty percent of the respondents reside in cities with a population of more than 100,000 and 27 percent in towns with fewer than 5000 inhabitants. Full information about this survey, including the questionnaire and raw data, is available at < www.worldvaluessurvey.org/services/index.html > .

²⁸ The authors had the opportunity to participate in the well-known Friday prayers of the University of Tehran in January 2003. Despite the cold, a considerable number of people listened to the sermon by Ayatollah Ahmad Janati, Tehran's Friday prayers leader, who delivered the sermon in the open air. His sermon was interrupted occasionally by chants of 'Death to America' and 'Death to Israel' and lasted more than an hour, after which it was followed by the communal prayers.

²⁹ In an interview given to a reformist newspaper, Mohsen Do'agoo, the well-known Friday prayers leader of the Shemiranat district, a Tehran community located on the slopes of the Alborz Mountains, declared that 'the so-called reformist movement is an anti-revolutionary current and must be annihilated.' See *Etemad*, 22 October 2003.

Table 1. Attendance at Friday prayers by levels of self-declared piety

	Very rarely attend	Occasionally	At least once a month
Not pious	48	2	50
Somehow pious	84	6	10
Very pious	85	7	15

Source: Tehran Survey 2003. $N = 388$, Pearson $\chi^2(4) = 80.77$.

Interestingly, survey results reveal that participation in Friday congregations is very low among Iranians residing in Tehran. Just 6 percent of survey respondents said that they attend the congregations every week, while a total of 40 percent reported that they never attended the congregations. These findings are striking because many observers noted how crowded and emotionally moving the Friday prayers were in the early years of the revolution and how the Friday prayers sermons were central to the regime's mobilization of public support. The decline in attendance rates since the early revolutionary years may reflect the changing political atmosphere in the country. It seems plausible that Iranians who dislike the politicization of places of worship do not attend communal Friday prayers. If this is the case, then an unintended consequence of establishing an Islamic Republic may be the reemergence of more individualistic strands of Shi'ism in Iran.

Based on these initial observations, we undertake a systematic analysis of the relationship between religious belief and participation in the Iranian context. Table 1 tabulates levels of piety with attendance in Friday congregations.³⁰ The results are counterintuitive. While only 15 percent of respondents who claim to be very pious attend Friday prayers at least once a month, 50 percent of non-pious respondents do. Correspondingly, an overwhelming majority of pious respondents almost never attend Friday prayers. This large gap between religiosity and religious participation raises a new set of questions. If religiosity is not the primary motivation for people who attend Friday prayers, what characteristics distinguish them from people who do not attend? Does attendance in Friday prayers entail any purposes other than experience of religious solidarity?

Given the highly politicized nature of Friday prayers in Iran, it may be the case that participation in public prayers has become a gesture of political loyalty to the regime. Citizens who profess unwavering obedience to the Leader, or *rahbar*, Ali Khamenehi might be more likely to attend weekly prayers where regime clerics address the faithful. These same people tend to be more supportive of the Islamic regime. Table 2 gives support to this possibility. It shows the relationship between attendance in Friday congregations and attitudes about the responsiveness of the political system. In general, people who consider the political system to be more responsive are those who attend congregations more frequently; 78 percent of people who do not miss weekly Friday congregations think that the political system is either very or occasionally responsive to their needs, while only 35 percent of people who rarely or never attend congregations hold positive opinions of the political system. The evidence tends to support the proposition that Islamic rule

³⁰ Ideally, an exact comparison between the Tehran survey and the World Values Survey for Iran would provide a reliable picture of religious participation in Iran. While the Tehran survey inquires about respondents' participation in Friday congregations, the World Values Survey for Iran includes only a general question on participation in mosque prayers. Still, in both surveys, respondents who self-describe themselves as being religious are not necessarily those who attend Friday congregations and mosque prayers.

Table 2. Responsiveness of the political system by participation in Friday prayers

Values (in %)	Very responsive	Occasionally responsive	Rarely responsive	Never responsive
Once a week	39	39	13	9
Once a month	35	45	17	3
On special occasions	2	43	26	22
Very rarely or never	2	33	39	27

Source: Tehran Survey 2003. $N = 378$, Pearson $\chi^2(9) = 101.5331$.

actually has had a negative impact on mosque attendance in Iran. This is because attendance in Friday congregations has been transformed into an act of political ideology.

Generational Differences and Attendance at Friday Congregations

One can argue that the relationship between mosque attendance and political attitudes is basically spurious. Generational differences might explain both the variance in mosque attendance rates and levels of political disillusionment. It is likely that the younger generation (under the age of 35) are more politically and religiously apathetic than the older generations and thus less likely to participate in Friday congregational prayers. This is a very plausible explanation that deserves systematic inquiry. Table 3 shows the relationship between five age groups and levels of attendance in Friday congregations. Two patterns are worth noting. First, large majorities rarely or never attend Friday congregations in all age groups. Hence, attendance levels do not follow a strictly generational pattern. Second, the attendance rate is highest among the generation that was aged 17–29 during the 1979 Revolution. This generation—currently the 46–60 age group—reports relatively higher levels of attendance than do the other age groups. It is likely that the revolutionary struggle and the war against Iraq still loom large in the minds of this generation. In fact, this generation has very positive evaluations of the political system, as 77 percent describe the current political system either as very responsive or occasionally responsive to their needs.³¹

These bivariate analyses demonstrate that participation in the Friday congregations has political motives that are unrelated to religious intensity. We also want to investigate whether this finding can be generalized to all demographic groups in Tehran. Does the relationship between participation in congregations and political disillusionment apply to all Tehranis, regardless of gender, education, age, class, or religiosity? The results of the multivariate regression analysis with participation in the Friday congregations as the dependent variable are shown in Table 4. Gender differences turn out to be insignificant. Males are not more likely to attend Friday congregations than females. The coefficient for the age variable is positive and statistically significant, with p -values less than 0.05. Older people report higher attendance rates than younger people. This result seems to be caused by the unusually high attendance rates among people who are between 46 and 60, which indicates a non-linear relationship between age and attendance in congregations. Between two education variables, only religious education has a significant and positive impact on the levels of participation in congregations. Not surprisingly, respondents who are trained

³¹ The current president, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, who was born in 1956, belongs to this generation.

Table 3. The relationship between age and participation in Friday congregations

Values (in %)	Once a week	Once a month	On special occasions	Very rarely or never
Ages between 15 and 25	5	5	5	85
26–35	4	5	5	86
36–45	6	15	9	70
46–60	14	20	11	56
60 and over	5	24	4	67
Average	6	11	6	77

Source: Tehran Survey 2003. $N = 391$, Pearson $\chi^2(12) = 32.1267$.

Table 4. Multiple regression analysis of factors that are associated with participation in the Friday congregations

	Model 1	Multiple imputation model
Gender	-0.12 (-1.09)	-0.04 (-0.42)
Age	0.09 (2.34)*	0.10 (2.62)*
Religious education	0.62 (4.06)***	0.51 (3.77)***
Secular education	-0.01 (0.32)	-0.01 (-0.40)
Class identification	0.01 (0.25)	0.02 (0.37)
Religiosity	-0.05 (-2.53)*	-0.06 (-3.00)**
Pilgrimage to Mashed	0.21 (3.59)***	0.21 (3.91)***
Evaluations of political system	0.43 (6.90)***	0.43 (7.53)***
Adjusted R^2	0.34	Five dif. models [0.33–0.35]
Sample size	334	412

Notes: the table shows unstandardized coefficients and gives t -statistics in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Tehran Survey.

in religious schools that are strictly controlled by the regime are more likely to attend Friday prayers led by regime-appointed imams. The level of education and class identification are irrelevant to participation rates. Interestingly, religiosity³² is significantly and negatively related to levels of participation in congregations controlling for demographic factors. People who consider themselves pious and think religion is very important for their lives are not necessarily those who attend the Friday congregations. This finding corroborates our earlier observation that religious intensity does not translate into greater religious participation in the Iranian context. Meanwhile, respondents who visit Mashed for pilgrimage purposes are more likely to have higher levels of attendance in Friday congregations. In this sense, these two dimensions of religious participation are significantly correlated with each other. Positive evaluations of the political system are also correlated positively with attendance in Friday congregations and are consistent with our theoretical expectations. This relationship is significant, with p -values less than 0.001.

Because some respondents failed to answer some questions, the regression analysis has 334 observations, instead of the full sample of 412. For instance, 46 respondents did not

³² This indicator is built by creating a composite variable based on the importance of the religion and piety questions. The Cronbach's alpha score for the variable is 0.84, which indicates that these two questions measure the same dimension of religiosity.

report any class identification and 22 of them did not indicate how they perceive the political system. The magnitude of the missing data is not large. However, the results may be biased and skewed because of the diminishing size of the sample. Furthermore, some of the variables that appear insignificant may be significant and vice versa. We use the multiple-imputation technique³³ for predicting missing data by using the relevant, available, and non-missing data in the sample. The analysis using an imputed sample produces smaller standard errors and recovers all the missing observations. The third column of the table shows coefficients generated using multiple imputations. No significant change is observable. Older and religiously educated people who are politically disillusioned are more likely to attend Friday congregations than people who are younger and, interestingly, more religious.

Theocratic Rule and Decline in Religious Participation

A defining aspect of the Iranian regime has been the fusion of religious and political authority. The theory of *velayat-e faqih* as articulated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the 1970s and subsequently incorporated into the constitution puts ultimate political power in the hands of Islamic clergy.³⁴ Despite the constitutional amendments of 1989 according to which the *faqih* does not need to be the most learned clergy in Islamic jurisprudence and justice,³⁵ religious tests for political office are well established in the Islamic Republic. Religious faith has been the basis of political rights in a state where Shi'ism is the official religion. The government derives its legitimacy from the often-repeated claim that an overwhelming majority of the population are pious followers of Twelver Shi'ism. Thus, part of the regime's authority is based on non-negotiable religious truths that draw the boundaries between what is politically legitimate and illegitimate. The state supervises almost all aspects of social conduct in the public space and enforces religious laws. Given these political conditions, the evolution of religious beliefs and practices in contemporary Iran presents a fascinating area of inquiry.

Although Iranian society remains deeply religious under theocratic rule, this religiosity does not translate into attendance at Friday congregations organized and controlled by state authorities. Iranians residing in Tehran make a distinction between their religious faith and religious duties as demanded by the Islamic Republic. The tremendous politicization of religion in contemporary Iran negatively affects religious participation. One consequence is that Iranians from all walks of life and who are observant Shi'is abstain from participating in the politicized congregational prayers. While Shi'ism

³³ Gary King et al., 'Analyzing incomplete political science data: an alternative algorithm for multiple imputation,' *American Political Science Review*, 95 (March 2001), pp. 49–69.

³⁴ For a rich discussion of the undemocratic process through which the constitution was written and approved in 1979, see Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, John O'Kane (Trans.) (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 22–58.

³⁵ After the amendments of 1989, the *faqih* no longer needs to be a *marja-e taqlid*. After the rationalist *usuli* school emerged victorious over the traditionalist *akhhbaris* at the end of the eighteenth century, the position of the leading clergy—*mujtahids*—gained enormous importance. Shi'i believers were expected to follow the rulings of a *mujtahid* who commanded extensive knowledge of religious praxis and law. The *marja-e taqlid* are the leading Shi'i clergy who are emulated by their followers. See further Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism*, Janet Watson & Marian Hill (Trans.), 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 92–97.

remains a powerful force under the Islamic Republic, increasingly it is becoming more private. The popular enthusiasm and religious fervor of the early revolutionary years are long gone, and the state's ability to shape and control popular religion has waned. For these reasons, the fusion between religious and secular authority seems to be unsustainable in the long run in contemporary Iran.³⁶

While religious life in contemporary Iran gives some support to the universal applicability of the supply-side theory of religion, it also demonstrates some of its shortcomings. On the one hand, religious participation measured as attendance in the Friday congregations has been very low under conditions of extensive state regulation and monopolization. This is consistent with the expectations of the theory. On the other hand, Iranians continue to have strong religious beliefs and high levels of participation in rituals and pilgrimages, such as the pilgrimage to Mashad that are not regulated directly by the state. Despite the lack of pluralism and competition, religion has remained a major source of influence on how Iranians make sense of politics. For instance, more than 50 percent of respondents in the Tehran survey said they are, above all, Shi'is and an additional 26 percent said that they are Muslims; in contrast, only 19 percent said they are Iranians. In cultures where religiosity has been a defining aspect of national identity, the impact of religious competition on religious experience is more likely to be weaker than in cultures where religion is only peripheral to the construction of the national identity. It might even be the case that religious pluralism does not have any impact on religious participation.³⁷ Another possibility is that the causal relationship between religiosity and state regulation of religion may be reverse. State religion is more probable when an overwhelming majority of the population adheres to a single religion.³⁸

References

- Akhavi, S. (1983) The ideology and praxis of Shi'ism in the Iranian Revolution, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 25(April), pp. 195–211.
- Barro, R. & McCleary, R. M. (2004) Which countries have state religions?, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 120(November), pp. 1331–1370.
- Berger, P. (1966) *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday).
- Billings, D. B. & Scott, S. L. (1994) Religion and political legitimation, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 20, pp. 173–202.
- Casanova, J. (1994) *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Chaves, M. (1994) Secularization as declining religious authority, *Social Forces*, 72(March), pp. 749–774.
- Chaves, M., Schraeder, P. & Sprindys, M. (1994) State regulation of religion and Muslim religious vitality in the industrialized West, *Journal of Politics*, 56(November), pp. 1087–1097.
- Eickelman, D. & Piscatori, J. (1996) *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- European Values Study Group and World Values Survey Association (2006) *European and World Values Surveys Four-wave Integrated Data File, 1981–2004*. v.20060423, available at <www.worldvaluessurvey.org/services/index.html> (Accessed November 20 2005).

³⁶ According to Chaves, secularization can be thought of as the decline of religious authority rather than the decline or the marginalization of religious beliefs. His reconceptualization of secularism seems particularly relevant in the Iranian context. Mark Chaves, 'Secularization as declining religious authority,' *Social Forces*, 72 (March 1994), pp. 749–774.

³⁷ The methodologies underlying most literature on the impact of religious pluralism on religious participation are found wanting; see further David Voas et al., 'Religious pluralism and participation: why previous research is wrong,' *American Sociological Review*, 67 (April 2002), pp. 212–230.

³⁸ Robert J. Barro & Rachel M. McCleary, 'Which countries have state religions?,' *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 120 (November 2004), pp. 1331–1370.

- Finke, R. & Stark, R. (1998) Religious choice and competition, *American Sociological Review*, 63(October), pp. 761–766.
- Fish, S. (2002) Islam and authoritarianism, *World Politics*, 55(October), pp. 4–37.
- Fox, J. & Sandler, S. (2005) Separation of religion and state in the twenty-first century, *Comparative Politics*, 37(April), pp. 317–335.
- Gill, A. J. (1994) Rendering unto Caesar? Religious competition and Catholic political strategy in Latin America, 1962–1979, *American Journal of Political Science*, 38(May), pp. 403–425.
- Halm, H. (2004), *Shi'ism*, J. Watson & M. Hill (Trans.), 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
- Hefner, R. W. (1998) Multiple modernities: Christianity Islam, and Hinduism in a globalizing age, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27, pp. 83–104.
- Kalyvas, S. N. (1999) Wanton and senseless? The logic of massacres in Algeria, *Rationality and Society*, 11(August), pp. 243–285.
- Kazemipur, A. & Rezaei, A. (2003) Religious life under theocracy: the case of Iran, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42(September), pp. 347–361.
- Kepel, G. (2002) *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, pp. 61–105 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- King, G., Honaker, J., Joseph, A. & Scheve, K. (2001) Analyzing incomplete political science data: an alternative algorithm for multiple imputation, *American Political Science Review*, 95(March), pp. 49–69.
- Kurzman, C. (2004) *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Lewis, B. (2003) *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Perennial).
- Moaddel, M. (1992) Ideology as episodic discourse: the case of the Iranian Revolution, *American Sociological Review*, 57(June), pp. 353–379.
- Momen, M. (1985) *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).
- Norris, P. & Inglehart, R. (2004) *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Rosefsky, C. W. (2002) *Mobilizing Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Roy, O. (1999) The crisis of religious legitimacy in Iran, *Middle East Journal*, 53(Spring), pp. 201–216.
- Schirazi, A. (1998) *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, John O'Kane (Trans.) (New York: I.B. Tauris).
- Sherkat, D. E. & Ellison, C. G. (1999) Recent developments and current controversies in the sociology of religion, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, pp. 363–394.
- Stark, R. (1999) 'Secularization, R.I.P.', *Sociology of Religion*, 60(Fall), pp. 249–273.
- Stepan, A. C. & Robertson, G. B. (2003) An 'Arab' more than a 'Muslim' democracy gap', *Journal of Democracy*, 14(July), pp. 30–44.
- Tessler, M. & Gao, E. (2005) Gauging Arab support for democracy, *Journal of Democracy*, 16(July), pp. 83–97.
- Tezcur, G. M. (2004) Religious values and political attitudes in Iran. Paper presented at the Middle East Association Annual Meeting; San Francisco (November).
- Voas, D., Crockett, A. & Olson, V. A. (2002) Religious pluralism and participation: why previous research is wrong, *American Sociological Review*, 67(April), pp. 212–230.
- Weber, M. (1958) Religious rejections of the world and their characteristics, in: H. Gerth & C. W. Mills (Eds) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, pp. 323–362 (New York: Oxford University Press).
- White, J. (2003) *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press).

Appendix: Survey Questions used in the Analyses

The World Values Survey, Iran

1. Independently of whether you go to mosque or not would you say you are ...
 - a. A religious person
 - b. Not a religious person
 - c. A convinced atheist
2. Apart from weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services these days?

The Tehran Survey

1. How important is religion in your life? Please use a scale of 1 to 10 to indicate preference, with 10 meaning highest level of piety.
2. On a scale of 1 to 10 piety, where do you place yourself?
3. How often do you attend the Friday Prayers?
4. How often do you visit the resting place of Imam Reza in Mashed?
5. On the whole would you say the political system in this country is responsive or not responsive to your needs?
6. People sometimes describe themselves as belonging to the working class, the middle class, or the upper or lower class. How would you describe yourself?

Copyright of *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.