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Presence, Manifestation, and Visitation in Abrahamic Religions: The Notion of “Presence” in Shi’ism

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ABSTRACT

Robert Orsi’s *History and Presence* identifies a major lacuna in the modern understanding of religion. If secularism is characteristic of the modern era, Orsi argues that it is not the absence of the faith. Instead, it is the approval of a certain kind of religion in which the “real presence,” an interaction of sacred, metaphysical realm in the everyday life of the faithful, is ignored. While considering Orsi’s critique, this paper investigates the notion of presence in Shi’i Islam along with a brief study of similar notions in Catholicism and Judaism. This paper argues that the notion of presence or *ḥuḍūr* plays a significant role in everyday life of Shi’i Muslims and attempts to define it according to the context of visitation prayers and the narrations of the Shi’i Imams. It moreover suggests that this overlooked aspect in the modern study of religion could provide grounds for a more empathetic dialogue of religions.

KEYWORDS

Presence; *ḥuḍūr*;
Catholicism; Imam; Judaism;
Shi’i Islam; Blessing;
Baraka; visitation

In his *History and Presence*, Orsi narrates an account of a debate over the Catholic Eucharist in the sixteenth century. In the middle ages, the Eucharist is also called the Mass, the Sacrament of the Altar, the Lord’s Supper, the Lord’s Table, Holy Communion, the Breaking of the Bread, and the Blessed Sacrament (Levy et al., *A Companion to the Eucharist*). The central question of the debate was whether Jesus is present in the host during the sacrament of Eucharist or not. A reformer such as Luther (Anselm et al. 676) did not challenge the real presence of Jesus but, as the Reformation proceeded, the idea of Jesus’ presence in the host became more and more attenuated. Thereafter, in mainstream Protestantism, the host becomes a symbol to recall God rather than being the “real presence” anymore. As Orsi states, the Catholic position had long been that God is present in the matter and time.

History and Presence argues that the problem of presence is central to the modern concept of religion. If secularism is a characteristic of the

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modern era, then Orsi argues that secularism is not the absence of the faith; instead, it is the approval of a certain kind of religion in which the "real presence" is ignored. Orsi states that this is a religion that is quite compatible with secular society and its values. People of religions with a "real presence" are, from this modern perspective, "savage" and "primitive." This is probably in response to Frazer's statement that the modern scientific thought is a progress of humankind from magic through religious belief to scientific thought" (Frazer, *The Golden Bough*). In this view, devotional forms of religious rituals are seen as primitive and religion is also more or less is deducted to magic.

The neglect of such a standpoint in religion results in a lack of awareness of the "real presence" in which humans and gods interact in everyday life. That is why, according to Orsi, the modern study of religion is rather superficial. At this stage, the everyday life of the theorist and the historian becomes the ground for judging the experience of others (Orsi 63). As Orsi puts it, because of this shortcoming, the academic study of religion is unable to see the beliefs or practices that are related to the "real presence" of gods in the everyday life and practice of the followers and devotees and calls for the modern study of religion to undergo its own reformation. Orsi finishes his *History and Presence* with the following statement:

The unseeing of the gods was an achievement; the challenge is to see them again. If the presence of the gods in the old Catholic sense is an absolute limit that contemporary scholars of religion and history refused to cross, then they will miss the empirical reality of religion in contemporary affairs, and they will fail to understand much of human life. (Orsi 252)

Orsi narrates several stories of Catholics' encounters with the Divine, angels, or other forms of metaphysical being in order to demonstrate his argument. The trajectory of his definition of the word religion is also bounded with the particular history of this particular understanding and definition and its function in certain societies. Orsi calls those with the Catholic sense of the real presence in the Eucharist "people of presence," for the fact that such an idea pervades Catholic reality. Additionally, Orsi, includes people of other religions to this category when he states that "Among peoples of presence, I include Catholics, although not all Catholics, and not only Catholics, but also people of other religions in which supernatural beings are present to humans in the way that has been associated with Catholics since the late sixteenth century and that Catholics themselves took as their distinctiveness in modernity" (Orsi 149–50). It is almost an encounter with the sacred or the continuation of it, in a very personal way, but at the same time pertains to the public domain.

This paper, by focusing on the core attitude of *History and Presence* and taking its lessons to heart, looks at corresponding concepts in Shi'ī Islam—

similar to that of presence in the Catholic narrations—of the presence of Transcendent and angelical beings and particularly the metaphysical reality of the Imams presence in daily life and rituals.

Islam and the presence of the divine reality

In the Islamic worldview and particularly in Shi'ism, the whole universe is the presence of God, and nothing or nowhere is out of this presence, this concept corresponds the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence) in Judaism. Absence (*ghayba*) then is the opposite of presence (*ḥuḍūr*). It is not possible to conceive that God is absent from any location or time. The whole universe, on the one hand, is the self-disclosure of the Divine, and on the other hand, every existing being is a representative of a name or a quality of God. The Qur'ān indicates that "He is with you wherever you are" (Quran 57:4). The content of the verse provides that God is present everywhere in the cosmos. It then appears that the concept of absence emerges when we talk about the present in relation to human capacity. God has no absence, for God's encompassing and absolute reality is not bounded by any existence that may be imagined to create boundaries; thereupon, God is an eternal presence and omnipresence. Its opposite, absence, emerges in Islamic theological and Sufi doctrinal texts as a result of human involvement in the material realm (as opposed to spiritual awareness) that makes humanity incapable of consciousness of the Divine omnipresence. The concept is that humankind is veiled from seeing or experiencing spiritual realms or realities by his human inadequacy, not the absence of those realms or realities.

The Shia-Sufi reading of Islamic Scripture also asserts the omnipresence of the Divine reality. The first Islamic *Shahada* affirms that there is no being but God. Ibn 'Arabi elucidates on this notion as follows:

There is nothing in *wujud* [Being] but God. In the same way, if you were to say,

"There is nothing in the mirror except the one who is disclosing himself to it," you would be speaking the truth. Nevertheless, you know that there is nothing at all "in the mirror," nor is there anything of the mirror in the viewer. But within the very form of the mirror, the display of variations and traces is perceived. At the same time, the viewer is as he was, and he displays no traces... There is nothing in *wujud*, but He, and *wujud* is acquired only from Him. ... So the mirror is the Presence of Possibility, the Real is the one who looks within it, and the form is you in keeping with the mode of your possibility. (Ibn 'Arabi and Yah.yá 1972 qtd. Chittick 15)

The Qur'ān highlights the omnipresence of God. Qur'ān 57:3 indicates the omnipresence of the Divine reality: "He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden, and He knows all things."

The aspect of Islamic omnipresence of God is discussed in the Qur'an within two modes: as God's incomparability (*Tanzih*) and similarity (*Tashbih*). These modes describe the Divine reality first in being beyond the world of phenomena (*Tanzih*). In this sense, God is not comparable. But, in God's similarity (*Tashbih*), God's signs exist everywhere. The similarity in a sense is where the presence of the Sacred is in everyday life and can be found in spiritual experiences or encounters.

Nevertheless, another relevant Qur'anic term for the Divine presence is *Sakinah*, translated variously as the peacefulness, peace, and reassurances of God. This is the equivalent of *Shekhinah* (Presence of the Divine) in Judaism. Intriguingly, in one verse, Quran 2:248 speaks of a Jewish prophet who talks to his followers about God's Shekinah, which comes down to them as "the Ark of the covenant" and brings them God's peace and assurance. The significance of this verse is laid on the materiality of the ark and its contents, namely the tablets of the Ten Commandments and the rod of Aaron. Thus, the Ark represents the transmission of the Sacred through the materiality of the world and of God's presence and blessing. Other instances of *Sakinah* in the Qur'an are expressed in the following verses: 9:26; 9:40; 48:4; 48:18; and 48:26. In all of these instances, God sent *Sakinah* down to the prophet and the faithful. Both in Jewish and Islamic contexts, then, *Sakinah/Shekhinah* is a presence of the Sacred in its different forms. When speaking about the presence, apart from its spiritual dimensions, one can refer to a material form that has received a blessing from the Divine or the prophets and thereupon has become holy, blessed, and carries the material form of presence. The Ka'ba is the greatest of such materiality become Sacred in Islam. It is intriguing that such a concept is also present in the religions of Native Americans with the notion of Sacred lands/sites and objects (Bernd et al. 676). Many anthropologists of religion would argue that this is a common or even defining element in "primitive" religion. For a classic formulation, see Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. One story, then, is that the spatialization or materialization of the Sacred in "non-primitive" religions, i.e., Judaism/Islam/Xianity, are surviving remnants of earlier totemic practices.

The Islamic revelation ascribes to God ninety-nine "beautiful names and attributes" (*al-Asmā' al-Husnā*) that represent the qualities through which God acts. Those qualities are, for example, the Living (*hayy*), the Knowing (*'alīm*), the Powerful (*qadīr*), the Willing (*murīd*), the Speaking (*mutakallim*), the Hearing (*samī'*), the Seeing (*basīr*), etc. Among those names is *walī*, which brings a particular form of relationship between God and the faithful. This relation is defined in the Qur'an based on the *Sakinah*, implying a relationship of peace and tranquility.

Walāyah, moreover, is an authority that God bestows to chosen representatives and, in the case of Shia Islam, to the household of Muhammad

(*Ahl al-Bayt*). Those *Walīs*, in return, are God's manifestations and successors on the earth and carry the burden of the spiritual guidance of their followers toward eternal salvation. In other words, they distribute God's blessing and play the role of the perfect human in their cosmic and metaphysical reality. The perfect person in this sense is the one who perfectly manifests God's names and attributes (*al-Asmā' wa al-ṣifāt*). In the Sufi terminology of Ibn Arabi, they are the mirror of God, the best example and role model that one can follow. As such, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, puts walī, as a theophany which represents the utmost rank of presence, as a same symbol with the Supreme Name of Allah, Muhammad, and the Qur'ān. (Moqaddam and Nourian 1) The Qur'ān asks people to "follow Muhammad if they love God." However, in another verse, Muhammad admonishes people to love his family: "I do not ask of you a wage for this [Prophecy], except love for the kinsfolk" (42:23).

The ascribed love of the *Ahl al-Bayt* is the key to understanding an essential factor in Shia Islam. The love and loyalty to the *Ahl al-Bayt* provide grounds for the expansion of the Sacred presence among the Shī'ī believers. Love engages with the Omnipresent face of God that, in return, perfect humanity manifests on the earth. Thus, the faithful should always remain loyal to God. This loyalty continues to the Occluded Imam (*al-Mahdī*), who is defined as the continuation of the *Walāyah* of God, but invisible. Invisibility, in this case, does not permit forgetfulness and heedlessness of his presence, for he is the gate of God and mediator of God's mercy upon the earth. In order to be enlightened, spiritually guided, and to receive the Divine blessing, one must remain in spiritual contact with an imam. As such, the Hidden Imam is physically absent but spiritually present. Followers have to find a connection with his spiritual presence to get the spiritual blessing (*Barakah*). That is why Corbin states that the Imam lies hidden from the senses but present to the hearts of those who believe in him (Corbin 42). Therefore, the prophetic tradition (Hadith) indicates the vivid functionality of knowing the Imam: Whoever dies without knowing the Imam of his Time dies the death of Ignorance [*al-Jāhiliyah*] (Taftāzānī *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*).

Shia Imams as God's manifestation and proof of the existence of God

In the Shī'ī doctrine, the imam is not elected by people; God instead appoints him through his messenger. Thus, Imams are not merely (or even primarily) political leaders; they instead are sacred, infallible, perfect men, perfect manifestations of the names and attributes of God, God's successors on the earth, and proofs of God. (Newman), (Asghari) Such metaphysical characteristics make Imams representatives of God's authority. In that capacity, the *Walī* or Imam is assumed to possess spiritual authority. This

spiritual authority and leadership is expressed in the Qur'an: "Your guardian is only Allah, His Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the alms while bowing down." (5:55)

The verse presents the continuation of *Walāyah* from God to the prophet and eventually to the faithful that are *Ahl al-Bayt* in the Shī'ī interpretation. Corbin describes this concept as the heart of the Imamology that goes hand in hand with prophetology (Corbin *Temple and Contemplation*). He points out that the *Wilayah* is a gift of love, the divine love or favor that renders eternally sacred the "Friends of God," and it transforms the religion of the Law into the religion of love (Corbin 42). It is in this sense that Schuon describes Sunni-Shī'ī relations in his *Christianity/Islam* (Schuon 1996).

In his famous sermon entitled *al-Bayān*, which is generally narrated by "extreme" Shia (*Ghulāt*) sources, Ali describes his inner reality as follows: "I am the Secret of secrets, I am the Guide of the Heavens, I am the First and the Last, I am the Apparent and the Hidden, I am the Compassionate, I am the Face of God, I am the Hand of God, I am the Archetype of the Book, I am the Cause of causes." This sermon indicates that Imams are the manifestation and presence of the Sacred. Numerous narrations among Shī'ī hadith collections express the same notion. The *al-Hujjah* chapter in the collection of *Uṣūl Al-Kāfī* is among the sources that describe this dimension of the Imam. Some chapters of this collection depict Imams as possessors of the substance of knowledge and its principles, which they inherited from the Prophet by way of transmission. They are also regarded as the trustees of God for divine secrets. *Al-Kāfī*'s other chapters present Imams as individuals whom God has chosen and made heirs of his book [Qur'an]. In other words, the imam is the "Speaking Qur'an" who can provide the proper interpretation of the textual "Silent Qur'an." It is in a way that the Imam is the embodiment of something beyond form and shape.

Visitation prayers (*Ziyārat Nāma*)

Believers are on the other side of the relation with the Imam, receiving his presence and blessing. As Imams are the representatives of the sacred, their shrines are blessed by virtue of their own spiritual reality. Thus, visitation takes place with the aim of receiving a blessing and gaining a spiritual presence. To that end, Shī'ī visitors seek salvation in the devotional and spiritual following of Walīs. To better understand this other, devotional side of the cosmological presence of the Imam, a study of the Shī'ī visitation prayers (*Ziyārat Nama*) is necessary. It is commonly accepted among the Shī'a that visitation prayers are mostly developed or extracted from the sayings of Imams or their close companions in Islamic Scripture. Visitation prayers comprise a large proportion of the body of Shia devotional prayers and

literature. A visitor during his/her visit reads a prayer with the belief that the Imam is a present and attentive audience listening to him/her. A common theological understanding in Shī'ī Islam suggests that there is no difference whether Imam is alive or dead; in either case, he can hear and aid his followers. A tradition narrated from the seventh Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓim (745–799) indicates the significance of the visitation and its metaphysical aspects: “He who visits the first among us, also visits the last among us and he who visits the last among us, also visits the first among us. He who expresses love for the first of us has also shown it for the last, and he who loves the last of us also loves the first” (Amir-Moezzi 391).

The narration becomes more meaningful if read in light of another narration which underscores that all *Ahl al-Bayt* are one light (*Nūrun Wāḥid*) and still, in another narration, that they are all identical with Muhammad: “All of us are Muhammad, our first is Muhammad, our middle is Muhammad and our last is Muhammad” (Majlisī 16). If the physical imam is absent, people address his soul to ask him to meet their needs through his mediation with God. Perhaps the most important reason why Shī'īte everyday culture is attached so closely to the Imams is that the Imam is always present or felt to be present spiritually in the Shī'ī understanding of Islam and found to respond to or guide followers. The inward and cosmic reality of the Imam, on the other hand, is the continuation of the Sacred and his presence in all the prophets and saints. The following excerpt exemplifies this commonality in a way that is also discussed in the Qur'ān:

Peace be upon Adam, the chosen one of Allah from among His creation... Peace be upon Noah (*Nūḥ*), whose invocation (for punishment) was answered... Peace be upon Abraham (Ibrahim), whom Allah endowed with His friendship.... Peace be upon Moses (*Mūsā*), the one for whom Allah split the sea with His Power.... Peace be upon John (*Yahyā*), whom Allah drew near (his rank) by his martyrdom. Peace be upon Jesus (*Isā*), the spirit of Allah and His word. Peace be upon Muhammad, the beloved of Allah and His elite. (Mashhadī and Majd *Ziyarat Al-Nahiya Al-Muqaddasa*)

The prayer addresses each prophet and mentions their main characteristics or miracles. Following this common opening, the pilgrim goes on to address specifically the Imam of the particular shrine he or she is visiting, and the prayer then focuses on the Imam's perfections and degrees of faith. As noted, the visitation prayer involves a detailed description of the shrine and its blessed surrounding in which the visitor encounters the presence (*ḥuḍūr*), blessing (*barakah*), healing (*Shifa*), and the like. This visitation prayer continues to enumerate al-Husayn's spiritual and metaphysical characters individually:

Peace be upon al-Husayn, who sacrificed himself up to the last drops of the blood of his heart ... Peace be upon whom Allah placed a cure in the soil of his place (of martyrdom). Peace be upon the one under whose dome answer (to supplications) is guaranteed. (ibid)

Robert Orsi, in his *History and Presence*, cites examples such as cure in the soil, hope for answered prayers, and the sanctity of exalted places. These correspond directly to elements in the veneration of Imam al-Husayn. The soil on which al-Husayn was martyred is considered to be blessed with curative properties. The dome in his shrine echoes the supplication of the visitor, and so on. This prayer portrays a scene in which the soul of the Imam is present, and in addition to himself, there is a continuation of the Sacred through God to the other elements. The sacred is thus transmitted to other objects, and the visitor expects to benefit from it. The ultimate goal of the visitor is to join the assembly of those enlightened people and be admitted to paradise by their intercession. The intercession is the result of congruence. Therefore, the visitor makes every effort to reach that congruency. Another part of the visitation prayer reads:

O, Allah! By the sanctity of this exalted place (the tomb of Imam al-Husayn), bestow blessings upon Muhammad and the family of Muhammad, assemble me in their company, and admit me to paradise by their intercession. (Ibid)

To reach the level of congruence, the visitor tries to purify his or her heart to make it worthy of the Imam's consideration and favor (*nazar*). The same visitation prayer represents the need for purification as an introduction to the metaphysical encounter with the Sacred. The presence in this sense needs a purified receiver too. At the same time, the visitor asks for the Imam's help to be purified:

Peace be upon you! Indeed, I intended your visitation, and I am hopeful of achieving the prosperity that is with you. Salutations to you, Salutations from he who recognizes your sanctity, is a sincere (believer) in your guardianship, seeks nearness to Allah through your love, and is aloof from your enemies." (ibid)

Visitation then engages behaviors and thoughts. For good deeds, one needs a pure heart to make the right decision and act upon it. Moreover, the Imam has invited him/her in the first place. In a sense, it functions like a magnet that attracts homogeneous things.

Shrines usually are full of visitors during both the day and the night. The blessedness and sacredness of the Imam also devolves on to every job and every material object within the shrine. It transforms employees into the category of the sacred and the blessed. Gates, walls, land, and soil, on the one hand, and jobs such as collecting visitors' shoes, cleaning, and washing, serving people and making food, and the art of decoration all gain the aura of the Sacred. The blessing is transmitted from the holy Imam to all objects surrounding him. Hence kissing or touching those objects has become a common act of the visitors. Indeed, the feeling of blessedness extends beyond the walls of the shrine to the entire pilgrimage, from leaving home to arrival at the holy site. The visitor feels a presence inside which compels him/her to act sincerely and wholeheartedly.

Meri (46), in his *Aspects of Baraka (Blessings) and Ritual Devotion Among Medieval Muslims and Jews* explains the common aspects of blessing (*Baraka*) and ritual devotion among medieval Muslims and Jews. Robert Orsi's account of Catholic devotional prayers presents the same notion in Catholicism. This suggests that the notion of presence and baraka is conceptually similar, at least among the Abrahamic religions, although it may take different shapes within each tradition. Nevertheless, the commonality is laid in the blessing that is the foundation of the Sacred (Meri 1) and is transmittable through a holy person whether dead or living, a pilgrimage site, belongings of a holy person, or things associated with him or her such as a holy site or its soil.

Although visitation seems to be a dialogue of a living supplicant and a deceased holy person, visitation prayers in the Shi'ī tradition are represented as a live conversation with the Imam. The following excerpt from a visitation with Ali, the first Shi'ī Imam, is a perfect instance of such a live conversation in which, in this case, the meaning of presence is not symbolic but rather spiritually vivid:

I bear witness, O my masters! You hear my words; you see my position, you know my place, you answer my call. You are divinely appointed guides and His abundant Bounties. (Al-Hadi and Baghi 119)

As the prayer continues, the visitor's tone turns to ask for things that are related to one's eschatological salvation through the mediation of Imam:

Remember me before your Lord. Admit me to your pond [at paradise]. Offer me to drink from your cup. Admit me to your society. Help me be raised from the dead and join your company. Remove the entanglements from me in this world, and the hereafter, since you are most exalted before God, and your intercession will be accepted by him. I have come to visit you. I salute you, standing in your shrine, requesting you to intercede with God on my behalf. I hope that he may forgive my sins, grant me glory, remove my desperation, render me aid in my weakness, answer my prayers, help me fulfill my wishes, grant me demands, said and unsaid, and what he knows best that He may grant me His Satisfaction and admit me to His Paradise. (Al-Hadi and Baghi 119)

This visitation prayer shows how a visitor invokes the presence of the Imam when he/she stands in the shrine and witness that the spirit of the imam hears his/her whisper. The next part of the same prayer addresses God. It makes a triangle of humanity, Imam, and God. The Imam, as mentioned, stands as a mediator between the other two. Though this does not mean that a person cannot directly talk to God, the Imam's presence facilitates the connection and the relation:

O Lord, accept their intercession with you on my behalf and help me attain to what I invoked you to grant me by their glory. Do not render me hopeless in what I requested them, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful! (Al-Hadi and Baghi 122)

This visitation prayer reflects the fact that a devotional prayer is often an act of the individual in which he or she directly experiences the radiance and presence of the Sacred. Nevertheless, there are two major visitations in the Shi‘ī tradition that emerge as simultaneously individual and social. Both occasions are rallies of large numbers of the believers on the anniversary of ‘*Ashūrā* and the day of *Arba‘īn* (the fortieth day after al-Hussayn’s martyrdom).

Sacred soil and its curative power

Visitation to the holy site of an Imam in the Shi‘ī tradition results in gaining *Barakah* or blessing. Such shrines are assumed to be sacred and holy. Visitation prayers tell us that angels descend from heaven to the holy shrine where the Imam’s spirit is present. The sources of blessing emanate from God, but the Imam, with his special closeness and intimacy to God, conveys the blessing. Beyond the spiritual benefits that come from the blessing of the Imam, there can also be material effects, such as the curative power believed to be bestowed during visitation. Meri explains that objects, persons, sites, and activities that are employed in the service of God derive their sacred character from that relationship (Meri 46).

In some Shi‘ī holy sites, a corner is designated for those who are seeking cures or healing. In the shrine of the eighth Shi‘ī Imam, this corner is called *Panjar-i Fūlād* or the “steel window.” The sick and disabled are always there for prayer and healing. The publishing house associated with the shrine produces many works offering the narratives of those who have experienced an encounter with the Imam and thus have been cured.

Blessing, as Orsi explains, is not merely limited to spiritual or metaphysical beings. The soil in the Catholic site he mentions had curative power (Orsi 77). The same holds true for the shrine commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussayn. Moreover, the soil of the shrine for Hussayn has been enrolled into various rituals of the Shi‘ī tradition. Chief among them is keeping a bit of the soil and taking it to the grave upon one’s death. In this manner, the blessing and curative power of the soil become a material object. According to Orsi and Meri, similar rites are practiced in Catholicism and Judaism.

Shi‘ī traditions tell us, moreover, that the blessed and curative soil can turn dysfunctional if it is disrespected. The following excerpt is taken from an account of the healing of an ill person by the fifth Shi‘ī Imam Muhammad al-Bāqir, who had used Hussayn’s soil to make a remedy. When the sick person drank it and asked about the medicine, the Imam replies that:

The Sirup you drank was made from the soil of the grave of Imam Husain (a.s.). It is that beneficial thing which I use as medicine. Beware! Do not consider anything it's equal. (Dastghaib *Greater Sins*)

The man continues to ask if he can take some in order to cure others. al-Bāqir's response shows that the blessing is subject to erasure if the conditions of respectful storage are not kept:

When people pick it up from the vicinity of Imam Husain's [sic] tomb and take it outside, they do not accord the respect due to it and do not keep it packed securely. So, every Jinn, animals, and all those creatures who are in need smell from it, and thus others derive benefit from it. However, a soil that contains such a cure must not be stored like this, lest it loses its effect. If one can ensure its protection, then one should touch it to one's body or consume it; one shall be cured at once. *Turbah* [the soil] is just like *Hajar al-Aswad* (the black stone [in the wall of Kāba]) that used to glow like a white ruby, and any diseased person who touched it used to be cured. Due to the infidels and the people of *Jahiliyya* touching it often, it became black, and its effect lessened.

The blessing, therefore, remains until an object is kept under the given conditions. Otherwise, it is subject to ineffectiveness. (Dastghaib *Greater Sins*)

Intriguingly, al-Bāqir's response indicates that according to *Ahl al-Bayt*, similar principles govern the blessed objects, whether it is the black stone in the *Ka'ba* or the soil of al-Hussayn. If the blessing and curative modes are subject to erasure, then it means that the object itself is not an independent source of blessing and cure, but rather the presence of the Sacred in the object. The added presence that makes the object powerful or potent will disappear if it is not handled with the appropriate reverence and care.

The academic study of Shī'ism developed much later than Sunni Islam in the Western scholarship. Although there are many common areas in the study of both branches of Islam, it is still significant to consider the methodological need in the study of Shī'ism. We know that the historical method dominates the other research methodologies in academic inquiries. Notions and concepts of presence in the Shī'i Islam discussed in this paper could lead us to the significance and necessity of the study that Orsi underlined. His point also could go along with what Henry Corbin (1903–78) maintained regarding phenomenological study of religion and, in our case Shī'ism. In his studies, Corbin traced the spirituality and esoteric meaning in the Shī'i Islam, which is primarily represented in the notion of presence as accentuated by Orsi. When this method in the modern study of Shī'ism is neglected, many ideas and communities are labeled as Ghālī (extremists) while those notions are present in the core of Shī'i faith. Presence, in this sense, is turning religion into a live tradition that is substantially involved in everyday life of the believers. The modern study of Shī'ism, along with the historical inquiries, needs to take this aspect into serious consideration.

Conclusion

Robert Orsi, in his *History and Presence*, while explaining the notion of presence in Catholicism, points out that contemporary academic study of religion neglects the study of this aspect of religion. In his view, such negligence results in a markedly attenuated field and a misunderstanding of an essential part of religion. This paper takes Orsi's critique to heart by investigating the notion of presence in Shī'ī Islam and noting its similarity to similar notions in Catholicism and Judaism.

In the Islamic intellectual and transmitted tradition, the whole universe is the presence of God. It is only in our measure of understanding that the concept of absence emerges. The prayer from the Psalms, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" (139:7-12) resonates with similar Islamic and particularly Shī'ī prayers. Although God is omnipresent, in the Shī'ī interpretation, He appointed the man as His vicegerent on earth. In this respect, Imams and saints in Shī'ī Islam play a vital role in facilitating the human-God relationship. We have discussed the multiple forms of the presence of the sacred and also the issue of blessing as mediated through the Imams in the Shī'ī tradition. As pointed out, the *baraka* or blessing is understood to be perceived through the senses, pilgrimage rituals, and devotees' experiences. Nevertheless, As Meri puts it, holiness emanates from God, and the sacred character of anything else derives from its relationship to God.

The visitations and devotional prayers that Orsi depicts as the forgotten face of the modern religious studies in the age of secularism compose a large part of Shī'ī practice and belief. Based on what we have discussed in this paper, this so-called "primitive" face of religion has not only not been forgotten in the modern secular age; it instead is gaining more importance in recent decades. It involves both very personal aspects of individuals in their encounters with the Sacred and has important social aspects and probably political consequences as well. The encounter of the presence of the Imam in Shī'ī Islam requires more attention for understanding its functions and consequences. Moreover, the similarities which Shī'ī Islam has with both Catholic practice and the parallel concept of *Shekhinah* in Judaism suggests a comparative study. In this way, this overlooked aspect of the modern study of religion can provide grounds for a more empathetic dialogue of religions and a study of religion with more sympathy with those who follow it. Finally, we mentioned the importance of the study of presence in Shī'ism, not only through the historical methodologies but also through a phenomenological study that identifies a living tradition; A tradition that performs an essential role in the everyday life of its adherents.

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