

## Article

# The Coronavirus Crisis in a Shiite Society: Faith and the Experience of a Pilgrimage Ban at Iran's Central Shrine

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019, brought about far-reaching changes in individual and social life. Governments adopted social distancing measures, to varying degrees, to reduce the burden of disease on the health care systems and its damage to the public health. In Iran, the shrine of Imam Reza, which is one of the most holy sites for Muslim Shiites worldwide and a popular pilgrimage destination, was closed along with three other holy shrines. Since faith in Imams, and visiting and expressing devotion to them, is of paramount importance in Shiite teachings, there were a mixture of stances regarding the shrines' shutdown before and during the lockdown. Based on 14 in-depth interviews, this study examines how typical pilgrims have dealt with this ban. Although all interviewees experienced conflicting emotions, their responses centered on three perspectives. Those who advocated for the shrine's shutdown adopted strategies to cope with cognitive dissonance and threats to their religious identity. The strategies were mainly based on the redefinition, accentuation, reinterpretation, and selection of some theological and jurisprudential readings so that they could address the above challenges to their religious beliefs. The anti-shutdown participants, with a fatalistic interpretation of contracting a disease, opposed the state's stance, while the pro-shutdown participants accused the state of conservatism or political expediency rooted in an insincere devotion to the Imam. Moreover, some anti-shutdown respondents, despite their discontent, went along with this pragmatic strategy due to their belief in the importance of the image of Shiites in general, and the Shiite state in particular.

**Keywords:** coronavirus; pilgrimage; Iran; Mashhad; Shiite; Imam Reza shrine; COVID-19

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## 1. Introduction

In December 2019 and early 2020, the world was shaken by the swift spread of the COVID-19 respiratory disease. This outbreak had vast repercussions for the performance of nation-states, public and private sectors' services, and economic, social, cultural, and religious activities worldwide. In light of evidence that person-to-person transmission was the most common means of spreading COVID-19 (Rothan and Byrreddy 2020), the main strategy for controlling transmission was social distancing and restrictions on gatherings (Quadri 2020). Hence, many holy places and pilgrimage sites around the world—both locally significant and globally famous—were forced to shut down (Mosier et al. 2020). Such decisions were often controversial, as some religious leaders and followers harshly reacted to the newly imposed restrictions (Wildman et al. 2020). The inaccessibility of places of worship was particularly problematic because, more than ever, people turned to prayer—often directed to holy people and saints (see Di Giovine 2020)—to relieve negative feelings and anger, to provide a sense of security and sociality, and to request divine intervention for healing and well-being. This issue was especially complicated when contemplating the closures of Shiite shrines in Iran, where the theocratic state tends to propagate and promote the Shiite faith, heritage, identity, symbols, and rituals. Indeed, the custodian of the most

sacred shrine in the country is assigned by the head of the state, which further complicates the issue as it seems to inject politics into the lived experiences of faith.

In Iran, all universities, schools, and places of large gatherings were shut down under a governmental order on 23 February 2020, after the confirmation of the first case of SARS-CoV-2 infection and death more than two weeks earlier. Later, active cases and mortality rates quickly increased as the healthcare system was overwhelmed by the disease and suffering from heavy economic sanctions. After intense debates in the media between high-ranking clerics, and street protests, the major Shiite pilgrimage sites in Qom, Mashhad, Shiraz, and Tehran were closed in accordance with the Ministry of Health and Medical Education's order on 14 March.

During the lockdown, the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad was closed. Regarded as the most important site for Shiites in Iran, the shrine is a mausoleum for the eighth religious leader, Imam Reza. As far as faith in and strong devotion to Imams distinguishes Twelver Shiism from other Islamic sects, the shrine is one of the most popular destinations for Shia devotees in Iran and other countries (Reader 2015). Yet it is more than a site for individual pilgrimage; it is the center of weekly devotions and annual ceremonies by large congregations. Thus, most of Mashhad's residents would make routine or occasional pilgrimages on a weekly, monthly, or yearly basis. Indeed, according to a one-year survey, 54% of pilgrims who live in Mashhad visit the shrine about once per week and 29% visit once per month (Anonymous 2017). Moreover, touching and kissing sacred objects and architectural elements (*Baraka* in Arabic; *Tabarrok* in Persian) are common practices among Shiite pilgrims, but were forbidden because of the potential to transmit the disease. Thus, the closure of the shrine shocked most people, especially devout residents of Mashhad. Some surveys with nationally representative samples showed that a relatively significant number of respondents supported the opening of sacred places. In three different surveys conducted from April to May 2020, 33%, 19%, and 28% of the respondents agreed with the reopening of the shrines (ISPA 2020; RICAC 2020a, 2020b). These findings were significant, but because of the quantitative nature of these surveys, they could not provide more details about respondents' individual perceptions and experiences of the closing down of sacred places and shrines. Based on qualitative research, this paper dimensionalizes this data, providing a more complex look at a Shiite community's lived experiences and response patterns that underlie devotees' diverse positions regarding the closure of this sacred shrine during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although contemporary tourism and pilgrimage studies acknowledge a blurring of the sacred and the profane, particularly at religious heritage sites (Morinis 1992; Badone and Roseman 2004; Di Giovine 2013a, 2013b; Di Giovine and Choe 2020), the classic literature on pilgrimage is predicated on the idea that a sacred site is separate, distinct, and marked out from secular, everyday life. According to Emile Durkheim, the establishment of sacred times and places—which are set apart from daily life—is an important component of approaching the divine in many cultures. He argues that “religious and profane life cannot coexist in the same space. If religious life is to develop, a special place must be prepared for it, one from which profane life is excluded. The institution of temples and sanctuaries arises from this. These are spaces assigned to sacred things and beings” (Durkheim 1995, p. 312). Mircea Eliade (1957) similarly remarks that holy shrines are sites where the sacred “irrupts” into profane life, providing a means of accessing cosmological perfection and well-being amidst the turmoil of everyday life. From the anthropological standpoint, Victor Turner (1973) considers pilgrimage sites and other shrines to be sacred “centers out there”—separate from and peripheral to the secular realm; likewise, Turner argues that participating in the ritual of pilgrimage with other devotees at the shrine may produce the sensation of *communitas*—an “anti-structural” feeling of unity, in which all participants temporarily transcend the social structural divisions of everyday life and recognize each other's humanity (but see Eade and Sallnow 1991). According to this theoretical approach, a sacred place is distinct from the profane, and has qualities that are seen to transcend the social world. At the same time, this socially-constructed distinction is related to processes

of boundary-making through which individuals' identities are constructed (Jenkins 2014, p. 127; see also Barth 1969; Di Giovine and Brulotte 2014, pp. 3–4).

However, the unexpected spread of COVID-19, medical evidence, and warnings about the transmission of this contagious disease, as well as the official lockdown of the shrines by governmental authorities (typically the ultimate “profane” entity in these theories), provoked the perception that the distinction between the sacred (shrine) and the profane areas was being eroded. The boundary between the sacred and secular was blurred, and the separation of domains lost its urgency. According to Belk et al.'s (1989) description of sacralization mechanisms, in the case of the shrine, two mechanisms resulted in desacralization: the inevitable mixing of the virus (the profane) with the shrine environment (the sacred), and “tangibilized contamination.” Places that were understood to be free from pollution and impurity suddenly became polluted—infected by the virus with no sure way to purify it. Thus, the borders of the sacred, its power and agency (e.g., in miracles and healing), and the faith and identity of pilgrims who could no longer visit the shrine, were all called into question. First, the coronavirus, as a natural evil, threatened physical and social life. Consequently, pilgrimages were restricted. This was perceived as a second order evil, threatening the consistency in religious beliefs and identity where pilgrimage had important and specific implications for the Shiite and the theocratic state. This situation created theological and practical challenges for believers. Although some research studies on religious communities' responses to the problem of evil in disasters have been conducted (e.g., Chester and Duncan 2010; Solihu 2007), and some papers have been published on Muslims' reaction to restrictions on religious gatherings during the recent pandemic (e.g., Begović 2020; Svensson 2021), such a rare condition in modern-day Iran has not been documented in previous research.

Thus, this study aims to: (i) provide insight into the ways in which believers understand and interpret the situation (ii) explore religious people's experiences of the pilgrimage restriction during the COVID-19 crisis in the Shiite community of Mashhad, and (iii) identify the ways in which faith more broadly factors into understanding participants' roles in pilgrimage and religious heritage tourism. The specific research questions we sought to explore were: (i) What patterns could be identified in regular pilgrims' stances toward the shutdown of the shrine? (ii) How did regular pilgrims emotionally experience the pilgrimage shutdown? (iii) How did they cognitively use their theological and jurisprudential heritage, as well as their faith, to make sense of the restriction on pilgrimage?

## 2. Rethinking the Problem of Evil in Light of Religious Heritage

Several studies have been conducted on the cognitive and practical responses of religious communities to disasters such as tsunamis (Merli 2010; Holmgaard 2019; Paul and Nadiruzzaman 2013), earthquakes (Di Giovine and Ascione 2020; Chester and Duncan 2010), and volcanoes (Chester and Duncan 2010; Gianisa and Le De 2018). These studies have examined various aspects of the subject, including the post-disaster meaning-making process and theological explanations (Davis et al. 2018; Holmgaard 2019; Chester 2005), the impact of religious narratives on the experience of the disaster (McGeehan and Baker 2017), the ways in which communities deal with the consequences of the disaster and the recovery process through meanings attributed to the disaster, risk reduction strategies through various interpretations of religious teachings, and religious-based epistemologies (McGeehan and Baker 2017; Chester et al. 2013). Some comparative works focused on the diversity of theodicies related to disasters as evil and their usage by people and religious leaders in a specific socio-historical and ethno-political contexts (Merli 2010).

Prevalent interpretations of disasters and suffering include divine punishment for sins, an opportunity for acquiring moral virtue, a test of faith (Damian et al. 2016), and a reminder or warning (Svensson 2021). Some scholars note that these kinds of perceptions implicitly refer the responsibility to God. This results in a low perception of risk, passive acceptance of suffering, fatalism, and vulnerability (Gaillard and Texier 2010; Gianisa and Le De 2018). However, other evidence shows that these understandings have not provoked

serious resistance against risk protection programs (Chester et al. 2013). This phenomenon has led scholars to seek to identify the mental processes behind it. Park (2016) argues that when people encounter a crisis or distress, their fundamental beliefs are frequently threatened by discrepancies between the situation and their global and situational meaning. Festinger (1957) famously calls this “cognitive dissonance,” which leads to psychological discomfort and the need to rationalize one’s cognition and reduce logical and/or normative inconsistencies. Rationalizing is done by changing some elements of, or adding new elements to, their cognition, or, as Park argues, by reinterpreting their beliefs by actively reappraising the situation and its outcomes.

In the Islamic context, two distinct studies by Solihu (2007) and Ghafory-Ashtiany (2009) explore Islamic sacred texts and jurisprudential heritage. Both of them stress the human’s free will and his/her responsibility in natural disasters. According to Solihu (2007), the world works based on an intrinsic natural order (physical law) and the rule of human free will (moral law). If one violates the law of the physical world, (s)he has to inevitably expect disastrous outcomes. Similarly, Ghafory-Ashtiany (2009) in his reinterpretation of the Qur’an attempts to have an innovative understanding of the concept of “sin”. Referring to some statements in the Qur’an, he suggests that misusing wisdom and free will, misusing nature, causing harm to oneself, and violating people’s rights will ultimately result in the increasing vulnerability of communities. Therefore, these actions logically cause harm and damage.

To classify responses, some disaster researchers use the concept of theodicy. Leibniz in 1710 coined the term “theodicy” to describe how Hebrew and Christian scriptures explained the suffering of innocents (e.g., in disasters, wars, etc.), and other theologians and philosophers have continued the discussion on models of theodicy (Chester et al. 2019). Merli (2010) defines theodicy as “the theological and/or existential problem of reconciling the concept of a merciful, just and omnipotent god with the existence of evil and unjust human suffering.” There are similarities between interpretations of Islamic thought-heritage mentioned above and the Leibnizian models of theodicy. Chester et al. (2019) suggest five types of Leibnizian models based on God’s or humans’ responsibility. From another perspective, it seems there are two main interpretations of disasters as evil. One accepts God’s agency by referring to God’s perfect agency in the world and understands evil as a part of a greater purpose of God in the world system.

The other interpretation accepts human free will, agency, and responsibility (not necessarily individual, but also collective and institutional). This view considers the role of humans in dealing with natural and moral evils. There is a more moderate view in Islamic thought that promotes responsible behavior in the face of evil through citing Islamic heritage, including the Qur’an, the hadith, historical evidence of the Prophet’s behavior, and the divine intentions behind jurisprudence. Accordingly, responsible behavior reduces vulnerability to risks.

Furthermore, after the coronavirus crisis, some works focusing on the response of Muslim communities were published. Begović (2020) shows that Muslim leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina persuaded the faithful to adopt responsible behavior to protect their health and the health of others. He confirms that the restrictions on prayer gatherings were intended to prevent the virus from spreading. In another work, using the cognitive science of religion (CSR) approach, Svensson (2021) explores Muslim societies’ reactions to restrictions on religious gatherings in the media. He identified four cognitive reactions: (1) theological reflections on the origin, nature, and religious significance of the disease, (2) religious justifications for restrictions on communal worship, (3) apologetic approaches to finding elements in religious sources that can be interpreted in a way that can be compatible with scientific facts about preventing and spreading the disease, and (4) discussions related to issues of purity, impurity, and contagion in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. He shows how contemporary Muslim societies justify and support restrictions on collective prayer based on intra-religious arguments and theodicies.

Most of the empirical research previously reviewed has been conducted in non-Islamic or Sunni contexts, or has been based on the sacred text. But the lived experiences and both the cognitive and emotional reactions of the Shiite communities in the face of COVID-19 restrictions on collective religious practice in a highly sacred place is empirically under-researched. In fact, in this paper evil is not a natural disaster or coronavirus *per se*, nor its physical and economic outcomes, but rather the restriction on pilgrimage as an outcome of the pandemic is seen as evil.

### 3. Background

#### 3.1. Shiites and Imams

Shia Muslims (also known as Shiites) are one of the two main sects of Islam. Despite many similarities between Islamic sects, there are some discrepancies in theology, historical understanding, and religious faith and practice. According to a Pew report, 10–13% of all Muslims are Shiite (Pew 2009). Within that number, Iranian Shiites make up 37–40% of the world's Shiite population. Furthermore, about 90–95% of Iranians identify as Shiites (Pew 2009), especially that of Ithna Asharis ("Twelvers"), which is one of five main subdivisions of Shiism.

The interpretation of the concept of "*Imamate*" is the main theological distinction between Shiite and Sunni Muslims (Gleave 2004; Zaman 2004). In Shiite doctrine, an Imam is a direct descendant of Muhammad; however, an Imam is not just a historical figure (Nasr 2005), but an infallible guide and mediator of God's blessings for believers (Zaman 2004). The Imams also hold particular religio-political power; as Gulevich (2004) notes: "Shia Muslims believe that only direct descendants of Muhammad are capable of serving as the supreme Muslim religious and political leader." It is believed that some traditions based on quotes from Muhammad as well as some interpretations of the Qur'an support this belief (Glazebrook and Abbasi-Shavazi 2007). Shiites believe, therefore, that rejection of and disrespect to the Imam is tantamount to the rejection of the Prophet (Madelung 2005). Hence, obedience and adherence to and faith in the Imam as well as expressions of devotion, loyalty, and love to him are construed as requisites of salvation. As the mediator between God and humans, the Imam is the source of the benefaction, grace, knowledge, the "knowledge of the hidden", intercession on the Day of Judgment, miracle, supernatural powers, and healing through Baraka or Tabarrok (Davidson and Gitlitz 2002; Madelung 2005; Landolt 2005; Nasr 2005).

#### 3.2. Pilgrimage in Shiite Culture

Pilgrimage is common in Islam, which is the only major world religion to obligate pilgrimage as one of its main pillars of the faith (Coleman and Elsner 1995, p. 53; see the Qur'an 3, p. 97). This is especially the case among Shiites (Davidson and Gitlitz 2002). While every able-bodied Muslim is required to fulfill the hajj obligations, which includes visiting the holiest shrines in Mecca, Saudi Arabia (Gulevich 2004), in the Shiite faith, pilgrimage to Imams' shrines is also an important component of devotional practice and specific to Iranian devotion (Bhardwaj 1998). It is not an obligatory ritual, but, for several theological, political, social, and historical reasons, it is a recommended act and a popular part of religious and spiritual life (Davidson and Gitlitz 2002; Pinault 1992). Such a pilgrimage is undertaken "to make religious vows, to offer their gratitude to the saint for favors received, to ask for healings or other forms of help, to absorb the spirituality of the place, or simply to express their admiration and love for the holy person" (Gulevich 2004, p. 386). Some common practices associated with Shiite pilgrimage are praying, recitation of the Qur'an and *Ziraratnameh*, touching and kissing of the tomb, and votive offerings (Campo 2009). Furthermore, according to some beliefs and narratives, material cause-effect relationships may be suspended in Imams' Shrines (Betteridge 1992); this experience is called *Mojezeh* [Miracle].

### 3.3. Imam Reza Shrine

The Imam Reza Mausoleum is recognized as the most sacred and important Shiite pilgrimage site in Iran (Amir-Moezzi and Jambet 2018). While the other Imams of Twelver Shiism are buried in Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Imam Reza was martyred and buried in Mashhad in the 9th century (Reader 2015). Every year millions of Iranian and foreign pilgrims visit this shrine (Financial Tribune 2017). Traditionally, pilgrims tend to touch and gently kiss the shrine's architectural elements, such as doors, walls, the floor, and the burial chamber as a public performance of devotion and an attempt to connect with the Imam's "contagious magic," which can connect the devotee with the sacred (see Frazer [1890] 1952, pp. 43–52).

The shrine is situated at the heart of the urban center of Mashhad, the second most populous city in Iran and the economic hub of the northeast of the country. With a population of more than 3.5 million inhabitants, who range from the religiously conservative to the modern and secular-leaning, Mashhad has been the site of frequent battles between conservative and reformist social and political forces in the Iranian public sphere in recent decades.

Although more than 90% of visitors to the shrine consider themselves "pilgrims" and are largely uninterested in visiting secular heritage sites in Mashhad (Dadpour 2009, p. 79), the complex itself is considered to be important cultural heritage and promoted as such by the nation-state. In 2017, Iran submitted a nomination file on the Imam Reza Holy Complex to UNESCO's Tentative List (the first step in designating it as a World Heritage Site). Arguing that it has been a destination for foreign tourism since at least the seventeenth century (UNESCO 2017; see also Farmanfarmaian 1996)—and indeed during the reign of the Shahs in the 20th century it was modernized to be more conducive to secular heritage tourism (Zakar et al. 2013)—the UNESCO file presents the site as a compendium of diverse artistic and architectural styles "which are all with political and social importance"; indeed, the formation of the city of Mashhad itself is "indebted to [the] creation of the holy shrine" (UNESCO 2017, p. 2). The document further argues that the shrine represents outstanding universal value because of its centrality in Shia and pilgrimage culture and identity. It is the symbolic center of "unique and distinctive ethics and rituals to be known as an inseparable heritage of the complex and the complicated culture of its wider setting. In fact, the genuine values of the heritage associates not only with its magnificent architecture and structural system but also with all the rituals, all together implicating the unique spiritual spirit of Imam Reza" (UNESCO 2017, p. 1).

The shrine consists of several interior and exterior spaces (courtyards) covering a total area of 598,657 square meters. The complex was progressively expanded and built upon from at least the 14th century by rulers and high-level officials whose patronage was considered a means of political legitimacy and evocative of their temporal power (Zakar et al. 2013; see also Wilber 1987). Its gilded dome, fine decorative arts and tiles, artwork and documents held in the shrine's museum, and mosque complex are all identified in the nomination file as "masterpieces of Iranian architecture [sic]", especially from the early Teimurid era. In the 1970s, Shah Reza sought to modernize the shrine, separating religious from everyday secular life (Zakar et al. 2013), and today the complex is separated from the outside by walls, barriers, and entrance gates. Visitors to the shrine today also have to pass through additional security gates. Before the coronavirus pandemic, these gates were never closed, and devotees could enter by day or night. But the gates were locked three weeks after the first confirmed cases.

### 3.4. Attitudes toward the Coronavirus Lockdown

The shutdown of holy sites is not a recurring or recent experience. However, during the pandemic, a host of surveys in Iran and other parts of the world have been undertaken to explore public opinion and reactions. In a national phone survey by ISPA (2020), conducted in early April 2020, participants were asked, "If COVID-19 restrictions were to be lifted, which places would you prefer to reopen sooner?" Respondents were evenly split between

opening what could be considered “profane” places, and what were considered “sacred” sites. Indeed, 33% gave priority to the reopening of “shopping malls” and 33% to “religious places and shrines”, while other places received a lower priority. In the first round of telephone surveys by the RCAC polling team (RICAC 2020a) in the first half of April 2020, it was found that 75–77% of citizens were against holding Friday prayers and reopening of religious places from the end of April, and only 19% advocated the reopening of religious places, which was consistent with the results reported by ISPA (2020). In the second round of telephone polls, which was carried out in the second half of May 2020, 61% were still against, but support for reopening shrines rose to 28%. The increase in anti-shutdown sentiment is probably due to the relative decline in the COVID-19 mortality rate in Iran at that time. This result reveals that at least 19–33% of the studied samples concurred with the reopening of the sacred places, which is a sizable percentage. However, these surveys, due to their quantitative methodological approach, fail to dimensionalize the experience and perception of the respondents after the shutdown of the holy places.

#### 4. Method

Since the coronavirus crisis and Iran’s lockdown of sacred places is unprecedented in the modern era, a phenomenological approach was adopted in this study to understand regular pilgrims’ experiences as well as emotional and cognitive perceptions during the lockdown. In this study, a “regular pilgrim” refers to practicing Shiites who had visited the shrine three or more times in the six months preceding the lockdown. Some of them visited the shrine regularly on a weekly or monthly basis. As Van Manen states, “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (Van Manen 1990, pp. 9–10). It requires “capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton 2014, p. 190). To capture regular pilgrims’ experiences, two investigators who lived in Mashhad (N. R and S. V.) conducted participant observation, in which they observed people praying in the streets leading to the shrine during the lockdown period and conducted informal discussions with locals. Observational fieldnotes, coupled with what they had read or seen in the media, helped the authors to expand their view of the range and patterns of reactions of regular pilgrims. As reflexivity is part of the phenomenological and ethnographic process (see Myerhoff and Ruby 1982; Davies 1998), the researchers also contemplated their own feelings and thoughts about the situation, relating it to previous observations that Imam Reza’s shrine has typically been consistently full of devotee pilgrims from around the country. They felt surprised and strange at the same time. However, they were relieved when the government closed the shrine and Friday prayers ceased to prevent the spread of the disease and mortality. The investigators articulated their thoughts in second-order fieldnotes, then strove to put aside their own preconceived perceptions and assumptions.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were recorded with the consent of the participants. The data were gathered through face to face and phone interviews by the authors who lived in Mashhad. In the period of data collection, the lockdown was not applied to all organizations and institutions on all workdays. Therefore, face to face interviews were conducted in the interviewees’ or interviewers’ homes or places of work.

Participants were selected using the purposive sampling method based on the definition given above of a “regular pilgrim.” The researchers began by interviewing those they personally knew, then deepened the pool of subjects through snowballing. Maximum possible variation was considered in terms of age, gender, educational level, socio-economic status, political orientation, and religiosity of the participants in the sample. Data were gathered during the lockdown from 23 May 2020 to 15 June 2020. Interviews lasted for 77 min on average. The interviews were conducted in Persian (Farsi), the language in which all interviewers and interviewees were fluent. Data collection and analysis continued until data saturation was reached (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Fourteen participants (nine women

and five men) had an average age of 44 (min = 20, max = 70). As for the level of education, four had primary school education, four had a bachelor’s degree, and five had a master’s degree or seminary education (L3). Pseudonyms were used to protect subjects’ identities and ensure their privacy. Participants’ demographic information is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participants’ Demographic Information.

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education	Position Regards Shut Down
Masoumeh	F	43	Part-time teacher	BSc	pro-shutdown
Rahela	F	33	Housewife	BSc	pro-shutdown
Noora	F	63	Housewife	Primary School	pro-shutdown
Farzaneh	F	20	Student	BSc	pro-shutdown
Mahin	F	65	Housewife, volunteer shrine usher	Primary School	strongly anti-shutdown
Mehri	F	70	Housewife	Primary School	pro-shutdown
Leila	F	65	Housewife, volunteer shrine usher	Primary School	pro-shutdown
Rozita	F	39	Part-time researcher	MSc	moderate anti-shutdown
Sima	F	20	Student	BSc	pro-shutdown
Reza	M	39	Bank employee	MSc	pro-shutdown
Musa	M	43	seminary teacher and family counselor	Seminary education, L3	moderate anti-shutdown
Fazel	M	31	Bookseller	Seminary education, L3	pro-shutdown
Mehdi	M	24	Student, Hotel employee	MSc	strongly anti-shutdown
Hadi	M	22	Graphist	BSc	pro-shutdown

Using an interview guide, interviewees were encouraged to describe their pilgrimage routines, habits, beliefs, perceptions, and their previous emotions and spiritual experiences of the shrine. Then, more open-ended questions were posed specifically about the shrine lockdown: “What came to your mind when you first found that the shrine would be closed for an unknown period? What did you make of it? How did you feel? There are some conflicting views about virus infection in the sacred place of the shrine. What’s your stance on it? What do you think of Imam Reza in this situation? How do you feel about inaccessibility of the shrine and pilgrimage? What do you think about praying at home instead of the shrine?”

Interviews were transcribed to gain an overall sense of each experience. Two investigators read each transcript several times, sentence by sentence. Then they discussed the data and their interpretations. The researchers wrote notes during the interviews, as well as during the analysis period. Inspired by Moustakas’ (1994) method, the analyst identified significant statements in each interview. Next, a list of significant statements was prepared (horizontalization of the data). Then, more general themes were identified based on integrating related statements. Then the analyst described what and how participants experienced the lockdown of the shrine. Finally, these descriptions were combined, and findings were written down.

**5. Findings**

*5.1. Typology of Stances toward the Shutdown of the Shrine*

As Fouladiyan et al.’s pre-pandemic research argues (Fouladiyan et al. 2021), pilgrims with very different views come to the shrine believing that their behavior is in line with true Islam. While there were three stances toward the shutdown of the Imam Reza shrine—pro-shutdown, anti-shutdown, and moderate anti-shutdown—all respondents believed their position was in line with true Islamic faith.

Pro-shutdown respondents were mostly proponents of Shiite political Islam; those with particularly strong views even made the case that this measure was belated. They

rationalized their stance by expressing concerns about the spread of the disease, deaths, the dire situation of the medical staff, the importance of respecting the professional judgement of medical experts and the Ministry of Health, and protecting the image of Iran, Islam, and Shiism. Only two respondents were strongly against the shutdown of the shrine. Building on their faith in the Imam to protect them from worldly ills, they argued that the possibility of contracting a disease in the shrine was zero, stressing that the secular causal rules were not at work in the holy space of the shrine.

The two moderate anti-shutdown participants took the middle ground, and, though their sentiments were different, both considered the global image of Shia Islam in their answers. One was not openly opposed to the shutdown, fearing that the world would consider Iran to be anti-scientific and irrational if shrines were left open. Nevertheless, he was displeased with the perceived biased treatment of the shrine compared to other places (markets, shopping malls, etc.).

*If going to the shrine causes harm to others or makes people ill or disrupts social order or makes our enemies happy or represents Islam as an irrational/illogical religion. It's better the shrine to be closed. The world is looking at this Islamic state (Iran) to see how they treat to this crisis: If their decisions in based on rationality or based on taste or delusion without referring to scientific evidence and documents. Fazel (pro-shutdown)*

The other suggested that the shutdown was the actual result of global propaganda against the “image” of Muslims, and argued that the shrine should remain open:

*Our enemies have propaganda against us in the media. If this propaganda didn't exist, the shrine should not be closed. There was no need for closure. if I were them, I wouldn't do that. However, I know decision makers' work is hard, because they have to consider all aspects including political ones. Maybe they have to close the shrine to shut our enemies' mouth. I don't agree with them in closing the shrine, but I understand them. Rozita (anti-shutdown)*

The anti-shutdown group accused the other group of infidelity, weak faith, and insincerity in religious beliefs, while the pro-shutdown individuals accused the other group of ignorance, blind obedience, or inability to appreciate the essence of religious teachings. Respondents on both sides questioned the true motivations of the other side. On the one hand, anti-shutdown Medhi felt that the government was bowing to the will of the people, rather than doing what was right in the eyes of the divine:

*When all people wanted the shrine to be closed, the state closed it. This state is called “Islamic” just in name only, but it is hypocritical [they don't perform true Islam]. The state need legitimacy and get it from public. So, they just try to satisfy masses [who want the shrine to be closed] . . . I really didn't expect the shrine's custody to say the shrine was infected and closed the doors. Mehdi (anti-shutdown)*

On the other hand, pro-shutdown respondents, such as Fazel and Sima, felt clerics who criticized the closures were doing it for their own interests:

*There are some preachers who just wear cleric clothes, some of them are businessmen and some are unwise. Those who incited people to violence against the shrine lockdown are businessmen [not a real man of God]. I did not know any high-rank or highly educated cleric did the same. Fazel (pro-shutdown)*

*I thought maybe some irrational people incited people to protest against the shrine's lockdown, maybe they do that for getting LIKEs on Instagram; they are opportunists. In addition, in my mind those believers who protest against the lockdown were foolish, just like unwise people in the era of Prophet Mohammad [who didn't know true Islam]. Sima (pro-shutdown)*

Indeed, although many expressed anger, frustration, and despair at what seemed to originate from the failure to practice religious rituals, in actuality these were politically motivated responses. To the anti-shutdown group, the ruling faction has demonstrated weak religious beliefs. Rozita (anti-shutdown) stated:

*The shutting of the shrine was reminiscent of all the atrocities [throughout history] designed to keep [Shiite] people away from pilgrimage and practicing of spiritual and devotional activities. The shutdown of the shrine reminds me of the tyranny of the Saudis or the Zionists in forbidding pilgrimage to the holy places.*

Exline et al. (2014) also emphasizes that in similar situations people experience some social conflicts about religious issues. In the work of Fouladiyan et al. (2021), pilgrims similarly believed that “enemies” want to separate them from spirituality and the Imam (a kind of conspiracy theory). The resolute nature of the state reaction and its unified stance, or at least the silence of different influential political and religious factions that backed or opposed the government, as well as its supporters, came as a surprise to all pilgrims interviewed, regardless of their personal perspectives on the shutdown. The lack of a strong and lasting stance against this decision, and the suppression of some scattered resistance by the government, was surprising. For the pro-shutdown group, the closing of the shrines was due to the fact that this disease was perceived as a critical threat by the state.

### 5.2. Emotional Experiences

Pilgrimages are affective, often evoking strong emotional responses (Eade and Sallnow 1991; Coleman and Eade 2004; Di Giovine 2012; Di Giovine and Picard 2016). Likewise, participants also recounted the oft-conflicting emotions they felt upon experiencing the closed shrine. The first and strongest set of feelings they experienced included doubt, surprise, confusion, and shock. Just before the complete shutdown of the shrine, one of the participants had entered the courtyard and described his experience as follows:

*The first week [after the official announcement of the COVID-19 outbreak], I visited the shrine. There were no signs of congestion or crowds. I was completely confused when walking into the courtyard. I had no idea where I was going. Since I was accustomed to the crowdedness [but now no one was around] I wondered where I was and why the shrine had changed so much [Pause]. People have nowhere else to go. I used to visit the shrine, talk to the Imam, and get things off my chest. Now, where can I go and find a shoulder to cry on? My head was really spinning and I was totally puzzled. Mahin (anti-shutdown)*

The anti- and pro-shutdown participants were astounded for different reasons. The pro-shutdown respondents could not believe that the theocratic regime had willingly caved in to the opinions of medical specialists without putting up much of a fight. On the other hand, the anti-shutdown participants were taken aback that the government had given up its relentless emphasis on religious affairs and its passionate and persistent defense of religious symbols and rituals.

*Of all the people who talked about the infection of shines, one would not expect the custodian of the shrine to make such a statement ... This is really annoying. It is generally believed—though I do not claim it to be absolutely true—that Imam Reza has been disregarded. Mehdi (anti-shutdown)*

Furthermore, the sense of disbelief, confusion, sorrow, nostalgia, heartbreak, frustration, despair, alienation, and compassion for the Imam Reza as well as regret, guilt, and indebtedness to the Imam, were often shared by those who regularly visited the shrine several times a week. These feelings were particularly strong in the pilgrims who were deeply ritualistic in their religious practices.

The most intense emotions were reported by the elderly (over 60 years old) who normally spent a great portion of their time in the shrine during the week. Leila, for example, agreed with the closure for public health purposes but felt high anxiety:

*When the shrine was closed, I felt a suffocating weight on my chest. As if someone was pressing his feet against my neck and I could not breath. Leila (pro-shutdown)*

Some participants reported a sense of guilt. This feeling stems from the belief that the Imam construed the absence of pilgrims as a sign of negligence, inattention, disrespect, or the followers’ instrumental view of the Imam. Masoumeh (pro-shutdown) said:

*Sometimes I felt guilty. It was as if Imam Reza tells me: “Whenever your child had a headache, you would rush to me to pray [now you does not come by].”*

While the feeling of guilt, and the fear of offense is certainly a common response in Abrahamic religions (see [Geyer and Baumeister 2005](#)), this takes on extra weight in popular Shiite devotion, which holds that loyalty and publicly expressed love toward the Imam is essential to salvation. Despite all the negative feelings, a handful of proponents expressed their agreement and even relief toward the shutdown, contending that this measure protected the health of citizens and Iranian, Islamic, and Shiite dignity.

### 5.3. Cognitive Perceptions

Exploring pilgrimage habits and attitudes of the participants showed that they privileged the importance of the material aspect of the pilgrimage, especially holy places. Some respondents, citing a number of hadiths, claimed that “prayers are more likely to be answered in a holy space”. Others described the pilgrimage as a necessary rite of intensification ([Chapple and Coon 1942](#); see [Di Giovine 2013b](#), pp. 75–76), a necessary means of renewing and recentering oneself—or in the words of one respondent, “recharging my battery.” Some pointed to the “spiritual experience” and “the state of spiritual exultation” felt in the shrine as evidence of the exclusive and exceptional impact of this shrine. The threat of coronavirus had cast doubt on some of these assumptions. Hadi (pro-shutdown) mused:

*“When you see some people kiss and lick the Zarih [the chamber], doors, etc., it makes you wonder: What are the boundaries? What is the sacred? What is the profane? What is the line between respecting the sacred and even disrespecting Ahle-Beit [the family of the prophet]?”*

This seems to be in line with other pandemic-era findings. For example, [Osei-Tutu et al. \(2021\)](#), found that Christian religious leaders in Ghana, when confronted with religious doubt and crises of faith resulting from the pandemic, tried to imply that the church is not a physical space, but exists somewhere in their heart. Likewise, pandemic surveys of Anglicans and Anglo-Catholics in the United Kingdom showed mixed conceptions of the importance of physical space on worship ([Village and Francis 2021](#)). And as the pandemic wears on, many congregations in Europe and America have adopted telemediated and virtual services. The worshipping at home while watching images of the sacred space, complexifies and blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, creating what [Bryson et al. \(2020\)](#), calls “infrasecular” or “intersacred” spaces in which the profane homes are linked together with the sacred space during common worship. Thus, encountering this theological dilemma, our participants seem to have adopted various cognitive strategies, which are described below.

#### 5.3.1. Redefining the Domain of the Sacred and Its Agency

In several religious cultures, participants have justified the lockdown of shrines by redefining the domain of the sacred. For example, [Dowson \(2020\)](#) shows that while some Christian communities in the UK were upset by the shutdown of churches, others emphasized that the church is not a building but a community, and that rituals are symbolic acts. Likewise, some of our informants emphasized that the shrine is but a building whose historical territory has actually changed over time, and that spiritual connection with the Imam could be attained in other places. To them, the physical presence in the sacred place is a “means” to an end, i.e., spiritual and mystical connection. They considered the material components of devotion as “subsidiary”; rather, the “essence” of religiousness is an “authentic connection” with the sacred that is not dependent on any material form:

*You feel like you have to be inspected [at the gate] and then set foot in the shrine. Unless you recite the entrance prayer, this does not feel like visiting the shrine. These are all, nonetheless, conventional. The walls were built later. Earlier, this area was not part of the shrine. A couple of house here were demolished for the expansion of shrine. But, there is a*

*feeling that tells us the shrine is there; that a courtyard of the shrine lies there. Imam's soul is omnipresent, however, and you can talk to with a simple recitation. You have a sense of intimacy in the shrine. If you are a man of faith, you would not care much about the shrine.* Hadi (pro-shutdown)

In fact, Hadi in a back-and-forth discussion, first referred to his experience of the borderline of the sacred and the profane and related rituals in pilgrimage. Second, he implicitly argued that borders (i.e., the shrine itself) are socio-historical constructs that have been made by socio-political powers. Therefore, he implicitly denied the objectivity of the sacredness as the essence of the shrine. Then, he referred to his own existential experience of pilgrimage and sacredness. As [Belhassen et al. \(2008\)](#) argues, such a perception stems from a combination of experiences, meanings (theological beliefs/faith), and objective physical environments at the same time. Finally, he tried to relieve himself and solve his cognitive dissonance by clinging to the Shiite belief which says that the "Imam's soul is omnipresent".

### 5.3.2. Selective-Consistent Reinterpretation of the Sacred with Material Causation

The shutdown of the shrine, as the second-order evil, was the outcome of the coronavirus pandemic, which was itself the first order "evil". The shrine's closure challenged common beliefs about the sacredness, purity, and safety of the shrines. People seemed to have some reservations and expressed cognitive dissonance between their faith in the supernatural and the workings of the natural order. Although all interviewees claimed to have previously witnessed the violation of causal, material, and customary rules and principles in the miracles attributed to the Imam, particularly granting the requests of pilgrims, and healing patients, the pro-shutdown respondents treated the pandemic as an exception without further elaboration. This exceptionalism was documented with various types of evidence and claims, including the specific nature of healing reported by the intercession of Imams, cases of the Infallibles or their contemporaries developing a disease, being poisoned and the ensuing famine and death, the will of God, the Imam's consent, and references to the statements and traditions of religious leaders.

*I doubt even Imam himself would have accepted this. Because he was also a man of science and wisdom, and science cannot be blended with feeling. Because we have a good feeling about this space, it does not mean the virus will not survive here. After all, the material world has certain rules and laws and here [shrine] is no exception to that rule.* Farzaneh (pro-shutdown)

Another participant said:

*I believe that God does not work against natural laws. The neutralization of the virus in the shrine is against the natural laws. I believe in miracles but I also believe God or imam's work are in line with material cause and effects.* Masoumeh (pro-shutdown)

Meanwhile, some anti-shutdown respondents had different views. As one pointed out, there was no contradiction between the affliction of Imams with diseases and their transcendental power, such as that of Imam Ali ibn Husayn Zayn al-Abidin, who was ill and did not participate in the Ashura war; and Imam Reza, who was poisoned. He asserted that they were submissive to the divine will. That is, even in cases where a material factor was involved, he presumed a sacred agent was at work (God's command and will). This fatalistic view rejected the suspension of the pilgrimage.

*Our behaviors are unfavorable, suffering is the consequence of our behaviors. When you go to visit Ahle-Beit [Imams], they would not mean harm to you, because they are generous and munificent. At the back of my mind, I thought I might get infected with Coronavirus in the shrine, but maybe it is my fate to get this disease.* Mehdi (anti-shutdown)

Mehdi had two conflicting ideas, although both are rooted in Shiite beliefs. On the one hand, he stressed human free will in committing sin and implied that harm was the inevitable outcome of human error. This argument is similar to an Augustinian model of

Leibnizian theodicy (Chester et al. 2019). On the other hand, he took a fatalistic stance on the issue, which means that whatever one does, one may still get the disease. Thus, one can feel free to violate health recommendations because one cannot change fate by his/her choices. He seemingly used both arguments to show that any position taken (pro-free will or fatalistic) was still justifiable. Fouladiyan et al. (2021) also found that a fatalistic position was expressed by pilgrims before the restriction when the controversies were still ongoing in Iran. He found out that pilgrims justified their behavior by focusing on providence (fate). They believed that they did not have a role in protecting themselves or others from getting the disease. The only effective power was the sacred one. This logically leads to a low perception of risk and passive acceptance of suffering, which have roots in fatalism, as Gaillard and Texier (2010) argue.

### 5.3.3. Emphasis on the Authenticity of the Moral and Faith-Reinforcing Ends of Pilgrimage

In the days preceding the shutdown of shrines and on the first night of the lockdown, there were some violent reactions by the anti-shutdown group, which went viral on social media (e.g., licking the *Zarih*, breaking the gates to enter the shrine), provoking some heated debates between the anti- and pro-shutdown groups on social media. In particular, the pro-shutdown group was accused of having weak faith. In the study, the pro-shutdown group argued that the insistence on pilgrimage was an objectification of the sacred sites as the burial places of religious leaders, and some participants even mentioned that such an insistence was against monotheism. Musa, (moderate anti-shutdown) stated: "I think if one [pilgrim] grows dependent on a certain place to pray, it will border on idolatry. You have to relate to the soul of the Imam, not a certain place or building." Some of the pro-shutdown interviewees highlighted the moral and faith-reinforcing ends and outcomes of the pilgrimage, as a demonstration of devotion and loyalty to the Imam and his moral teachings. For them, these purposes could be attained even without attending the holy place:

*I watched the clip of a man along with his kid at the shrine of Hazrate Masoumeh [Imam Reza's sister buried in Qom]. He began licking the Zarih and asked his child to do the same. I wonder what does this really mean? I mean, what is he going to prove? Imam Reza never asked for these things. He demands people to understand the religious knowledge, he wants people to be humane and civilized and act morally. Rahela (pro-shutdown)*

It seems that this understanding of pilgrimage, which is more functionalist and morally universal rather than traditionally religious, stems from the thoughts of Iranian religious reformists. Reformist readings of Shiite philosophy of jurisprudence and ethics stress the importance of ethics and rationality for a religious life against imitation and submission (Qabel 2012; Malekian and Fanaei 2014; Naraq 2014). In their works, the consistency between jurisprudence and rationality is stressed. Furthermore, they emphasized the priority of rationality and ethics over religion and jurisprudence. Therefore, most of the modern new generation of religious Iranians do not agree with extremist views and actions in the name of religion.

### 5.3.4. Selecting Humanistic-Social Aspects of Religious Teachings

Another reaction was the abstraction of ideas from religious and jurisprudential teachings, which align with modern and humanistic understandings of individual and social phenomena and modern civic ethics. As such, they helped settle conflicts. On the other hand, some underlined the importance of pilgrims' health and the sanctity of life, arguing that the protection of the pilgrims was "the will of Imam Reza". Such an argument was also advanced by the official custodian of the Imam Reza shrine to soothe one of the anti-shutdown advocates prior to the lockdown (Marvi 2020). On the other hand, some pro-shutdown people pointed out that the possible disease transmission due to poor hygiene at the time of pilgrimage was in fact a "violation of the rights of people", and therefore condemned it as a sinful act against the authentic spirit of religion.

This rationalization was made by citing legal concepts such as people's rights and liabilities. In Twelver Shiism, there is a quotation (*hadith*) from prophet Mohamad that says: "Everyone who harms someone is indebted and must compensate" (Mohaqeq Damad 2002). The participants who presumed that the pilgrimage ban disrespected the Imam moderated their feeling of guilt through rationalization:

*I was very cautious because I did not want to help the spread the infection. I was especially worried about harming others".* Rozita (moderate anti-shutdown)

*The harms of getting people sick outweigh the benefits of pilgrimage. This is the right of people [ . . . ]. Clearly, the rights of the people take precedence over the spiritual rewards of pilgrimage.* Sima (pro-shutdown)

On 4 March 2020 (before the official shutdown of the shrines), the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, stressing the observance of guidelines and instructions issued by the officials regarding the prevention of infection, asserted, "These orders cannot be violated, because God has made us responsible for our own health and the safety of others. Thus, whatever helps promote community health and prevent the spread of this disease is good, and whatever exacerbate its spread is evil" (Khamenei 2020). Participants appeared to have adopted a similar stance or subscribed to such an argument without making direct reference to it. Begović (2020) demonstrated that in Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, believers use theological arguments or norms of religious laws to rationalize COVID-19 restrictions. For example, they refer to the prophet Mohammad, who stressed the importance of saving one's own and others' lives, forbidding suicide and self-destructive acts. The author also mentioned that in the Christian tradition, life was considered as a gift from God, so Christ expects the protection of public health and well-being. Likewise, in addition to officiating a special *Urbi et Orbi* supplication for the end of the pandemic in a closed St. Peter's Basilica in March 2020, Pope Francis, the leader of the Catholic Church, more recently argued that getting the COVID-19 vaccine was a "moral obligation" and an "act of love" in line with Catholic teaching (Francis 2021).

### 5.3.5. Functionalist Interpretations of Material Inaccessibility

Finally, the inaccessibility of the sacred sites led some to seek various functions for this ban, including a theological function, representational function, and political-economic function. For example, for some participants, the shutdown exposed them to global instability, existential insecurity, and desperation in an unprecedented way. In this way, this experience brought them new theological and moral insights, prompting them to rethink their priorities, and focus on salvation rather than the material and mundane aspects of life. Reza (pro-shutdown) stated that after the COVID-19 crisis hit, "*my beliefs were cemented, and I learned to become less attached to objects, like this shrine.*" Gratefulness was another response to this shutdown. Fazel (pro-shutdown) said, "*I think that a little deprivation . . . would let us appreciate the value of pilgrimage.*" Several other participants (including two pro-shutdown participants and one moderate anti-shutdown participant) pointed to the representational function of the shutdown. They believed that the global mainstream media usually represent a distorted image of Muslims in general and Shiites [Shiite Iranians] in particular. The shutdown of sacred places demonstrated to the world that Islamic belief [including Shiite and Iranian Shiite] was consistent with modern science and rationality, presenting to a global audience a view that Shiites and Iranians were not extremist Muslims. Participants believed that this was a positive outcome because it resulted in improving the image of Iran and Shiism.

Furthermore, one of the participants believed that the shutdown of the Imam Reza Shrine undermined the power and the interests of its custodian organization, which can be interpreted as a political-economic outcome. As noted by Sima (pro-shutdown), "*Many of extralegal businesses that relied on the shrine are closed now. In the name of the shrine, they ripped off people. Enormous sums of money were laundered.*" Each of these functionalist interpretations was, to some extent, a teleological explanation for the inaccessibility of the shrine, and

while implicitly fatalistic, they sought to find some “good” in this “evil”, as a way of moderating the strangeness and undesirability of this crisis. According to [Meza \(2020\)](#), most religious traditions validate several worlds, spaces, times, senses, and insights beyond the material world. This viewpoint provides the opportunity for believers to develop their imagination of realities and their meanings and interpretations. So, as [Ter Borg \(2011\)](#) argues, when believers encounter a disaster or unbearable losses, religion can develop meanings to cope with finiteness, fear, vulnerability, and ontological insecurity. In turn, it can lead to overcoming the catastrophe and limiting risks and damage to health.

## 6. Conclusions

The coronavirus pandemic was a crisis that not only compromised the life and health of human beings, but by depriving them of the chance to visit sacred places, perform religious acts, seek peace, and promote the well-being of individuals and communities, explicitly called into question pilgrims’ faith. In the doctrines of Twelver Shiism, where pilgrimage and the expression of love and loyalty to Imams are seen as a means of salvation, the pilgrimage ban was a challenge to believers’ religious identity, faith, and salvation.

This study investigated the experiences and perceptions of regular pilgrims to Mashhad’s Imam Reza shrine (the largest and most popular Shiite shrine in Iran) during its pandemic closure. According to findings, the regular pilgrims’ reactions can be classified into three types: pro-shutdown, anti-shutdown, and moderate anti-shutdown. This distinction was informed by their different understandings of material and sacred causality. This typology also reflected various readings of authentic faith and sincere religiosity.

Participants experienced a range of emotions, such as disbelief, surprise, shock, confusion, sorrow, anger, nostalgia, heartbreak, failure, despair, homesickness, compassion, regret, and guilt. Interestingly, all those interviewed were shocked by the theocratic state’s decision to shut down the shrine, as they had not expected the Islamic Republic of Iran to comply with the global practice of shutdown, and to provide secular justifications and secular pragmatism in religion-related matters. Yet the justification for their shock differed based on their interpretations of Islam, the role of popular devotion such as pilgrimage, and the connection between sacred and secular realities. In particular, many treated the inaccessibility of the shrine because of the coronavirus as related to the theological problem of Evil. The pro-shutdown participants outlined their cognitive perceptions in five general categories: redefining the domain of the sacred and its agency, selective-consistent reinterpretation of the sacred with material causation, emphasis on the authenticity of the moral and faith-reinforcing ends of pilgrimage, selecting humanistic-social aspects of religious teachings, and a functionalist interpretation of material inaccessibility. These cognitive strategies were mainly accomplished by smartly selecting, reinterpreting, and creatively highlighting a selection of the religion-based epistemological concepts at the cost of downplaying others, so that a consistent understanding of the non-religious epistemological concepts (conventional secular science and material causal relations) and religion-based epistemological concepts (theology and theodicy, ethics, and jurisprudence of Twelver Shiites) could be achieved. The efforts to reconcile secular and religious perceptions partially corresponded to what [Merli \(2010\)](#) observed in exploring the response of Muslims in southern Thailand to the 2004 tsunami. Investigating four religious communities, [McGeehan and Baker \(2017\)](#) found that religious narratives included elements to interpret the reality for risk preparedness and better reaction to disasters.

Such an approach has a distinctive empowerment effect ([Chester and Duncan 2010](#); [Mosier et al. 2020](#)). The COVID-19 crisis seems to have seriously cast doubt on the material domain of the sacred and its agency for religious people. Regular pilgrims dealt with cognitive dissonance and concerns about salvation, and being an authentic and obedient believer. Hence, at least at the level of discursive consciousness, they addressed their problems by re-establishing the boundaries of the sacred and revisiting the conditions of its power. Furthermore, they highlighted the moral meanings attributed to the pilgrimage. Also, by defining some functions of this pilgrimage ban, they have marginalized the

interpretation that sees the shutdown of the pilgrimage as “evil”. Likewise, although some pro-state high-ranking clerics opposed the restriction on pilgrimages, less than two weeks after the first COVID-19 case confirmation they also tried to justify the restrictions (Marvi 2020; Alamolhoda 2020; IRNA 2020). However, the interviewees who were religious people seldom made direct references to the clergy. It could be inferred that such justifications had probably been accepted by a large group of religious people. This shows that in contemporary Iran, even religious people tend to refer to their rational power to derive their religious duties, not to religious leaders. Furthermore, they preferred not to talk about fatalistic arguments or the super-natural power of the sacred to deactivate the virus in the shrine. Therefore, the theocratic Shiite state, despite its rigid policies on religious issues, had to make hard pragmatic decisions to accommodate to the new situation in order to reduce the spread of the virus, the mortality rate, and the burden on the health system. Consequently, the state’s hard-liner clerics had to support the decision, too. An existential crisis imposed its own requirements and consequences. As a consequence, the pandemic blurred the borders of the sacred and the profane in the case of the most sacred place in the country.

It is important to note, however, that despite differences in the espoused meanings behind the pilgrimage ban and its justifications, all informants employed these cognitive perceptions without any threat to their religious beliefs, authenticity, and identity. Indeed, in a global survey conducted by Gallup (2019) on the intersection of science and religion, in response to the question, “Has science ever disagreed with the teachings of your religion?” Iran was one of the few Islamic countries where the majority of people did not find any contradiction between science and religion (72% of respondents answered “no” to the question). As Halliday points out, “Islam, like all other major religions, has a set of values, symbols, and ideas from which political and social norms could be deduced” (Halliday 1994, p. 96). Most of the participants did not believe the crisis to be a punishment from God, and did not see a discrepancy between science and their religious beliefs; rather, their explanations centered on secular cause and effect. The findings of this study also suggest that, in the Twelver Shiite context, highlighting some theodicies in parallel with other teachings can alleviate resistance to health measures without posing a threat to the religious community’s identity, and religious belief as a means of salvation. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, some theodicies emerged that had been less frequently considered about pilgrimage, sacred places, and the Shiite saints (Imams), but their advocates were able to find hints of ideas that matched the principles of Shiite jurisprudence. However, some participants who had fatalistic viewpoints exhibited low risk perception. These findings have some implications for managing similar situations in religious communities. For example, health promotion campaigns in Islamic Shiite communities can emphasize moral and faith-reinforcing ends of religion and humanistic-social aspects of religious teachings.

A notable point about the experience of some participants was that the global and political image of Iranian Shiism mattered to them, so that even the anti-shutdown and moderate anti-shutdown participants agreed with—or at least comprehended—the state’s decision to some extent as a way of preserving Iranian Shiite image in the secular world and Sunni Muslim world. However, almost all the participants were surprised because less religious or more modern individuals often felt the state rarely prioritized pragmatic policies at the expense of ignoring religious and ideological ideals and supporters. Therefore, even anti-shutdown individuals discovered that even a theological state needed internal and international legitimacy arising from its performance and respect for citizens’ vital health interests. Nevertheless, anti-shutdown participants accused the government of hypocrisy and disregard for Shiite teachings. In any case, it seems that this crisis stimulated critical and reflective thinking and strengthened the self-awareness of religious people, highlighting the spiritual and metaphysical facets over the material aspects of religious belief and practice. These findings, therefore, may provide an appropriate context for balancing the lived experiences and perceptions of faith and devotion with the promotion of health and protective measures in shrines.

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