

# **Remediated pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Reza**

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
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I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

## ***Abstract***

In this thesis I examine the remediation of pilgrimage practices through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). If mediation is the engine of subject and object formation, the relationship between human and non-human aspects of the world, representations and experiences, meanings and interpretations, then remediation is about the transformations of these performative relations. Through ethnography and internet-based research, I take the concept of mediation as an analytical tool to study a set of practices in order to 1) extend the study of mediation and sociotechnical configurations within Science and Technology Studies (STS) to the domain of pilgrimage, and 2) gain a deeper understanding of pilgrimage through the lens of STS. The site of my research is the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashad, Iran.

This thesis looks at remediations of pilgrimage at the shrine of Imam Reza over the last 10 years. It begins with an analysis of the use of landline telephones for remediated pilgrimage practices and traces further reconfigurations through which mediated pilgrimage is experienced today, including the mobile phone, Virtual Reality glasses, and applications on the web. Key themes emerging from the analysis are sensory experience, absence, emotions and (im)mobility. These themes shape the structure of this thesis, and also act as a scaffolding for a deeper understanding of pilgrimage remediated through the use of ICTs. This thesis contributes to research in the fields of media studies (specifically studies of remediation), science and technology studies, and pilgrimage studies.

I argue that in the process of remediation social beings and technological artifacts are reproduced and reconfigured, at the same time that they mutually implicate each other.

Shiite Iranians, in their use of ICTs, actively take part in shaping their connection to Imam Reza, demonstrating their creativity and openness in accommodating technologies for their religious purposes, at the same time that ICTs in return reshape and reconfigure what it is to be a pilgrim. This makes remediated pilgrimage an experience that is not coherent and stable, but rather always in the making. This research shows remediated pilgrimage through the use of ICTs to be continually crafted, making it multiple, transformative, contested and complex.

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**For Nazi**

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Imam Reza's shrine, or *Haram* in Farsi, is located at the heart of the city Mashad<sup>1</sup> in the north east of Iran, which is known as Iran's spiritual capital. It is the largest mosque in the world by area. The shrine has been built and rebuilt numerous times,<sup>2</sup> and it is the burial place of Imam Reza, a descendant of the prophet Muhammad and the eighth Shiite Imam of Twelver Shiites<sup>3</sup> who was murdered in 818. By the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century a dome was built on the grave, and the shrine is visited by 12 million Iranian and non-Iranian Shiite pilgrims annually (Higgins, 2007). I was born and raised in Mashad, and even though I was brought up in a non-religious family, there have been many occasions when I visited the shrine. My mother's sister and her family are very religious, and I remember visiting the shrine with my aunt. But my childhood visits to the shrine were mostly to hang out with my cousins, and to go to a traditional dessert store that was very close to the shrine after our visit. When I got older, around the time I was in high school, I would rarely visit the shrine with my cousins, but still occasionally would make trips there. One occasion for visiting was when a family member married. Usually in Mashad when couples want to marry, the bride and groom will go to the shrine with their close friends and family. They will perform a ceremony called '*Aghde bala sare hazrat,*' meaning marriage above the head of the Imam. This refers to a marriage ceremony that is conducted by a religious man inside the shrine, and it is believed that

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<sup>1</sup> Another way to spell the city is Mashhad. Mashad is the capital of Khorasan Razavi state, situated in the north east of Iran located between mountain ranges of Binalood and Hezar Masjed (Ghavami & Sedaghati 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Source [razavi.aqr.ir](http://razavi.aqr.ir), accessed Jan 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Twelver is the largest branch of Shiite Islam. The term Twelver refers to its followers and adherents' belief in twelve divinely ordained leaders, known as the twelve Imams (Source <http://factsanddetails.com> accessed February 2018). For a religious book on the life of Imam Reza see Sadooq (2007).

with the presence of the Imam the married couple will be blessed and will start a happy and successful marriage. The other occasion on which I would go to the shrine was a death in the family. It is customary in Mashad that when someone dies, the family and friends of the deceased will gather inside the shrine, say prayers while standing around the casket, and then carry it around the golden dome before they take it to the graveyard.

The first time I was exposed to digitally mediated pilgrimage was in the summer of 2010. I was inside the shrine with my family, as a non-religious Iranian, standing close to the golden dome, in awe of the artwork that has gone into the dome and the shrine. I was also watching pilgrims going into and coming out of the shrine. Many were standing or sitting outside and in front of the dome praying. While I was watching the pilgrims and the shrine, I noticed a pilgrim holding his mobile phone towards the shrine. He was not moving, and the hand that was holding the phone was completely stretched out towards the golden dome. After a few minutes, he took the phone to his ear and started talking to the person on the other end of the call. I was struck by this scene, and the closer I looked the more I was able to spot the same behavior by other pilgrims inside the shrine's courtyards and the area closer to the gates of the tomb chamber. Pilgrims were not only praying inside and outside of the shrine to Imam Reza, but they were also taking a significant role in the prayers and pilgrimage practices of others who were not present at the shrine, allowing their friends and family to say their prayers through the phone. In doing this, the pilgrims present in the shrine were becoming agents in a sociotechnical configuration (including the mobile phone) that offered a mediated pilgrimage experience to others.

This is how I began this research into digitally mediated pilgrimage in the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashad. In the next section I will briefly outline the theoretical approaches that inform this thesis, and introduce the main, interrelated themes that arose from conducting the research. Following that, I will discuss my research methods, relevant resources, and data from my fieldwork and finally, I will give a brief overview of each chapter.

### ***Pilgrimage as mediated practice***

This thesis studies the remediated practice of pilgrimage to Imam Reza as a phenomenon. By remediated practice I am referring to how pilgrimage is practiced through ICT use, and more specifically, how this practice is enacted and experienced by Iranian Shiite Muslims. By examining how practices of pilgrimage are mediated through sociotechnical configurations that include pilgrims, phone operators, mobile phones, etc., the study provides new insights into this emerging practice. It is in these configurations that the human and non-human agencies that comprise pilgrimage are shaped. The aim of the thesis is twofold: first, to extend the study of mediation and sociotechnical configurations within Science and Technology Studies (STS) in the context of remediated pilgrimage, and second, to expand our understanding of pilgrimage through the lens of STS.

Drawing on STS, and more specifically actor network theory (Bijker & Law, 1992; Latour, 1994, 1999, 2000, 2002; Law & Hassard, 1999), as well as media studies (Boczkowski, 2005; Boczkowski, & Lievrouw, 2007; Gillespie, 2009), I take the concept of mediation as a core theoretical framework for this thesis. Mediated practice here is defined as social practices that are enacted through the interaction of both human and non-human

agencies. This theoretical perspective not only pays equal attention to both material and human agencies when it comes to the enactment of a particular practice, it also encompasses the view that mediation is the origin of how objects and subjects are configured and come into being. Material artifacts and technologies function as mediators so that the human-world relation is a human-technology-world relation (Ihde, 1990), and subjects and objects are constituted in their mediated relations. Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005) describes mediation as something that co-shapes subjectivity and objectivity. On this view, pilgrimage as a mediated practice occurs when particular social beings and material artifacts interact with each other. Within this view pilgrimage has always been a mediated practice (Zia, 2011). I refer to the entanglement of humans and non-human agencies in this thesis as 'sociotechnical configurations,' understanding configuration as 'a tool to think about the work of drawing the boundaries that reflexively delineate technological objects, and as a conceptual frame for recovering the heterogeneous relations that technologies fold together' (Suchman, 2012, p. 48). When practices are mediated through sociotechnical configurations, meaning is circulated and is constantly transformed (Couldry, 2008, 2013; Livingstone, 2009; Madianou, 2005; Silverstone, 1999, 2005, 2007; Ong, 2014; Thumim, 2012). This implies that what pilgrimage means and how it is practiced varies across different sociotechnical configurations. At the same time, the social actors, the ones who are involved in the practice of remediated pilgrimage such as pilgrims, phone operators, website managers, etc., and the technologies (VR glasses, online tools, microphones installed in the tomb chamber, mobile phones etc.) are intertwined and are also continually crafted and reshaped. Actor Network Theory (ANT) and postphenomenology agree on the agency of sociotechnical configurations, meaning the agency of both human and non-human actants. Agency acts, or in Giddens' terminology, 'agency refers to doing' (1986,

p. 10). It is not exclusively a property of humans, but rather it takes shape in complicated interrelations between human and non-human entities (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015). While agency is not equally distributed, neither is it governed by a central power (Silverstone, 2002). In this thesis, I adopt a view of agency as ubiquitous, and as distributed in relational networks, including those that enact and mediate pilgrimage practice. Furthermore, agency here also refers to absent actors (such as website managers who read and publish pilgrimage prayers) and non-material and intangible entities, such as emotions and beliefs. For example, the belief that Imam Reza is present everywhere is an agency that animates the use of ICTs to experience pilgrimage. In the next chapter I delve more deeply into what I mean by distributed agency, and how the concept of agency is expanded within the context of this study. Throughout this thesis I recount stories that focus on certain distributed agencies. Having the view that agency within the context of Shiite remediated pilgrimage practice is distributed and ubiquitous means that each of the remediated pilgrimage practices that are explored here are situated, contested, fluid, spatial, temporal and historical. Each of the pilgrimage stories that are explored in this thesis are partial, the reality of each story can never be exhausted (more on this in the next chapter).

These remediations are not a total break from previous media, but rather they are the result of a chain of technical, social and religious behavioral changes that occurred through time and space. Meyer (2013) notes that religion is a field par excellence to explore the deployment, authorization, and use of various media in practices of religious remediation in a long-term historical view. With that in mind, in many of the case studies in this thesis the history of remediation across time and space is there in traces. For

example, I discuss how early stages of an online mediated platform can be traced in the way that it is configured today.

Among the myriad of media technologies, my focus is on information and communications technologies (ICTs). I focus as well on a particular religious practice, pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Reza, in a particular context, that is the context of Shiite Iranians. Extensive scholarly work has been done in relation to Islamic pilgrimage from a religious perspective (for example Ebadi, 2014; Eshaghi, 2016; Glazebrook & Abbasi-Shavazi, 2007; Hellman, 2017) focusing mainly on religious dogma and accepted ways of practicing pilgrimage; tourism (Abad-Galzacorta, Guereño-Omil, Makua, Iriberry, & Santomà, 2016; Berriane, 2015; Kessler, 2015; Mahallati, 2011; Munro, 2017), exploring the intersection of pilgrimage and tourism; and mobilities (Bajc, Coleman, & Eade, 2007; della Dora, 2012; Wigley, 2018) dealing with movement and traveling in relation to pilgrimage. At the same time, there is a body of research on the role of material and technological artifacts in pilgrimage (Badone, 2007; Catrien Notermans & Jansen, 2011; Eisenlohr, 2013; Förster, 2018; Honarpisheh, 2013; Mesaritou, 2015). Honarpisheh (2013) discussed Shiite pilgrimage practice in Shiraz, Iran, specifically the ways in which women interact with three shrines. Honarpisheh writes about the sensorial experience of pilgrimage, particularly the practice of touch in a physical pilgrimage site as a way to become closer to God. Eisenlohr (2013), looking at religious links as heritage, explores Hindu pilgrimage in Mauritius and the role of sound production techniques in popularizing a certain genre of Islamic poetry. He argues that the deployment of sound reproduction technology in the Islamic context establishes links to sources of religious authority. Förster (2018), looks into the use of mobile phones among Africans in Northern Cote d'Ivoire. He traces the social practice of displaying and commenting

through three examples, including the display of photos as proof of a specific event, which is pilgrimage to Mecca. Janesen and Notermans (2011) explore the modern Marian Shrine in Lourdes and pilgrims' miraculous experiences, by focusing on ex-votos, the religious objects by which pilgrims offer thanks to Mary for working miracles. Mesaritou (2015) discusses the topic of saintly presence and the ways it is felt, experienced and enacted with regards to pilgrimage to the center of Padre Pio. He focuses on the material and the spatial structure of the pilgrimage site. Badone (2007), inspired by the theoretical perspectives proposed by Coleman and Elsner (1995), contributes to the understanding of pilgrimage practice by interpreting oral narratives and texts about Kerizinen, a Marian apparition shrine in Brittany, France. These texts are used to validate the authenticity of the shrine. In her paper Badone illustrates how the construction of the sacred history of Kerizinen includes a process of selective editing, privileging particular types of narratives and narrators. Pilgrimage, or *ziyarat*<sup>4</sup> in Farsi, is a realm for diverse discourses and experiences (Eade & Sallnow, 1991). This religious practice has always been mediated. Most obviously in the case of the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashad, pilgrimage is a mediated practice that is enacted through a built artifact, the shrine itself. While the shrine remains a central element in mediating pilgrimage, today this practice is further remediated through ICTs. As Bolter & Grusin (1999) state, when remediation takes place a medium repurposes, reconfigures, and rehabilitates the social (and here religious) significance of the previous medium (here the shrine of Imam Reza). Remediation is 'the making of new media forms out of older ones' (Bolter & Gromala, 2003). ICTs that have been adopted in relation to the shrine of Imam Reza include landline telephones, mobile phones, Virtual Reality (VR) glasses,

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<sup>4</sup> The word *ziyarat* is the Farsi word that is used for pilgrimage in Iran.

several Iran-based online platforms, and social network websites built upon platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Main themes***

When considering mediated pilgrimage practices, I attend to the ways in which Shiite Muslim pilgrims engage with technological artifacts, words, images, emotions, movement, the spaces that they inhabit, and the other human actors who are directly or indirectly involved in their practice.<sup>6</sup> In the following paragraphs, I introduce the relevance of sensory experience, absence, emotions and (im)mobility in remediated pilgrimage practice to Imam Reza, as the main themes that are explored through this thesis.

### ***Sensory experience***

Visceral aspects of pilgrimage practice effected by sounds, visual aids, touch and other elements that bring about a sensory experience play a crucial role in the generation of religious and pilgrimage sensibilities and sentiments, turning embodied religious persons into pilgrim subjects. In particular, sound plays a big role in configuring the shrine and the tomb chamber.<sup>7</sup> Sound (or absence of sound) has the capacity to change pilgrims' bodies and influence their pilgrimage experience. Inherent in sound is a

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<sup>5</sup> In the text that follows, any mediation of pilgrimage that uses ICTs is referred to as remediated pilgrimage; this always assumes an ongoing transformation or remediation. Mediated pilgrimage is reserved to refer to the built artefact of the shrine and traditional practices of pilgrimage.

<sup>6</sup> I acknowledge that there are other topics such as economics, gender, history, temporalities etc. that can be equally as important to help us understand remediated pilgrimage, however for this particular thesis, I opt to focus on the aforementioned topics as those that I found most relevant, recurrent and interesting both to me and my research subjects.

<sup>7</sup> For sound in the context of Islam see Eisenlohr, 2018; Jouili & Moors, 2014; Khan, 2011; Schwarz, 2015.

reconfiguration of spatial concepts such as boundary, space and landscape.<sup>8</sup> Spaces that are configured by agencies such as sound with the aid of ICTs become spaces where mediated pilgrimage is practiced and lived. For those who are not co-located with the shrine, here sensory aspects expand pilgrims' experience of space and remove their sense of distance, making them feel that they are inside the shrine. As I discuss in Chapters Four, Five and Six, sound in this context is a deeply sociotechnical configuration: it is social, negotiated, wished for, and interwoven with human agencies such as engineers or shrine operators, or pilgrims inside the shrine who transfer it to other pilgrims' ears, as it is also interwoven with non-human agencies such as phones, speakers, microphones, videos and online platforms. On this view the acoustics of the shrine are produced by the shrine itself, but at the same time also produce that space. Hence the shrine becomes a space that is tied to its sonic spatiality, and listening is connected to a sense of closeness to the Imam and is woven into the practice of mediated pilgrimage to the point that lack of it might lead to an 'incomplete' or 'impoverished' experience. While multiple sensory experiences are explored in this thesis, including the role of vision and touch, more attention is paid to sound as it plays a crucial role in remediating pilgrimage in relation to ICTs, and the presence or lack of it has been a recurrent theme for pilgrimage participants.

### ***Absence***

As this thesis engages with a particular religious practice, it is in line with 'lived religion' (Nyhagen, 2017, p.1), which asks how religion becomes tangible in the world. And as materiality and ICTs are becoming key in the study of religious practices, studying how

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<sup>8</sup> This concept is at times referred to as sonic spatiality or sonic spaces (Revill, 2016), acoustic territories (Labelle, 2010), soundscape (Schafer, 1994 [1977]), and sonic object settings (Klett, 2014).

pilgrimage is lived includes the understanding that artifacts, their deployment, their circulation, even their absence are not something added on to a religion, but are rather inextricable from it (see Meyer, Morgan, Paine, & Brent Plate, 2010). Religion, by offering 'multiple media for materializing the sacred' is 'the practice of making the invisible visible [...] Once made material, the invisible can be negotiated and bargained with, touched and kissed, made to bear human anger and disappointment' (Orsi, 2012, p. 177). The (im)material artifact that mediates pilgrimage practice at times is characterized as a 'medium of absence' (Weibel, 2011, p. 33), and 'what is being made present always depends on what is also being made absent' (Law, 2004, p. 83). In exploring method assemblages, John Law stresses the enactments of relations that makes some elements present such as objects, representations and practices (Law, 2004, p. 14). These are the visible presences that are enacted through mediations of pilgrimage. For example, Imam Reza is made present through the configuration of the shrine. Law continues to argue that these enactments make other elements absent. These absences come into two forms: either as manifest absence (such as what is represented); for example, the remote caller supported by the physically present pilgrim holding the mobile phone towards the shrine. Alternatively, absence takes the form of a 'hinterland of indefinite, necessary, but hidden Otherness' (Law, 2004, p.14). Absence goes with presence; it is one of its correlates since presence is incomplete and depends on these absences, to make present then is also to make absent. In the context of remediated pilgrimage through the mobile phone, for example, what is present is the experience of pilgrimage, as well as the agencies that are involved, such as the pilgrim inside the shrine and the mobile device. The manifest absence is the belief that Imam Reza is everywhere, or the relation between the pilgrim inside the shrine and the pilgrim who is on the other side of the phone call. The belief, and the closeness between

pilgrims, animates the remediated pilgrimage. Otherness, on the other hand, is absence that is not made manifest, that also goes with and is necessary to presence but disappears; for example, the role of engineers who set up microphones and speakers inside the tomb chamber so that when pilgrims call the shrine they can hear the sounds and be able to talk to the Imam, with their voices heard within the shrine and mixed into the crowd.

When it comes to pilgrimage practice, absence is a recurring topic for the participants. As I discuss in detail below, absences such as lack of sound, or videos, or pilgrims' preoccupation with being absent or away from the shrine, or the absence of identity on the internet, the absence of members of family or friends inside the shrine, or the absence of mobility (immobility), all come to matter through relations and interactions that occur between pilgrims and the technological configurations that they are engaged with. The agency of absences has materiality, they exist in and have effects on the spaces that pilgrims inhabit, and the practices that they are involved in. Absences materialize and come into being in the form of blog posts, Instagram photos, Facebook posts, online comments and emotions. The ontology of pilgrimage absence is not a thing in itself but something that exists through sociotechnical configurations that give absence presence. Pilgrimage absences are then embodied, performed, texturized, enacted, emotional, spatial, circulated, shared and remembered. In this thesis, these absences are referred to as present absences, that come into presence in different forms. Throughout this thesis absence is explored in terms of the mediated spaces, relations and configurations in which it is enacted, performed and materialized in relation to pilgrimage to Imam Reza.

## ***Emotion***

One way that absence manifests in mediated pilgrimage practice is through emotions: emotions in this sense can be seen as another immaterial agency. They can also be viewed as manifest absences, for example, when pilgrims rely on ICTs as a way to mark their physical absence in the shrine and deploy technology to fill that absence by emotionally engaging in posting pilgrimage prayers. My analysis of emotions takes inspiration from Ahmed's approach to theorizing emotion (Ahmed, 2000, 2004, 2010, 2013). She argues that emotions do things, they align individuals and communities, they are an element in the configuration and constitution of social beings. Reading Ahmed in parallel with mediation theory, I take emotion/affect as one of the elements that join the sociotechnical configurations of mediated pilgrimage. Ahmed looks at emotions as objects and posits that the object of emotion takes shape as effects of circulation. By that she doesn't mean that emotions are contagious (see Izard, 1977), but rather she emphasizes that emotions do not reside in either the individual or the collective, but rather they move between bodies. She asserts that emotions stick to and circulate with bodies and material objects, and in effect also stick subjects together, and connect individuals to one another. She introduces the concept of 'affective economy,' which encompasses the circulation of emotion between social bodies, as well as between texts, objects, images, etc. Emotions in this sense do not belong to the contours of the body, they bind and stick bodies together. In this thesis I explore the configurations that evoke and generate emotions in mediated pilgrimage and discuss how emotions and objects of emotions bind pilgrims together, enact religious collectivities and circulate not only among pilgrims' bodies but also in their sensory experience, such as typing online pilgrimage texts, hearing sounds and recording images. This includes

understanding how emotion moves pilgrims toward and away from other pilgrims and objects, and how it lingers, stretches and sticks through time and space, as emotion moves and co-shapes the bodies and the spaces that it sticks to and circulates within.

### ***(Im)mobility***

Closely connected to the concept of emotions is the notion of (im)mobility, as inherent in emotion (e-motion) is movement. (Im)mobility is an inseparable part of mediated pilgrimage. The embodiment of emotions involves mobilities such as the sensory experience of scrolling through the shrine's 3D images, which entails the movement of fingers, clicking on the mouse, pushing keyboard keys, running fingers on the trackpads, or entering the online/virtual journey into the shrine complex; these are micromobilities. Other forms of mobilities are moving inside the shrine or walking towards the shrine. In all cases mobilities are interwoven with the practice of pilgrimage.

Both material and (im)material objects are incorporated in mediated pilgrimage. For example, pieces of clothes are left by (immobile) villagers on the road, so that (mobile) pilgrims walking by can step on them and bring blessings/healings to the owners of those clothes. The road, the vehicles, the internet, even pilgrims' beliefs and the emotional longing to be close to the Imam are all objects of pilgrimage (im)mobilities.

Mediated pilgrimage practice, in essence, is a bodily and kinetic ritual that includes movement inside the shrine of Imam Reza or being away from but moving towards it; for example, by moving one's fingers on the phone to dial the shrine's landline phone number. Inside the shrine, pilgrimage practice again encompasses myriad forms of movement and mobility, from walking towards the tomb chamber from within the shrine complex or bowing towards the tomb as part of greeting/saying farewell to the Imam,

to moving one's palms upward for prayer, or touching and clasping the tomb chamber. Many religious leaders and books encourage pilgrims to take long journeys in order to get to the shrine, and they hold the belief that the longer pilgrims walk, or the more they are physically fatigued and feel pain, the more they will receive blessings from the Imam (see Tapper 1990). This topic will be discussed further in Chapter Seven.

At the same time, fixed, immobile infrastructure and even immobile bodies affect and shape the bodies of pilgrims and their pilgrimage practice. Pilgrims who are unable to travel physically, or are distant from the shrine of Imam Reza, enact a type of mediated pilgrimage, which moves pilgrims' fingers to press on their keyboards in order to type prayers, or to scroll and navigate through the shrine online. Chapter Seven identifies 'spaces of flows' and spaces of immobility in relation to mediated pilgrimage, and explores these constellations of (im)mobilities, including certain patterns of movements, representations of movements and ways of practicing movements and immobility.

My analysis takes inspiration from several scholars in the mobility paradigm, including Ahlqvist & Urry (2000); Cresswell (2006, 2010); and Urry (2007b, 2012b). This theoretical approach, which at times is referred to as the mobilities turn, explores how social actors are constructed on the move. Many scholars (Ahlqvist & Urry, 2000; Urry, 2000, 2007b, 2012b) advocate for a 'sociology beyond societies' that focuses on how sociality and identity are shaped and produced through networks of people, ideas and things moving, blocked movement, or moorings, instead of the inhabitation of a shared space such as a region or nation state. For Büscher & Urry (2009, p. 110) 'studies of movement, dwelling and place-making not only illuminate important phenomena, they also provide compelling new modes of knowing.' Mobilities in this sense are not understood only in terms of movement, but also in terms of forms of emplacement, stopping, waiting,

stillness and immobility. In this thesis mobility relates not only to physical movement of bodies and objects, but also includes the inner journeys of pilgrims towards the shrine, a movement within the imaginative space of mind and heart. It also includes the circulation of texts, ideas, and intangible objects such as emotions and religious beliefs, vibrations of the shrine's sound, and its moving effect on pilgrims.

### ***Research methods***

Earlier in this chapter I explained the genesis and motivation for this thesis in my personal relation to the shrine and familiarity with it as a Shiite religious site. In terms of theoretical orientations, I was already involved with science and technology studies, media studies, and sociology, based on my education in both Edinburgh and Lancaster Universities, where I studied Science and Technology Studies and Sociological research. My familiarity with mediated pilgrimage stems not only from my background as someone who was born and raised in Iran and has made frequent visits to the shrine, but also from a master's thesis which explored pilgrimage mainly inside the shrine, as a practice that is already mediated through the built artifact of the holy shrine itself (Zia, 2011). Both of these impacted this research in terms of the practical ways that I conducted myself in the field site, and in the theoretical underpinnings of the research. I have used very few materials from my master's thesis in this thesis, and each time the source is cited. The data and resources that are collected and analyzed here were assembled for the PhD and are taken from both observations at the shrine and online sources.

My observations in the shrine included an array of pilgrimage practices, many of which included the use of ICTs and in particular mobile phones. Here is an example taken from my notes:

I am sitting on one of the carpets that is spread in front of the golden dome. Many pilgrims are sitting next to me praying, some are standing praying, the girl next to me is sobbing, staring at the golden dome, she is clasping her phone in her left hand the whole time, while sobbing she unlocks her phone and takes a few shots of the dome. Her pilgrimage practice is shaped not only by the shrine but also by her mobile phone, and her act of photo taking. I am wondering if these photos are shared in social media (Field notes Jan 2014).

Later on, when I continued my research using the Internet, I was able to connect these dots, as there are a large number of photos and posts that are shared in social media such as Instagram and Facebook and news websites, which convey pilgrims' offline experience in the shrine. As the above excerpt shows (and many other cases that are presented in the following chapters), pilgrimage practice in the shrine is tied to and extended through the online/digital realm. As I extended my focus to the online and digital, I found a plethora of data that demonstrate the binding of pilgrimage practice across these realms. These evidently deeply connected realms of online and offline convinced me of the importance of conducting research in both areas.

The shrine is a large complex, with several courtyards that are situated around the tomb chamber. As Figure 1.1 shows, there are multiple entrances to the tomb chamber, which is depicted as a golden circle in the center of the map. I chose to enter the shrine complex from the Jomhoori Islami Courtyard (just to the right of the tomb chamber in Figure 1.1), due to my familiarity with this courtyard as the one that my family would

always visit. This courtyard was one of the most crowded, as it also holds the iron window that faces the tomb chamber and is a place for pilgrims to say their prayers. So, upon starting the first phase of data collection, it was clear to me that I wanted to spend my days inside this courtyard (Figure 1.2). I conducted all of my interviews and observations, and entered the tomb chamber, inside this courtyard.

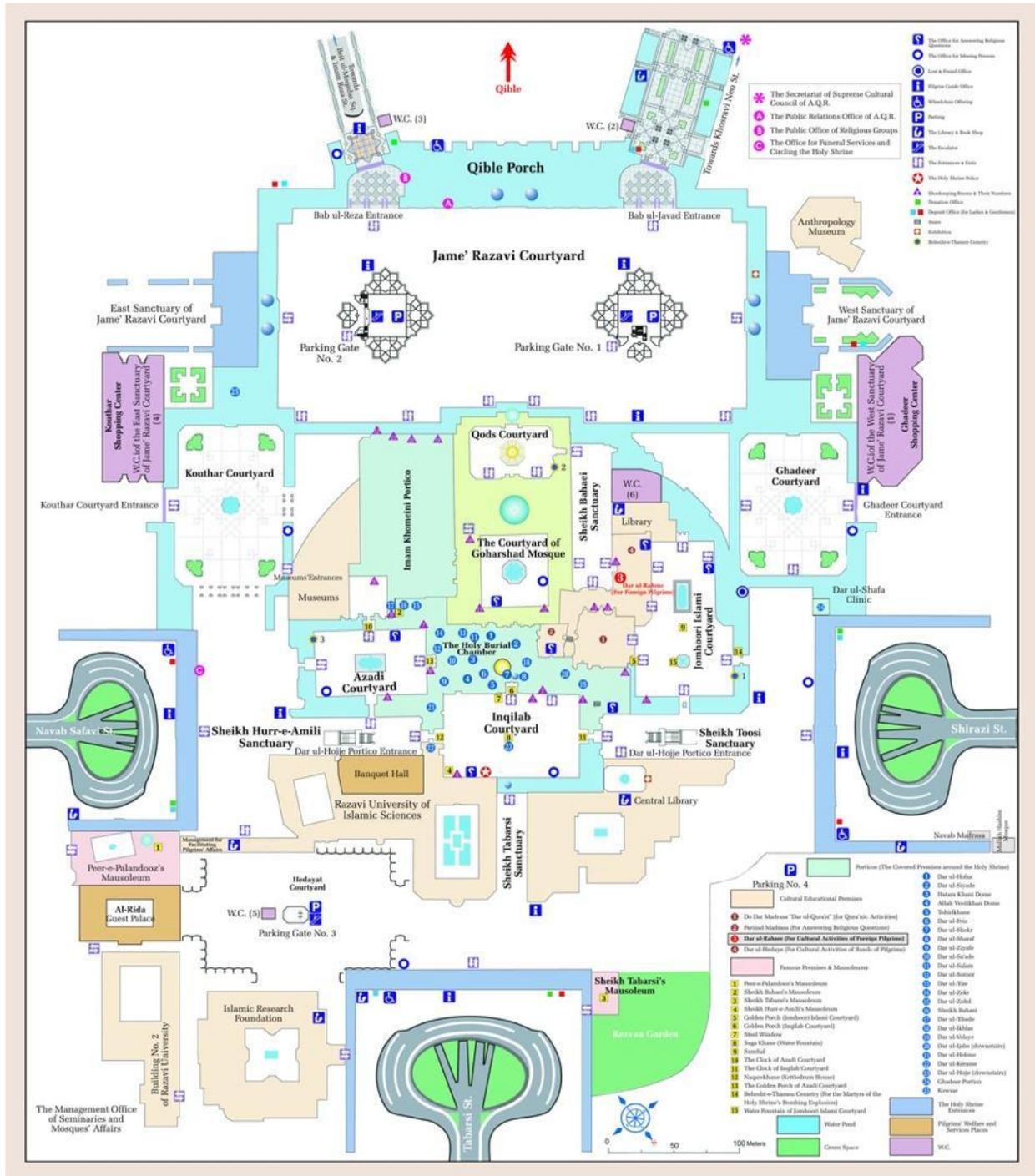


Figure 1.1 Map of the shrine complex (source: en.mashhad.ir accessed in December 2017)



Figure 1.2 The Jomhoori Islami courtyard (source: Instagram.com accessed December 2017)

The act of using a mobile phone to call friends and family typically took place in front of the tomb chamber. At the time of my research, pilgrims found it difficult to make phone calls while being inside the tomb chamber itself, as the shrine officials blocked mobile phone reception. Although I had seen a few cases where pilgrims managed to make calls inside the tomb chamber, to my understanding of that space those were exceptions.

The shrine has security rooms at each of its entrances, and before one can enter any of the courtyard visitors are separated by gender and subject to security checks: there was usually a line for each check, and two or three women on the women's side would pat down visitors' bodies and check the content of their bags and pockets. If visitors were carrying mobile phones, laptops, tablets or cameras they would be asked to turn their

devices on so that security personnel could see that they are operating. Pilgrims/visitors who were familiar with this process, including me, would have our phones in our hands, unlocked and ready to show to the security women upon passing the security check. At times if a visitor's hair was showing from her face, the security guards would warn her to cover her hair. It is obligatory for women inside the shrine complex to wear a *chador*, a long garment which covers women's heads and goes all the way to their feet, exposing only their face (Figure 1.2). No part of women's hair, arms, feet or ankles should be visible inside the shrine. Once I was carrying a tumbler mug of tea and the security woman asked me to take a sip of the tea in front of her before she let me in inside. Everything in these security checks was manual and done by a security person: there were no x-ray scanners or metal detectors. The reasoning behind these security measures goes back to a terrorist attack that took place in 1994, leaving at least 25 dead and over 300 injured (source: [independent.co.uk/news](http://independent.co.uk/news) accessed Jan 2018).

The data collection for the thesis was conducted in two phases. In the first I spent about 6 months in Mashad and made daily visits to the shrine (from Jan-June 2014), and in the second phase, while I was outside of Iran from June 2014 to January 2016, I collected relevant data for my research primarily using online materials available on the Internet. A complete list of all the websites that are mentioned in this thesis can be found in the appendix along with a short description of each source. My original proposal for this thesis was titled 'Digitally remediated pilgrimage practice to Imam Reza among Iranian Shiite pilgrims,' but through the data collection phase I came to the realization that this title did not fully capture the topic of my research. I could see that remediated pilgrimage is not only done by digital media, but includes as well the mobile and landline telephone, and artifacts like VR glasses. In light of this observation, I opted to change

'digital' to 'ICT' in the title, to encompass a broader range of technological devices along with social network websites and other online tools. These realizations led to a new title: 'Remediated pilgrimage to Imam Reza through ICT among Iranian Shiite pilgrims.

Mediated and face-to-face interviews, online audiovisual/text/video data analysis, and participant observation formed the fieldwork. During the time that I spent in Mashad I would make daily visits to the shrine. Inside the shrine I observed and spoke with pilgrims who were not only practicing pilgrimage at the shrine themselves but were also using their mobile phones to let their friends and family pray. Some pilgrims would use their phones to take photos of themselves or of the shrine to capture a part of their pilgrimage practice. I also conducted 8 in-depth interviews<sup>9</sup> with pilgrims inside the shrine, and two interviews with website administrators who design and manage one of the online pilgrimage platforms. Informed consent was obtained conversationally when initiating interviews, and all interviewees remain anonymous in this text.

There are very few academic papers in relation to technologically mediated pilgrimage to Imam Reza's shrine: these papers are written in Farsi, and I found them in the central library of the shrine, which is one of the largest libraries in Mashad and located inside the shrine's complex (Figure 1.1). When I use any materials from these papers I translated them into English and provide the citation. All of the interviews were carried out in Farsi. Being Iranian and speaking the native language of Iran helped me to conduct interviews both face-to-face inside the shrine and online. All the data used from

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<sup>9</sup> Given the small and opportunistic interview samples the analysis here does not represent the Shiite population, but rather this data informs the identification of my themes and my analysis of them. Interviewees were a mix of male and female between the ages of 25 – 65 (this is an estimate).

the interview materials are referenced using a pseudonym for the interviewee. Again, during the second phase, the collection of various online resources, most of the data collected was in Farsi, and for the purpose of data analysis these were all translated to English. Similarly, if there was a name associated with an online comment or pilgrimage prayer, these names were changed into a pseudonym. Where images of pilgrims are used in this thesis, the faces are all blurred to hide the identity of the person who is visible in the photograph.

During the second phase of data collection, one participant/blogger/pilgrim responded to open questions that I sent to them via email. I informed the blogger about my research and asked if they would allow me to use their post in my analysis. After I received their permission I started the interview, which was a series of questions and answers over a period of one week. Any data derived from that interview uses a pseudonym instead of the name that the blogger identified themselves with during the interview.

I analyzed two online videos in relation to remediated pilgrimage. One is a documentary that is posted on youtube.com produced by Astan Quds Razavi,<sup>10</sup> and the other is a video taken by an Iranian clergy of an Iraqi pilgrim who used VR glasses, given to him by the clergy, to connect to the shrine of Imam Reza.<sup>11</sup> This video was shared in the public domain on both Instagram and bafghkhabar.ir, an Iranian online news website along with many other domestic and more well-known social network sites such as Facebook and Instagram. I analyzed both the content of the videos, and the comments

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_MXtLEEZ56M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MXtLEEZ56M) (accessed Jan 2018).

<sup>11</sup> [goo.gl/pyHcHI](http://goo.gl/pyHcHI) (accessed September 2017). For long URLs, I am using a google feature to shorten them; they will appear as goo.gl.

that were shared with regards to them. I also analyzed the live videos that are broadcast on two online pilgrimage platforms (Imamreza.tv and razavitv.aqr.ir). While the first platform no longer exists (Imamreza.tv) and the website has been shut down, in 2015 I downloaded the entire website including a snapshot of the main page and all of the comments and prayers. Similarly, a blogpost that was written by a blogger whom I interviewed through email is no longer available, but I have a copy of the blog post, which I translated into English and analyze in Chapter Seven. All contributions have been anonymized.

I analyzed data from 8 Iranian news websites in Farsi that pertained either to the shrine or to pilgrimage platforms or included interviews with pilgrims of Imam Reza. The data were mostly public online texts, with photos and in one case a video. Comments and data from four social network websites were also analyzed, two of which are Iranian sites. One is Cloob.com<sup>12</sup> (Cloob means Club in English), which was developed in Iran in 2004 after the international social network website Orkut was blocked by the Iranian government. Registration is mandatory for members and the network is categorized by several themes such as technology, education, sports and beliefs and religion. Each theme then has several sections or 'rooms' where members can join and discuss related topics. For example, there is a section called the shrine of Imam Reza, in which there are 8029 members.<sup>13</sup> In this section users discuss different topics with regards to Imam Reza and his shrine. The second Iranian social network website is hammihan.com (meaning compatriot in English), established in 2005. It is estimated that the website is serving over three million visitors monthly (<https://hammihan.com/about> accessed Jan 2018).

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<sup>12</sup> For a study on Cloob.com among Iranians see Bashir and Afrasiabi (2012).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.cloob.com/imamrezafa> accessed in Jan 2018.

Similar to Cloob.com this social networking website also operates based on different themes, where members can discuss topics and share photos and videos or send other members private messages. I analyze two discussions on these websites with regards to pilgrimage in Chapter Four. The first was a heated discussion about the legitimacy of calling the shrine by phone, and the second was initiated by an engineer who explained how he worked in the shrine to install microphones and speakers for callers of the shrine. The other two social network websites are Facebook and Instagram. Unlike Instagram, access to Facebook is blocked in Iran and Iranians inside the country use some sort of VPN (virtual private networks) to bypass the filtering. Public data on Facebook was used in Chapter Five (along with other websites) on the discussion of calling the shrine. In Chapter Six I used the 'like' button on Facebook to compare and contrast a similar button in the '*del neveshteh*' section, which is part of [razavivt.aqr.ir](http://razavivt.aqr.ir). In Chapter Six, where the emotionality of remediated pilgrimage is analyzed, I reference a Facebook post related to the Iraqi pilgrim who experiences pilgrimage with VR glasses, along with the comment section of the same post. Whenever I posted a snapshot of pilgrims' (Facebook users') comments, I blurred their names and their photos to protect their identity. Data from Instagram were used in Chapters Six and Seven when discussing emotions and (im)mobility. Instagram photos, videos, geotagged features and comments are analyzed, such as the use of hashtags (#). As with Facebook, if faces or profile names are visible they are blurred to protect the privacy of Instagram users.

### ***Emergent realities***

John Law argues that 'methods, their rules, and even more methods' practices, not only describe but also help to produce the reality that they understand' (Law 2004, p.5). For Law, the world is a flux of complex interactions that far exceeds the capacity for

knowledge making, and from these sets of relations temporary stabilities or 'realities' are shaped (2004, p.7). In a cross-cultural context such as that of this study, there is a risk of attaching Euro-American ontological assumptions to a place where reality is enacted differently. Haraway uses the notion of partiality to argue that there are multiple, incompatible enactments that are held together because they are 'necessary and true' (Haraway, 1991, p.149). Haraway rejects the argument that objectivity is produced by being detached from the world. She argues against 'the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere' (Donna Haraway, 1988, p. 581), because there is no position outside of social and material life. We are always situated somewhere: in particular bodies, within particular 'realities'. We are part of an array of people and things and engaged in an arrangement of doings and sayings. She advocates for a feminist objectivity based not on detaching from these positions and rendering them invisible, but instead on taking responsibility for them. She goes on to say that: 'only partial perspective promises objective vision ... Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object' (1998, p. 583).

Following Law's account of methods and Haraway's concept of situated knowledge, I worked to suspend Euro-American ontologies in my analysis for the possibility of gaining a different understanding of the world. Rather than presupposing a singular pre-existing reality, throughout this research I was open to 'realness as emergent' (Verran, 2001, p. 37). For Verran 'what's real emerges in gradually clotting and eventually routinized collective acting' (2001, p. 37). As a result, research does not take place in a single, broad and macro scale reality, which is later filled with details and textual analysis. Rather research starts from specific and thorough investigations of practice. What

realities, or 'ordered/ordering microworlds' (Verran, p. 201) can be traced from there remains an empirical question - one that methods participate in performing. For Verran, this is a politically significant move, since it allows for worlds with different ontological underpinnings to exist together, without one logic being translated in terms of the other (2001, p. 6).

### ***Remediated religious practices as units of analysis***

An understanding of reality as emergent implicates practices as key objects of research. Reckwitz (2002) defines practice as:

A routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge (2002, p. 249).

Practices are heterogeneous units of analysis, bringing together entities which under certain conditions of research might be separated and purified (such as bodies/minds and emotions, or material artefacts). Chapters in this thesis explore the distribution of agency across configurations of humans and nonhumans, something that has been a focus for scholars of STS. Established in the field known as laboratory studies (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Latour, 1987), the aim of this approach is to resolve the issue that once 'knowledge has "set" (once it is accepted as the truth), it is as hard to unravel as concrete' (Knorr Cetina, 1995, p. 140). In the case of studies conducted in scientific laboratories by ethnographers, the research setting included an assemblage of heterogeneous materials, including scientists, articles, dialogue, data and an array of material objects. In short, the result of these scientific experiments was analyzed as an

effect of the relations of this assemblage, suggesting that realities are crafted in practice.

In line with the STS view that realities are emergent and the fact that practices should be at the core of research is the approach of 'lived religion' (Nyhagen, 2017, p.1). This approach focuses on the experiences of religious practitioners and individuals in everyday life, whilst also considering the institutional aspects of religion that they may engage with. It posits that practitioners do not simply 'copy' institutional religious dogma and scripts, rather they have an active and reflexive role in shaping, negotiating and configuring their own beliefs and practices (Knorr Cetina, 1995; Nyhagen, 2017). 'Lived' emphasizes that religiosity is historical, contextual, provisional, mobile, and in a constant flux (Fernandes, 2009). I paid immense attention to these elements of lived religion during my research on remediated pilgrimage. This approach was developed as a critique of the limitations posed by analyses of religion which foreground institutions and organizations rather than 'the actual experience of religious persons' in everyday contexts (Fernandes, 2009; McGuire, 2008, p. 12; see also Ammerman, 2013; Hall, 1997; Neitz, 2011; Orsi, 2003). This approach is similar to STS scholars and their view on science, as knowledge for them is not a stable thing that will not change and is always held true, but rather it is something that is situated and configured through an arrangement of human and material artifacts. Similarly, 'lived religion' (Nyhagen, 2017, p.1) opens up debates about what religion, and in this case pilgrimage, is: is it a fixed, coherent set of prescriptions about belief and practice that are formulated and imposed by religious institutions and 'copied' by pilgrims, or do pilgrims have an active and reflexive role in shaping and configuring their own (and others) pilgrimage experience and practice? This approach does not preclude the analysis of institutional forms of

religion and individuals' engagement with them: as McGuire notes (McGuire, 2008, p. 98), individuals' lived religious practice may be 'closely linked with the teachings and practices of an official religion'. However, the power and meaning of religious institutions in individuals' lives must be studied empirically.

Neitz argues that (2011, p. 54), lived religion 'is often practiced in public or in collective acts and understandings'. In contrast, a claim that religion only exists in private or individual forms would reject the power and authority of institutional forms of religion. Furthermore, an argument that religion has to be expressed only in the private domain is problematic as it overlooks that religion is at its heart social, communicative and public (Woodhead, 2013). 'Private' forms of individual religious practice such as prayers express social engagement, Orsi argues (2003, p. 173). As seen throughout this thesis, when pilgrims share their pilgrimage prayers online many include their friends and family in their prayers, or when they are practicing pilgrimage through mobile phone or landline telephones they are already engaged in some sort of communication with another human being. Remediated pilgrimage, as shown throughout this thesis, can be seen at its heart as both communicative and social, as well as being a private endeavor. Caring for others is also at the center of the lives of many religious practitioners (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016). This notion of care and pilgrimage practice will be discussed in the chapters that follow. Pilgrimage practice can thus never simply be private; it is always linked to the social contexts in which individuals live and act, and gives adherents a sense 'of moral direction, of conviction, of belonging' which is ultimately social (Woodhead, 2013, p. 96). The 'lived religion' (Nyhagen, 2017, p.1) approach is therefore embedded in larger normative debates about the role of religion in both the public and private spheres.

Finally, and again in parallel to an STS approach to studying practices, the lived religion approach considers the material aspects of religion a significant feature of religiosity, and in the case of the Shiite pilgrimage a way of relating to transcendence (Ammerman, 2013; McDannell, 1995; McGuire, 2008). I cannot explain what pilgrimage practice is for Shiite Iranians by neglecting the role of materiality, and in this case the use of ICTs in religious practice (see Ameigeiras, 2008; Vásquez, 2011). The quest for transcendence involves practitioners' bodies (Neitz, 2011; Semán, 1997, 2004), along with different kinds of material objects that hold important meanings for those who use them in religious practices. Consistent with this, many scholars who adopt the 'lived religion' (Nyhagen, 2017, p.1) approach have also focused on the material aspects of religiosity. Algranti (2014), for example, observes and analyzes the creation, distribution, and use of religious objects. Linkogle (1998) and Colombani (2008) explore how religious objects are displayed in different popular feasts and the complexity of the social relations beneath them (see also Ameigeiras, 2008). Robert Orsi describes lived religion as follows:

Rethinking religion as a form of cultural work, the study of lived religion directs attention to institutions and persons, texts and rituals, practice and theology, things and ideas — all as media of making and unmaking worlds. [...] Religious practices and understandings have meaning only in relation to other cultural forms and in relation to the life experiences and actual circumstances of the people using them; what people mean and intend by particular religious idioms can be understood only situationally, on a broad social and biographical field, not within the terms of a religious tradition or religious language as existing apart from history (Orsi, 2012, p. 147).

Both STS and lived religion approaches have stimulated studies of scientific work and religious practices that are based on participant observation (Ammerman, 2013; McGuire, 2008; Knorr Cetina, 1995), and ethnography has become an important method in studies of practice within STS and lived religion. This study of remediated pilgrimage practices was also conceived as an ethnography, because understanding pilgrimage practice requires immersion in the material world in which it unfolds. Ethnography - as a bundle of qualitative methods - offers a range of resources to account for both the social and material dimensions of pilgrimage. Being inside the shrine physically, conducting online ethnography over an extended period of time, speaking Farsi, and being familiar with the practice, allowed me to gradually move towards pilgrims' understandings of this remediated practice. It also allowed observation of the physical and online interactions between people/pilgrims that take place during this practice, and the complexities of material objects and digital artefacts. These include non-linguistic forms of interaction, whose qualities are difficult to articulate verbally, such as the use of photos, or kneeling on the ground while using VR glasses to connect to the Imam. The participant observation that I undertook within the field site (both online and offline), such as engaging with conversations that pilgrims have with the Imam on the phone, or with heated online discussions over the legitimacy of calling the shrine in order to connect with the Imam, provided me a different view towards the embodied nature of remediated pilgrimage through ICT.

### ***Structure of this Thesis***

This chapter explored the motivation behind choosing remediated pilgrimage as the topic of this thesis. It also set out the main theoretical approaches and analytical tools

that will be used throughout the thesis, the data resources and the methodology that informed the execution of this research, and the thesis' central themes.

Chapter Two discusses in more detail the theoretical approaches to mediation that inform my research. This chapter elaborates the conceptual framework upon which the thesis is based, influenced by science and technology studies (particularly actor network theory) and media studies. Both fields attend to the implications of the material without oversimplifying it, and posit that sociotechnical configurations are situated historically and in specific social and cultural contexts. The chapter also reviews concepts for the study of media and material artifacts. The discussion in this chapter then moves on to an exploration of mediation in religion, advocating for a focus on viewing religious practices as mediated practices, and arguing that attention to mediated religious practices such as pilgrimage to Imam Reza includes engagement with artifacts, words, images, sounds, digital devices and other material and immaterial artifacts. The chapter closes with a discussion of the fact that pilgrimage has always been a mediated practice.

Chapter Three acts as a contextual chapter, familiarizing the reader with pilgrimage and specifically pilgrimage in the context of Islam. The chapter includes an exploration of the sense in which pilgrimage inside the shrine is already mediated by the architecture of the holy shrine of Imam Reza (see also Zia, 2011). It covers discussions on Islamic pilgrimage more specifically (*ziyarat*), and scholarly work in this field (Boissevain, 2017; Eickelman & Piscatori, 1990; Hosseini, et al., 2013; Schimmel, 1980; Soucek, 2000; Tapper, 1990). The chapter also introduces the reader to Imam Reza and his shrine, with a brief explanation of the shrine complex and the tomb chamber. The chapter closes with a discussion of the use of ICTs in Imam Reza's pilgrimage.

Chapter Four is dedicated to remediated pilgrimage practice in relation to the use of landline telephones and mobile phones. It explores this remediation from its early days, when pilgrims would call the shrine on a dedicated line and an operator would connect them to the Imam by holding the receiver towards the golden dome, to the subsequent automation of this service, along with an analysis of the use of mobile phones. The specificities and implications of this pilgrimage practice are discussed. Calling the shrine highlights the agential realm of sound<sup>14</sup> (see Häkli & Kallio, 2011, 2014), as when connection is made pilgrims can hear the sounds within the tomb chamber or its vicinity, and the acoustics of the tomb chamber and sonic experiences configure pilgrimage spatiality. The chapter ends with a debate over the 'authenticity' of calling Imam Reza, by analyzing a discussion that took place in two online forums, which reveal a multiplication of competing authorities (see Turner 2007). Remediated pilgrimage through making phone calls, and the ability of pilgrims to share their beliefs and comments online regarding this practice, helps us to investigate how the authority of traditional sources of epistemic power that govern the 'correct' way of religious practice is being amplified or delegitimized by the deployment of ICTs, leading to an emergent class of interpreters of Islamic pilgrimage practice.

Chapter Five examines digitally remediated pilgrimage practiced in relation to various online platforms that are made available by the shrine, from its early days of design to configurations in use in 2017. The first section examines Imamreza.tv, which was established in late 2005. The interaction between the pilgrims and the website managers are discussed. Remediated pilgrimage through this platform plays a key role

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<sup>14</sup> Other scholars have coined similar concepts such as 'capacities of sound' (Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Reville, 2016), and 'affective capacities of sound, or 'sound acts' (Simpson, 2017).

in reinforcing diasporic pilgrims' territorial attachments, while at the same time the boundary between their home and the shrine, to some extent, becomes destabilized. The second section of this chapter includes an analysis of the replacement of the old platform with [razavi.aqr.ir](http://razavi.aqr.ir) which includes a tool called '*del neveshteh*'<sup>15</sup> for sharing pilgrimage prayers. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of a failed online platform.

Chapter Six is inspired by the work of Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2001, 2004, 2010) and Kuruoğlu & Ger (2015) to explore emotions as an interconnected agency within the sociotechnical configurations that mediate pilgrimage practice. The circulatory nature of emotions in remediated pilgrimage is considered, as the stickiness of emotions bonds and brings closeness between pilgrims, their family and friends, and this affective field weaves together a collectivity solidifying a sense of 'us' among Shiite pilgrims. The engagement between ICTs and the pilgrim enacts certain emotions and sensibilities, which become interwoven with the whole experience of remediated pilgrimage. The stickiness of emotions points to ways in which affect intensifies and stretches through space and time, which leads to (dis)orienting people away or towards other bodies and objects and into shared ways of being and acting. The chapter ends with an explanation of the inscriptive power of online technologies and how they make it possible to track emotional inscriptions that are not shared, recorded and made public inside the shrine, but are shared anonymously online such as embarrassing, shameful, or deeply secretive prayers.

Chapter Seven examines approaches to understanding pilgrimage (im)mobilities in terms of spaces of flows and fixities. Several stories are explored here including walking

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<sup>15</sup> The English translation is 'a written note that comes from the heart'.

to the shrine; it is argued that the road becomes a place where pilgrimage is enacted and practiced and walking towards the shrine reflects and reinforces Shiite religious power and creates a community-on-the-road. This chapter also discusses objects of (im)mobilities such as gifts, souvenirs, and ICTs, and focuses as well how the spaces of pilgrimage are shaped through sharing photos on Instagram. The sharing of these photos indicates a kind of bragging, which illustrates the inequalities that are at play between those who are capable of physically travelling to the shrine and those who are not. The chapter also discusses the act of 'checking in' or geotagging photos that are posted on social media. The chapter ends with the practice of taking selfies in the shrine and sharing them on Instagram; it argues that taking selfies and accompanying photos of pilgrims' families inside the shrine shape the way that the shrine is configured, and pilgrims imprint these spaces with patterns of individualized lived experience of pilgrimage.

The thesis closes in Chapter Eight with a discussion of key findings of the analysis and concluding remarks, as well as a discussion of future research topics regarding remediated pilgrimage to Imam Reza.

## ***Chapter Two: Theoretical approaches to understanding pilgrimage as a mediated practice***

Materiality and mediation are at the heart of understanding remediated pilgrimage. This chapter elaborates the theoretical ground on which my analysis is based. To understand the role of materiality in mediation, this chapter starts with a discussion of early media studies and relevant critiques, arguing that materiality was previously neglected in media studies, or that scholars tended to take a technological determinist stance in their analyses. In recent years this has shifted, as social and media studies scholars have turned their attention towards the role of material artifacts. Science and technology studies is one prominent area of research in which there is a plethora of work that points to the agency of the material world. As mentioned in the last chapter, I focus mainly on Actor Network Theory, a branch of STS which provides unique analytical purchase in this context by taking into account the entangled relation between human and artifacts or, in other words, attending to sociotechnical configurations. Following this approach, mediation is understood as the origin of how subjects and objects are configured, not as something that comes in between them. It is an analytical tool which begins from the premise that both humans and non-humans have agency, and that they mutually shape each other.

### ***Neglecting materiality***

Media studies scholars and computer-mediated communication (CMC) researchers have observed that early scholars in communication and media studies have focused on texts, the industries that produced them, and the social actors who were using them. As Caprignano summarises, writing in the late 90s:

One paradox of media studies is that over the years scant attention has been paid to ... the medium.... Media studies today is still devoted to content analysis, to the effects of these contents on social behavior, and to the analysis of ideological or institutional apparatuses (Carpignano, 1999, p. 178).

In other words, the materiality of media has been largely taken-for-granted. As Gillespie, Boczkowski, and Foot (2014) note, studying news has typically focused on paragraphs on a page, rather than attention to the page itself:

The headlines were explored but not the newsboys who shout them out in the streets, or the codes that render them into clickable online links. These were some of the impediments that made it difficult to analyze 'media not as messages that affect minds, but as social relations by other means, an engagement of people through information and through things that happens to use words, sounds, and images as social currency' (Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2014, p. 2).

Early studies of media rarely engaged with 'the tightly-interwoven relationship between the material and the symbolic' (Boczkowski, Pablo, & Lievrouw, 2007, p. 967); rather, they tended either to see technology as neutral, or to cling to technologically deterministic views. With a few exceptions (see Innis, 1951; McLuhan, 1964, 1970; McLuhan & Fiore, 1967; Raymond Williams, 1974; Silverstone, 1994) or in some analyses of television (Innis, 1951; McLuhan, 1964; McLuhan & Fiore, 1971; Ong, 1982), many scholars of media and communication studies view information technologies as 'the intervening variable that explains a measurable change, the historical catalyst that explains a social shift, or the tool with which passive audiences can finally succumb to or resist the tyranny of mass culture' (Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot 2014, p. 3). By the 1990s this view shifted, however, with information technology weaving into all aspects

of everyday life. Mobile phone devices and the Internet, for example, became more and more central to the sharing and circulation of news, public discourse and entertainment. For media scholars, this rapid expansion of information technology was one of the reasons why they turned their attention to the materiality of the media. This was partly because the content of digital media is so prolific, fast paced and evanescent. This made it difficult for media scholars to fully analyze digital media content, which helped to turn the focus onto the materiality of the technology and contributed to seeing material technology and symbolic content as inseparable from each other.

### ***The mutual shaping of the social and the material***

New media and communication scholars have embraced the mutual shaping approach, adopting the language of sociotechnical configuration (discussed in the previous chapter) and co-production (Boczkowski, 2005; Gillespie, 2009; Haddon, 2006; Hartmann, 2005; Lyon, 2003; Sterne, 2003; van Zoonen, 2002). Although the terminology and their angle of approach may be varied, similar directions are being pursued in media studies (Bruns, 2008; Gitelman, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Varnelis, 2012), in ethnographies of digital cultural practices (Baym & Burnett, 2009; Boyd, 2010; Gray, 2009; Ito et al., 2009), in the materialist turn being explored in cultural theory (Berry, 2011; Galloway, 2004; Gane & Beer, 2008; Parikka, 2012; Slack, 2012), in game studies (Bogost, 2012; Montfort & Bogost, 2009; Taylor, 2009), in debates in media theory and elsewhere on the concepts of 'mediation' and 'mediatization' (Couldry, 2008; Lievrouw, 2009; Mansell, 2012; Silverstone, 2005; Wajcman & Jones, 2012), in scholarship on information policy (Benkler, 2006; Cohen, 2012; Lessig, 1999; Nissenbaum, 2009; Zittrain, 2008), and in critical information studies (Dourish, 2004; Edwards, 1997). All these scholars note that not only social conditions require our attention, but also 'matter

itself'. This conviction comes in many versions, among which is a new materialism perspective in which the call for renewed emphasis on materiality goes hand in hand with the insistence that we need novel understanding of the material world surrounding us (Coole & Frost, 2010; see also Edwards, 1997).

Materiality is not about deterministic, causal schemas, but instead we need to take the material as an agential domain. In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett (2009) uses multiple material artifacts such as trash, power networks, metals and food to support the claim that things have 'the capacity [...] not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own' (Bennett, 2009, p. viii), refusing the perspective that matter is brute, immobile, and passive, while asserting that material objects are not material by themselves but rather matter in context. Agency is not the only characteristic that is attached to material artifacts; they do not act in isolation but in relation to other agencies (human and non-human). STS, and in particular actor network theory (ANT), provide ample conceptual tools to understand the agency of materiality.

### ***Agency***

Recent studies of media and communication do not investigate merely what media do to individuals, but rather how social actors understand, appropriate, and continuously reconstruct them. Within STS a more dialectical, mutual shaping or co-production approach is advocated, where artifacts and social actions are seen as mutually constitutive and determining (Boczkowski, 2010; Hyysalo, 2010; Jasanoff, 2004; Ross, 2012; Wyatt, 2008; Williams, Stewart, & Slack, 2005). This body of studies has contributed to our understanding of how development and use practices are

interconnected throughout the life cycle of media technologies and has blurred the distinction between developers/producers and users as conceptual categories. Millerand & Baker (2010) have noted that 'users and developers are not stable entities; they tend to adopt multiple roles that are constantly evolving throughout information development system processes' (p. 152). In practice, they continue, there are 'crossovers and emergent roles in-between' these categories (p. 156). In the context of remediated pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Reza, pilgrims as users of technology and website managers/designers as developers of the tools that take part in the mediation of pilgrimage play these crossover and emergent roles (a full discussion of this will appear in Chapter Five).

As noted in the previous chapter, agency is not exclusively a property of humans, but rather takes shape in complicated interrelations between human and non-human entities (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2014). Agency in this thesis is viewed as distributed within practices, processes and materialities. This means that agency is not reducible to the material or technological features that makes up a technology such as a mobile phone, nor is it definable by merely the quality or intensity of, for example, sound. Sound is not an object or an entity in the conventional sense of the word (although it can be viewed as vibrating matter), but rather a set of processes and properties operating in and through situated actors and material arrangements. At the same time, considering the agency of sound in the context of pilgrimage would not be complete without a focus on sonic objects, the materials and technologies that emit sound (mobile phones, microphones, online tools etc), or the engineers and social actors who build the infrastructure or act as mediators to transfer the shrine's sound to other pilgrims, or the online users who continually request the website managers to broadcast the sounds

within the tomb chamber into their homes, as well as the quality of sonic objects such as their loudness, pitch and timbre. All these make up sound agency, and when raising the question of what sound does these distributed agencies must be considered. Throughout this thesis, the focus is on agency as process, as distributed agency, or as sociomaterial configurations, rather than on an agent in and of itself. In the next section I look more closely at distributed agency within the STS paradigm.

### *Distributed agency*

In the last two decades the idea of distributed agency has gained momentum across the social sciences, and particularly science and technology studies: ANT has been particularly influential in this regard (Callon, 1986; Law, 1991, 2002; Latour, 1996, 2005, 2007). ANT's approach to materiality is referred to as material semiotics, which calls for a symmetrical view of both human and nonhuman agents (Law, 1999, p. 4), conceptualizing agency as distributed in relational networks. In other words, what are called actors or agents are basically the product or effects of networks, and no primacy of human actors – individual or collective – over nonhuman ones can be assumed.

Latour's well-known example of the gun can elaborate this point. In studying the question 'do people kill or do guns kill?', he argues that one needs to move away from either purely materialist or sociological accounts of the gun's agency. Latour asks:

What does the gun add to the shooting? In the materialist account, everything: an innocent citizen becomes a criminal by virtue of the gun in her hand. The gun enables, of course, but also instructs, directs, even pulls the trigger [...] Each artifact has its script, its potential to take hold of a passerby and force them to play a role in its story. By contrast, the sociological version [...] renders the gun a neutral carrier

of will that adds nothing to the action, playing the role of a passive conductor, through which good and evil are equally able to flow (Latour, 1999, p. 177).

Latour claims that what both perspectives – materialist and sociological – fail to understand is that agency 'resides in the blind spot in which society and matter exchange properties' (Latour, 1999, p.190). Hence neither the gun nor the individual can bear the responsibility for the act of killing; the responsibility lies in the way the two agencies come together to construct a new hybrid agent – the gunman – and also the sociotechnical network that supports and makes possible such an alliance (Latour, 1999, pp. 180–182). Other scholars have followed this view; Pickering's (1996) work on 'the dance of agency' between humans and artifacts, Kaufmann's 'la danse avec les choses' (Kaufmann, 1995), and Suchman's 'sociomaterial configurations' (Suchman, 2012, p. 48). Understanding agency as a situated process is at the core of this approach. Material semiotic approaches claim that entities give one another being, that they enact each other and get enacted upon, or as (Law & Mol, 2008) put it the 'enacted-actor' (p.154) – the actor that is enacted in relation to other actors – does not exist all by itself and neither does it act in isolation. Rather, it acts in collaboration with others to such an extent that it is not always clear who is doing what. Actions move like a viscous fluid, what each actor does depends on their co-actors, but this does not indicate that a particular actor is determined by its surroundings; an actor-enacted has its own 'stubbornness and specificities' (Law & Mol, 2008, p. 73). The notion of enactment is used to suggest that the realities and identities of material artifacts and, in particular, technological devices are variously performed (Law, 2002, 2008).

Scholars who are rooted in the STS tradition argue that realities are not constructed – a term that evokes a sense of finality – but rather are constantly crafted and reconfigured

in specific situations. In this sense, Law (2008, p. 635) writes, '[Various] realities (including objects and subjects) and representations of those realities are being enacted or performed simultaneously.' In this way of thinking agency becomes ubiquitous, 'endlessly extended through webs of materialised relations' (Law & Mol 2008, p. 58). But what is the best way to pin these relations down? This is a matter of attribution, post hoc and after the action. In exploring stories about pilgrimage experiences, some entities or agencies are detached from their background and called actors (or pilgrims, technology or emotions); they are shaped to conceal and stand for the web of relations that they convey and cover. Any story of mediated pilgrimage that is discussed here is then partial; the reality of this practice is never exhausted. 'Imagine it as a fractal: if you magnify a fragment you discover an image that is as complex as the first one. And it is the same if you shift your attention to another fragment' (Law & Mol 2008, p. 72). In this view, technological artifacts seem to be a singular, stable reality only when the variety of enactments and practices which constitute them are bracketed. However, their realities multiply when various enactments are explored (Mol, 2002).<sup>16</sup>

In the next section I look more closely at the concept of mediation, beginning with early studies by Silverstone. I then move on to elaborate on Lievrouw's mediation approach. With this as background, I extend this concept of mediation to discuss how we can understand mediation and materiality in relation to religion, and in particular pilgrimage practice. I propose that mediation as an approach helps in understanding pilgrimage

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<sup>16</sup> A somewhat connected concept is the idea of multi-stability, which has been developed in postphenomenology: it refers to the ever-present potential for an artifact to be used in multiple ways through multiple contexts (Ihde, 2009, 2012; Mol, 2002; Rosenberger, 2014).

among Persian Muslims, and their relation to Imam Reza through the use of digital technologies.

### ***Mediation***

Silverstone, was one of the early adopters of the concept of mediation. He defines mediation as follows:

Mediation, in the sense in which I am using the term, describes the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication (the press, broadcast radio and television, and increasingly the world wide web), are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life (Silverstone, 2002, P. 762).

According to Silverstone, mediation encompasses the process through which meanings are circulated in society and, as a consequence, are constantly transformed (Silverstone, 1999, 2005, 2007; see also Couldry, 2008, 2013; Livingstone, 2009; Madianou, 2005; Ong, 2014; Thumim, 2012). Silverstone understands mediation as a transformative and dialectic process: it includes the ways in which social actors engage with media. and the engagement and interactions between individuals, groups and institutions that use symbolic resources provided via media. The world of mediation according to Silverstone is multi-directional:

Mediation is dialectical because while it is perfectly possible to privilege mass media as defining and perhaps even determining social meanings, such privileging would miss the continuous and often creative engagement that listeners and viewers have with the products of mass communication. And it is uneven, precisely because the power to work with, or against, the dominant or deeply entrenched

meanings that the media provide is unevenly distributed across and within societies (Silverstone, 2002, p. 762).

Silverstone argues that crucial to understanding these multi-directional processes is the need 'to enquire into the instability and flux of meanings and into their transformations, [and] also into the politics of their fixing' (Silverstone, 1999 P. 16). One of the questions raised by this theory relates to the ways in which media permeate new areas of social life, upsetting and unsettling previously established relations (Siapera, 2013); the extent to which media power is liberating remains an empirical enquiry. Within this view of mediation, and in the context of this study, the relevant questions are whether, and how, new media such as ICTs are stabilizing, challenging or transforming conventional ways of practicing pilgrimage. More specifically, I explore at the end of this chapter, and more deeply in Chapter Four, how the remediation of pilgrimage practice opens up spaces for new configurations and experiences of pilgrimage practice, including some which may challenge the authenticity of the ritual.

Couldry (2008) agrees with Silverstone's argument that any process of mediation of a realm of cultural or social life is multidirectional:

Media work, and must work, not merely by transmitting discrete textual units for discrete moments of reception, but through a process of environmental transformation which, in turn, transforms the conditions under which any future media can be produced and understood. In other words, 'mediation' is a non-linear process (Couldry, 2008, p. 380).

More specifically, Couldry explores how users engage in practices of storytelling on the Internet. For Couldry, treating these practices as an instance of mediation makes it

possible to respond to 'questions about how the availability of digital storytelling forms enable enduring habits of exchange, archiving, commentary and reinterpretation [...] [and] about the institutional embedding of the processes of producing, distributing and receiving digital stories' (2008, p. 388). He argues that certain practices with regards to the use of the Internet, such as storytelling, depend on assemblages of texts and artifacts that enact dynamics of media production, consumption, and circulation. Taking mediation as an approach shifts our focus of attention from merely investigating artifacts and textual forms or contents, to the role of practices in social life (see also Couldry, 2004).

In more recent analyses, mediation consists of 'social practices that do not exhaust the simple use of media technologies and/or production of media messages' (Couldry, 2008, p. 260). In order to tackle the challenge of bringing together practices, the materiality of the medium, its social and historical context, users, etc., Lievrouw also proposes mediation as a framework for understanding the mutually constitutive elements of media technology (Lievrouw, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Siapera, 2013). In her view mediation can be understood as an ongoing, articulated, and mutually determining relationship among three components of communication technology infrastructure and three corresponding processes or modes of change (see Figure 2.1).

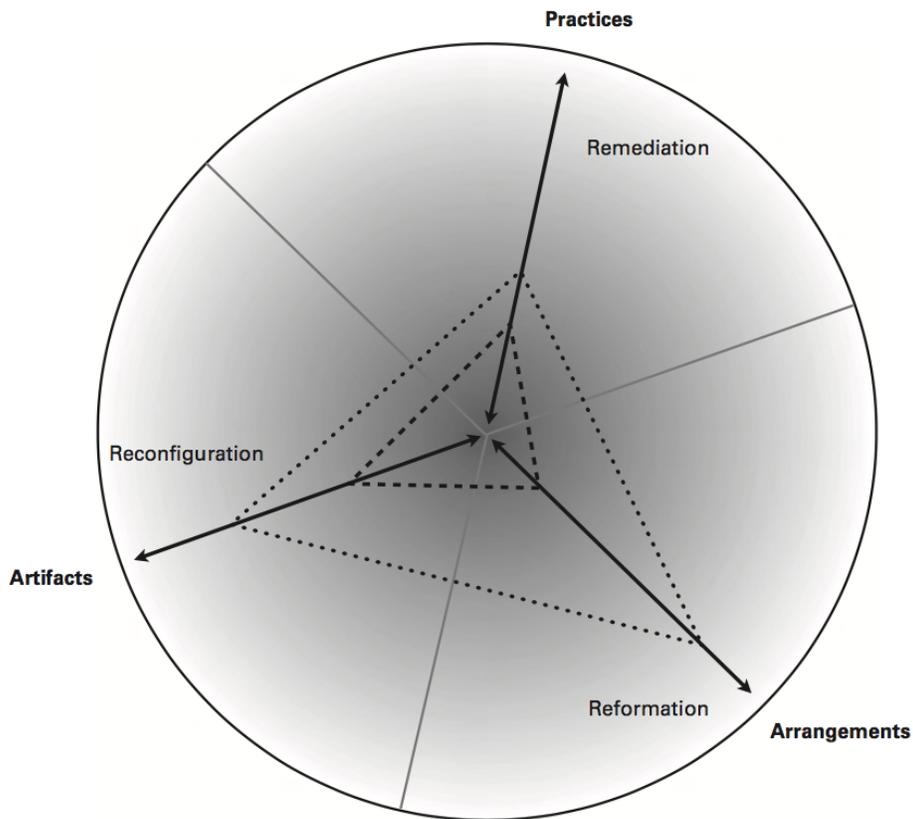


Figure 2.1 Mediation (Lievrouw, 2014, p.45)

Mediation encompasses the reconfiguration of media technologies and the remediation of media meanings (Lievrouw, 2011a). For Lievrouw, practices change in a continuous process of remediation of interaction, expression and cultural contexts. Patterns of relations, organizing and institutional structures are referred to as social arrangements; they are formed and shaped along with the devices, artifacts and practices through a process of reformation (Lievrouw, 2014). It is through remediation that political activists, for example, appropriate and adapt media for their own goals and purposes, while through remediation social movement agents construct new meanings starting from already existing cultural works and media products (Lievrouw, 2011).

## ***STS and mediation***

STS's work on mediation goes hand in hand with the work of postphenomenology (e.g., Ihde, 2003, 2009, 2010; Lievrouw, 2011a; Rosenberger 2009, 2014; Rosenberger and Verbeek, 2015; Verbeek, 2005, 2011), which refers to a school of thought that builds on approaches in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, expanding it with certain ideas and commitments. This perspective begins from the theories and concepts developed by Don Ihde and engages in concrete case studies revolving around certain human-technology relations (Rosenberger, 2014). As a distinctive philosophical perspective, postphenomenological claims are posed from an embodied and situated perspective, referring to practical issues (Rosenberger and Verbeek, 2015). Postphenomenology does not approach technologies as merely functional and instrumental artifacts, but instead views them as mediators of human experience and practices (Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015). Furthermore, postphenomenological studies combine an empirical orientation with philosophical analysis. They take technologies as their starting point to understand and explore human experience.

There are subtle differences between STS and postphenomenology. Some scholars claim that while STS merely analyzes things from a distance, phenomenology describes them from a closer engagement (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). However, they both use the concept of mediation to describe the phenomenon of emergent socio-material realities and to understand human experience. Instead of seeking the answer in either subjective ideas or objective facts, they both focus on the intentional relation between subjects and objects: 'A mediating technology enables certain possibilities for a user, while perhaps also foreclosing others, all of this relative to the particular user, the particular device, and the particular use-context' (Rosenberger, 2014, p. 375). Note that contrary

to some postphenomenological scholars (See Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Van Den Eede, 2011), mediation is not something that occurs 'in between' subjects and objects, or a 'middle position' between them; rather it is the origin of entities (for a more in-depth critique of this view see Verbeek, 2012). Subjects and material objects cannot have a separate existence. The human subject is always directed towards objects; we don't merely see, hear or think, but we see, hear and think of something. In the same vein objects in themselves may exist, but as soon as we think of them, they become things-for-us, artifacts that are disclosed in our relations with them. Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005, p. 130) describes mediation as follows: 'What humans are and what their world is receive their form by artifactual mediation. Mediation does not simply take place between a subject and an object, but rather co-shapes subjectivity and objectivity.' Ingold's argument further confirms that mediation should be thought of as an ongoing process of making rather than the passive connection of two or more discrete entities (Ingold, 2011; see also Revill, 2013, p. 4).

Both approaches distance themselves from the idea that there is a pre-given subject in a pre-given world of objects with a mediating object between them. Instead, mediation is a source of the specific shape that human subjectivity and the objectivity of the world can take. Postphenomenology is the practical study of relations between humans and technological artifacts, from which human subjectivities emerge, as well as meaningful worlds. This idea that objects and subjects are configured and shaped in the technologically mediated relations that exist between them is referred to as relational ontology. Rosenberger and Verbeek (2015) explain this as follows:

A telescope organizes a relation between an observer and a heavenly body, just as an ultrasound device helps to shape the relation between expecting parents and

their unborn child. In doing so, technologies also help to shape the subjectivity of their users and the objectivity of their world: telescopes constitute their users as observers and the sky as the observable, just as ultrasound constitutes the unborn child as a potential patient and expecting parents as those who are responsible for the health condition of their child (Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015, p. 19).

Subjects and objects are always the product of mediation, rather than the starting point. But postphenomenology argues that in order to see these processes of mutual configuration, and to do justice to human experience that we are subjectively 'in' a world, it is necessary to draw a line between humans and artifacts. When we give up this line, we also let go of the phenomenological possibility to articulate (mediated) experience 'from within' (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2014, p. 20). ANT puts complications towards networks of relations 'from outside', from a third-person perspective; postphenomenology on the other hand, engages human-world relations, and their technologically mediated character, from a first-person perspective. It is not the distinction between humans and non-humans that it wants to depart from, but their radical separation (see Verbeek, 2005, pp. 166-168). This subtle difference between 'separating' humans and nonhumans on the one hand and 'distinguishing' them on the other, enable us to conceptualize the 'active' role of technologies. As I elaborate in Chapter Four, when pilgrims call the shrine to talk to Imam Reza and say their pilgrimage prayers, they start their conversation with a human operator; once the operator assures the pilgrim that he is holding the handset towards the golden dome, the operator recedes into the background, becoming invisible and joining the sociotechnical configuration that mediates the shrine. Remediated pilgrimage in this case starts from the time when the pilgrims talk to the operator and distinguishing the operator from

the phone enables us to crystallize and notice the active role that each agent plays in this mediation.

When both postphenomenology and STS assert that technologies play an actively mediating role in human-world relations, it doesn't mean that artifacts can act just as humans do: 'The question is not: is agency not only a property of subjects but also of objects? Rather, the question is: what kind of roles do objects play in agency? Agency then is not an exclusively human property anymore: it takes shape in complicated interrelations between humans and nonhuman entities' (Rosenberger and Verbeek, 2014, p. 20; see also Boczkowski, 2010; Jasanoff, 2004; Hyysalo, 2010; Williams et al., 2005; Wyatt, 2008; Ross, 2012).

These approaches provide different resources for the analysis of mediated pilgrimage. Several scholars have suggested that postphenomenology and ANT can be usefully mixed (Hildebrandt, 2007; Smith, 2003; Verbeek, 2005). It is not hard to see their motivation. The reason is that these two approaches each articulate something about technology that the other misses. Postphenomenology is proficient at exploring the nuances of the relationships developed between an individual user and a technology, however it is not as readily prepared to analyze the effects of these relationships on the larger world. Conversely, actor-network theory is adept at describing the ways that collections of people and technologies together have effects on the world or addressing the chains of interactions among various human and non-humans, but not so proficient at addressing the nuances of particular relationships between individual humans and technologies (Rosenberger, 2014). As Aaron Smith (2003, p. 189) puts it, 'Latour's view [...], does not develop in nearly the same depth the direct personal relationships with artifacts that Ihde's does. Instead, Latour's project could be seen as picking up where

lhde's ends because it emphasizes systems of relations.' In other words, a distinction lies in the fact that the postphenomenological approach provides a way of engaging more closely with lived experience, at the point of the interface or the intersection between humans and technologies.

### ***Remediation***

In an attempt to understand the dynamic between practices and artifacts, Bolter & Grusin (1999) refer to remediation as the way in which a medium repurposes, reconfigures, and rehabilitates the 'techniques, forms, and social significance' of previous media (p. 65). Remediation is 'the making of new media forms out of older ones' (Bolter & Gromala, 2003, p. 80; see also Bolter & Grusin, 1999). I have also touched upon this concept in Zia (2011), arguing that the shrine is a medium for connecting Muslims to Imam Reza, and the mobile phone and the Internet are new configurations that remediate this connection. The making of new media forms out of older ones is a recurrent topic in the chapters that follow. For example, the shrine as a built artifact, a physical and material artifact, becomes reconfigured when it is remediated through the mobile phone and landline telephone (Chapter Four); online (Chapter Five); through Virtual Reality glasses (Chapter Six), or through pilgrims' selfies and Instagram photos on social media (Chapter Seven). In the process of mediation not only are the shrine, the VR glasses, the mobile phones etc. repurposed and reconfigured, but also the social agents involved. The pilgrim who engages in remediated pilgrimage practice is shaped and enacted through that practice. The website managers who manage and develop the shrine's online tools are also configured differently as people who play an active role in the experience/design and even completion of pilgrimage practices (Chapter Five), and in remediating the shrine, the servants who sweep the shrine's courtyards are also

enacted in a way that connects pilgrims to the shrine with their mobile phones (Chapter Four). They are no longer servants in the shrine who clean the courtyards, but those are play a central role in remediating the shrine for pilgrims who are not able to be there.

Bolter and Grusin note as well that, throughout history, new media artifacts have been embedded in discourses of authenticity and immediacy. Remediation thrives on a 'double logic': that of 'transparent immediacy' and of 'hypermediacy' (1999, p.313). The logic of transparent immediacy indicates that media technologies are erased from the representations that they produce, making it seem as if these representations offer immediate access to reality in a raw and unmediated sense. In other words, the medium itself is perceived as entirely transparent and invisible, like a window, and generates the illusion of the representation as an 'authentic' presence. This idea of medium being perceived as invisible is explored in Chapters Five and Six. Hypermediacy, on the other hand, claims multiple acts of representation and acknowledges that the technological medium itself is 'real', in that it is gradually becoming our second nature (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p.316). For example, many pilgrims who type pilgrimage prayers to Imam Reza acknowledge the existence of the medium in the form of the comment or *del neveshteh* section of the shrine's website (Chapter Five). Remediation is a concept which highlights the paradox of immediacy and authenticity, as Meyer (2008, p. 7) notes:

Positioning a new medium in relation to a previous one, remediation temporarily cracks the taken-for-grantedness to which mediation owes its reality effect. Exactly for this reason, moments of the introduction of new media are fruitful entry points to study cultural transformation in our globalizing age. As life-worlds are constantly reproduced through mediation, with immediacy being an effect rather than a starting point, the question is: How do new media intervene in an established

practice of mediation, characterized by the use of particular media, modes of transmission, and systems of communication? How does this change normalized transmission and communication?

### ***Religious mediation***

Religion encompasses a sense of going beyond the ordinary that can be called the divine, invisible, spiritual, or transcendent, and that requires certain forms of behavior, or particular sensibilities (Berlinger, 2014; Houtman & Meyer, 2012, 2008). The practice of religion has gone through many changes and shifts, and the study of these transformations and the role that materiality plays in religious experience is crucial in our understanding of any particular religion. As Meyer (2013, p. 2) notes: 'After all, the point is not just to state what is new, but to grasp how the present—and future—of religion and of its study are indebted to and shaped by its past.' This approach, which views religion as constantly changing, rejects theories that foreground belief, meaning, and inner religiosity (e.g., Asad, 1993, pp. 27–54). It departs from previous approaches in which religions were viewed as systems of ideas to which believers assented (Asad, 1993; Hoover, 2006; Lopez, 1998; Lynch, 2007, 2012; Orsi, 2013; Strenski, 2005; Zito, 2008). Instead, this new way of looking at religion invites us to deconstruct the traditional hierarchy of inner belief (see Asad, 1993) over outward forms of religious practice. Hence recent scholars are paying attention to actual religious practices, including engagement with artifacts, words, pictures, and other religious forms. This 're-materialization' of our conceptual approaches to religion (Houtman & Meyer, 2012, p.4; Morgan, 2010), the attention towards 'lived religion' (Nyhagen, 2017, p.1) and asking how religion becomes tangible in the world, is in parallel with developments in media studies, postphenomenology and STS, as materiality becomes a key term in the study

of religious practices. A materialized study of religion starts with the understanding that things, their deployment, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 209). It also entails tracing the continuous shifts in material use from the past to the present.

Religion as a mediated practice is a great realm of inquiry as well in which to explore distributed agencies. Thomas (2006, p.37) argues that religions have become 'machineries' and 'laboratories' of complex mediated communication. Immediate face-to-face communication is not the default mode of communication for religious practitioners; instead religion is always mediated, ranging from an architectural structure, a tomb, or a stone to religious texts. I have explored an instance of this mediation in the role of the shrine of Imam Reza itself in mediating pilgrimage practice among Iranian Shiite pilgrims (Zia, 2011). I viewed the shrine as a built artifact that mediates the presence of Imam Reza, and argued that the experience of pilgrimage to Imam Reza has always been a mediated one; moreover, I concluded that the use of ICTs such as mobile phones and pilgrimage online platforms are all a remediation of pilgrimage. This thesis expands my previous work by engaging further analytical tools to examine a wider range of empirical cases, and to develop the themes that were outlined in the previous chapter.

While the use of media for communicating with the divine and the use of media for communicating among the adherents of a certain religion might be different, they are still intertwined and interconnected. As we see in the case of the shrine of Imam Reza, practitioners who go to a certain religious site or location, to practice some form of ritual, also communicate with each other or use technology to communicate with those who are not present in that space. And in another sense, religious services and

ceremonies are multimedia performances (Thomas, 2007), complex combinations of various media of communication. Liturgies are multimedia patterns with complex forms of order (Rappaport, 1979, 1999; Thomas, 2007). Religion, by offering 'multiple media for materializing the sacred' is 'the practice of making the invisible visible [...]. Once made material, the invisible can be negotiated and bargained with, touched and kissed, made to bear human anger and disappointment' (Orsi 2012, p. 147). Hence religion is characterized as a 'medium of absence'<sup>17</sup> (Weibel 2011, p. 33), which affects a kind of presence of the transcendent. Religion renders present what is not there in an ordinary way by the use of multiple media (broadly defined from spirit mediums and pictures, relics, wood and bones, to books and digital computers) that train and activate the special sensibilities required for communication with the transcendent (Meyer, 2013). From this view, media are understood as taking part in 'effecting the transcendent toward which humans reach out, with and about which they seek to communicate and which they strive to manipulate' (Meyer, 2013, p. 8). For example, De Meneses (2017) explores how territoriality is enacted through Kaak al Abbas, which is a religious food in the celebration of Ashura, a landmark in the Karbala battle.<sup>18</sup> The author argues that the sacred can materialize in the mundane act of a group of Muslims such as eating, which consequently configures identities, and demarcates authority and territoriality. Others have explored the use of objects and pictures in shaping religious practices (Houtman & Meyer, 2012; Morgan, 2010, 2012; Pinney, 2004; Vásquez, 2011). The interdisciplinary

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<sup>17</sup> This concept was introduced in the previous chapter as one of the themes that will be explored in this thesis.

<sup>18</sup> Took place on October 10, 680 [10th of Muharram, AH 61], a brief military battle in which a small party led by al-Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and son of Ali, the fourth caliph, was defeated and massacred by an army sent by the Umayyad caliph Yazid I. The battle helped secure the position of the Umayyad dynasty, but among Shiite Muslims the 10th of Muharram (or Ashura) became an annual holy day of public mourning (Source Britannica.com accessed April 2018).

journal *Material Religion* (launched in 2005) includes a plethora of articles that deal with the role of material artifacts, and the editors of the journal argue that 'a material study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it' (cited in Houtman and Meyer, 2012 p. 7). Winchester (2017) investigates the relationship between Eastern Orthodox converts and their religious icons, noting that material artifacts play a role in the formation of religious identity. Similarly, Keane (2013) looks at how the relationship between humans and gods is mediated by operations on the materiality of the written sign. He asserts that once divine words are rendered into script, they gain a distinctively material quality and form; these are practices that generate or control religious powers.

As religious practices that are mediated through new technologies are informed by their more established forms, this process is referred to as sedimentation. The term 'sedimentation' points to the past experiences that actively contextualize present experience. Rosenberger (2014, p.38) uses the notion of sedimentation to refer to the force of habit related to a given human-technology relation. That is, a connection that is highly sedimented is one that is steeped in long-developed bodily-perceptual habits. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter Six, it is customary for pilgrims to say greetings to Imam Reza upon their entrance to his shrine, as they gaze at the golden dome. This act of greeting is remediated in the online world, as many pilgrims who view the shrine of Imam Reza in social media type similar greetings to Imam Reza below those photos. Although the practice of greeting is enacted differently, the greetings posted online are heavily informed by the long-standing practice of greeting the Imam while looking at the dome that contains his tomb.

Mediation is a fruitful tool to explore how communities are shaped in relation to a religion as well. The concept of Ummah, which refers to religious community, or 'virtual Ummah' in relation to the use of the Internet, is one that focuses on Muslim communities living in the diaspora (Lawrence, 2002; Mandaville, 2003, 2001; Roy, 2004 Cited in Al-Rawi 2016, p. 20). The virtual Ummah includes certain Muslim groups or communities who meet in an online platform like YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook in order to discuss issues of common concern. In some ways, the virtual Ummah reconstitutes what Benkler (2006) and Bruns, Burgess, Highfield, Kirchhoff, & Nicolai (2011) have identified as the 'networked public sphere,' or what Castells termed as the 'global network society' or the 'global public sphere' that is 'built around the media communication system such as the Internet and the mobile phone' (Castells, 2008, p. 90). In this thesis, the concept of 'virtual Ummah' is discussed by using its equivalent concept, community, in Chapters Six and Seven.

An exploration of religious practice through mediation brings about interesting debates about the role of material artifacts in making authority, as media 'mediatize' or assume power by undermining or facilitating changes and shifts in the authority of key social institutions (Hjarvard, 2008, p.3). In the increasingly growing religious marketplace (Clark, 2007; Hjarvard, 2008), traditional religious authorities are 'losing and to a great degree already have lost — the ability to control their own symbols and the means by which those symbols are expressed and communicated' (Clark, 2007, pp.3-8; see also Hjarvard, 2008; Hoover, 2007). Mandaville (2001) argues that contemporary Muslim intellectuals often challenge the authority of the government and the mosque and situate themselves in 'spaces which institutionalized forms of politics cannot reach and online media help to achieve' (p. 190). Similarly, Bennett & Segerberg (2012) argue that

the role of social media channels in today's societies is expanding so quickly that they have entered the phase of protest action, in the sense that they have become part of the tools for social and political activism that involves religious causes. In the context of the mobile phone it is argued that the advent of inexpensive mobile devices and seemingly ubiquitous technologies is important in the ongoing mediation of religious practice and is credited as one factor of an individualization of religious practice and a weakening of religious authority (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Peter Mandaville, 2007). In this respect new forms of pilgrimage mediation enable pilgrims to openly practice pilgrimage on their own terms, resisting accepted, authorized forms of practice. In the case of some forms of mediation where authorities have less control, some Muslims will even criticize and question the practice of pilgrimage through new media, condemning it to be futile and stupid (this will be explored in Chapter Four in relation to calling Imam Reza). On the other side of the spectrum, where authority and religious leaders have more control over material mediations, they can prohibit any disagreement or disrespectful comments in relation to a sacred figure: for example, in the case of Imam Reza's website the written prayers go through human filters and then get posted online. On the shrine's Facebook page, disrespectful comments are immediately deleted or altered in a way that is no longer readable. At the same time material artifacts and media technologies do not themselves mediate pilgrimage practice, but they become sacred with the introduction of Islamic icons and prayers. For example, when pilgrims post selfies inside the shrine and share them on social media, the way they represent the space they inhabit in the shrine, and the caption of their photo, mediates the presence of the shrine and Imam Reza and this leads the pilgrim's friends and followers to post pilgrimage prayers below his/her photo. And even when it comes to practicing pilgrimage via certain technological devices, some Islamic religious leaders encourage

people to perform *wudu* (this is also the case for virtual pilgrimage to Imam Reza),<sup>19</sup> which is washing parts of your body in preparation for pilgrimage or prayer. This leads to the further question of how the sacred becomes tangible, how certain materials or technological artifacts become sacred, and how Imam Reza becomes accessible through various mediations and associated practices. On the other hand, too much effort paid to sacralization may have a reverse effect. For example, the color green in Shiism represents holiness, so that on one of the online pilgrimage tools for Imam Reza, his tomb chamber was rendered in the form of a 3D image with an exaggerated green light, which actually deterred viewers and potential pilgrims from feeling connected to the shrine and Imam Reza (discussed further in Chapter Five).

When it comes to the use of ICTs, many feel that the connection that is enacted through these technologies cannot act fully as a substitute for face-to-face and physical connection. This is an instance of the 'compulsion of proximity', a phrase coined by Boden and Molotch (1994). To them co-present interaction acts as the 'the fundamental mode of human intercourse and socialization' (p. 278). Their central argument is that in many situations co-present interaction is an upgrade from other forms of interaction, such as sending emails or making phone calls. They refer this to a 'thickness' (p. 278) in co-present communications, through factors encompassing facial expression, gesture, body talk, and turn taking, along with the fact that these features are lost in other modes of interaction. They also suggest that co-presence is part of a wider sphere of interaction and that:

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<sup>19</sup> Source: <https://news.aqr.ir/> and <https://article.tebyan.net> (accessed Jan 2018).

Modernity is made possible not by the substitution of new technologies for copresence but by a tensely adjusted distribution of copresence and the more impersonal forms across individuals, tasks, places and moments (Boden & Molotch, 1994, p. 278).

Sociologist John Urry (2002) takes up this debate in relation to mobility, stating that co-presence is still a central motivation for travel. He claims as well, however, that there is the potential for some of the features of co-presence to be found in virtual proximities through new technologies:

Virtual travel produces a kind of strange and uncanny life on the screen, a life that is near and far, present and absent, live and dead. The kinds of travel and presencing involved will change the character and experience of 'co-presence', since people can feel proximate while still distant (Urry, 2002, p. 267).

Within the context of pilgrimage, the same challenge arises; can digital technologies obviate the need for co-presence? if the answer is no, then how does remediated pilgrimage enact the 'compulsion of proximity' (Boden and Molotch, 1994, p. 278) and address the need for being present inside a religious site?

### ***A note on Iran and Media***

After the revolution in Iran, which took place in 1979, the country was transformed. After years of being under a monarchy the revolution brought an Islamic regime, ruled by religious leaders. The constitution of the country is at its core Islamic. As Eshaghi states, 'the politic of the country and the religious have had many relations with each other in Iranian history and in some cases" the religious" has been defined in a situation beyond the extent of the political power' (Eshaghi, 2016, p. 494).

Within this system the media, both old (e.g. print and television) and new (Internet and cellular phones) are predominantly controlled by the state. Censorship has played an important role in the suppression of domestic opposition and management of ideas and information in the public sphere (Rahimi, 2015).<sup>20</sup> So that what internet users can view online is – it is often assumed – entirely controlled by the government and many websites such as Facebook are filtered and inaccessible from inside the country. However, the widespread use of proxy servers or web proxies (virtual private networks) such as Tor (Tor project, 2011) is common to circumvent government censorship (see Baldino & Gool, 2013; Eshaghi, 2016). The same control and level of surveillance is assumed to apply to religious activities online. For example, comments that are posted in relation to discussing certain religious activities such as calling the shrine or posting pilgrimage prayers will go through a layer of control by either the government or website managers (this will be discussed in Chapters Four and Five).

Historically Iran has embraced technology; this was evident during the 1979 revolution, which was 'meant to put into practice the supposed affinity between scientific technology and faith' (Rahimi, 2003, p. 102). Furthermore, 35 percent of the population has access to the Internet, and they account for over 50 percent of Internet users in the region (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2011). Kermani and Saeed (2017)<sup>21</sup> state that Internet users in Iran are estimated to be nearly 47 million. The Internet was first introduced into the country in 1993, with its adoption by the institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IPM), associated with the Ministry of Science (Rahimi & Gheytauchi, 2008;

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<sup>20</sup> For a complete discussion on media censorship in Iran see Rahimi (2015). For current state of Internet censorship under Rouhani's presidency see Karlsson and Kim (2015).

<sup>21</sup> Papers that are written in Farsi appear at the end of the references section in their original format for readers to be able to easily locate them.

Rahimi 2008, 2011). During the years between 2001 and 2008 Iran saw a significant increase in Internet use as the population of Internet users grew from 1.7 to 23 million; this was a penetration rate of 35 percent (Rahimi 2015). Online tools on the Internet such as Twitter, Facebook,<sup>22</sup> Youtube and blogs are widely used among Iranians (for a full report on their usage in Iran see Baldino & Goold, 2013). Similarly, mobile phones are increasingly being used in Iran (Rahimi et al. 2016 in Farsi, Kemp 2015 cited in Rahimi, 2017; Smith 2014 cited in Rahimi 2017).<sup>23</sup> In 2009 it was estimated that 50 million Iranians (over 70 percent) owned mobile phones.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter set out the theoretical foundations on which this thesis is based. Inspired by STS and ANT, the concept of mediation is unpacked, as well as the role of material and human agencies which act as the building blocks for understanding and defining remediated pilgrimage practice in the chapters that follow.

The chapter ends by connecting insights from media studies, STS and postphenomenology to debates on how religious practices should be studied and analyzed. Recent approaches in religious studies resonate with those of media studies and STS, viewing religion as continually transforming through remediations of practice. Specifically, this thesis looks at how pilgrimage is practiced or 'lived', with a focus on forms of distributed agencies that are involved in this practice. In the context of pilgrimage practice, mediation also allows us to explore how religious communities are

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<sup>22</sup>On the use of Facebook in Iran See Mousavi et al, 2013; Rahimi et al., 2015; Khosrowshahi and Azargoon 2012.

<sup>23</sup> For studies on mobile phone use in Iran see Kermani 2017; Shavazi and Homayoun, 2014 cited in Kermani, 2017; Hashemi, 2014 cited in Kermani, 2017; Mehdizadeh and Khila, 2013.

shaped. The chapter ends with a note on Iran and media. In the next chapter, I provide further background on pilgrimage in Iran, and in particular to the shrine of Imam Reza.

## ***Chapter Three: Pilgrimage among Shiite Iranians***

The practice of pilgrimage plays a key role in the religious lives of many in Iran. Pilgrimage involves complex and highly diverse practices; to enable a clearer understanding of its dimensions, this chapter starts by reviewing some relevant resources from pilgrimage studies, focusing on ideas of movement and mobility. Within this literature pilgrimage is seen as a practice that encompasses myriad forms of movement from physical travel, to holding one's hands towards the shrine, to virtual and imaginative mobilities or 'journeys of the mind'.

The discussion then moves on to pilgrimage in the context of Islam, particularly Shiism and, more specifically, pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Reza. I briefly discuss Hajj and *ziyarat*, as two main pilgrimage practices among Muslims, followed by a short discussion of how they differ slightly in each Islamic denomination. This discussion acts as a background to understanding pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Reza.

The next sections of this chapter provide a brief introduction to Imam Reza and his shrine, and the chapter ends by introducing the use of ICTs in pilgrimage experience. This discussion includes previous studies on pilgrimage to Imam Reza using online tools and panoramic images of the shrine and serves as a transition into Chapter Four.

### ***A brief overview of pilgrimage studies***

Pilgrimage is a significant part of the world's major religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Pilgrimage has been defined as 'a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding' (Barber, 1993, p. 1), or as involving journeys to and from sacred

sites and expressing beliefs and practices related to those sacred sites (Eade & Albera, 2015). Pilgrimage is also defined as both a traditional religious and a modern secular journey. Many pilgrims keep practicing this ritual, continuing pilgrimage's longstanding history, and many shrines still act as magnets to those in search of spiritual fulfillment (Digance, 2003). Pilgrimage has been studied in many fields including geography (Bhardwaj, 1983; Feldhaus, 2003), anthropology (Bhardwaj, 1983; Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Fontana, 1981; Coleman, 2014; Wang 2009 cited in Boivin, 2016), gender studies (Honarpisheh, 2013; Notermans & Jansen, 2012; Yeoh 2015) and media studies (de Vries, 2001; Lutgendorf, 1995; Morris, 2002; Meyer, 2006; Schulz, 2006). Within religious studies, authors argue that pilgrimage includes immersion and being present in a holy site; Smith and Ernst (1993) refer to pilgrimage as a ritual that orients the cosmos around a holy site and provides ways for pilgrims to integrate themselves around symbols of transcendence. Many scholars of religion agree that the assumption of a holy place plays an important role in the practice of pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage and sacred travel have often been studied and analyzed as interwoven concepts. The tendency to connect these two concepts has partly been a result of Victor and Edith Turner's work on Christian pilgrimage in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978). In their book they call pilgrimage 'a kinetic ritual' (1978, p. xiii). In this thesis the notion of travel is not extensively explored in relation to pilgrimage in terms of physical movement; rather, the focus is on how pilgrimage practice is remediated through the use of ICTs. In Chapter Seven walking to the shrine as physical movement is discussed, but the primary focus is on what remediates and enacts pilgrimage experience for those who are distant from the shrine. Nonetheless, (im)mobility and movement are important analytical tools to understand pilgrimage.

### ***Pilgrimage movement and mobility***

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, mobility has become an evocative term and an established interdisciplinary field of enquiry with a powerful discourse of its own. The concept of mobility entails large-scale movements of people, objects, capital, and information throughout the world, as well as more local processes of daily transportation, movement through public space, and the movement of material things in everyday life (Collins-Kreiner 2010; Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006). In line with this view and within pilgrimage studies, Smith (1992) argues that the term 'pilgrimage' connotes a religious journey, particularly one to a shrine or a sacred place. Coleman and Crang (2006) argue that pilgrimage movements entail both movement to and movement at sacred sites.

Many of the theories referenced within pilgrimage studies are adopted from tourism scholarship.<sup>24</sup> Tourism research develops a new mobility paradigm that offers a conceptual framework for understanding the nature not only of tourism, but also of many other practices (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2004). According to this perspective, places are seen as dynamic, as places of movement. 'Places are like ships,' note Bærenholdt et al., 'moving around and not necessarily staying in one location' (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2004, p. 146). In this thesis, following this perspective, pilgrimage spaces, such as the space of the shrine of Imam Reza or the online spaces that mediate the shrine, are understood as fluid and dynamic. The spaces that mediate the presence of Imam Reza are not stable and fixed but diverse and

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<sup>24</sup> For an in-depth understanding of the intersection of tourism and pilgrimage see Cohen, 1992, 1998; Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000; Digance, 2003, 2006; Ebron, 1999; Frey, 1998; MacCannell, 1973; Smith, 1992; Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Turner & Turner, 1978; Vukonić, 1996.

multiple, and through the case studies that are explored here this diversity is unpacked.<sup>25</sup>

A recent survey of mobilities research stresses a number of important aspects of this emerging field of study, including a focus on the relationship between human mobilities and immobilities; analysis of the relationship between mobility systems and infrastructural moorings; and the interrelational dynamics between physical, informational, virtual and imaginative forms of mobility (Hannam et al., 2006; Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Although the concept of migration has gained much attention in the field of mobilities, other forms of 'circulation,' and in particular 'religious circulations,' have received less attention (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1990, p.12). The representation of the mobility of crowds of pilgrims can be seen in terms of the number of pilgrims traveling to a sacred site: for example, each year an estimated three to five million Muslims go on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, around five million Christians go to Lourdes in France, and 28 million Hindu pilgrims visit the River Ganges in India (Singh, 2006). This number for the shrine of Imam Reza is 12 million.<sup>26</sup>

Bhardwaj's well-known study of Hindu places of pilgrimage in India proposes that '[p]ilgrim "flows" are the connecting links between the Hindu population and its numerous sacred centers' (1997, P.7). His book is about 'the countless dedicated pilgrims whose footprints have given meaning to India as a cultural entity' (Bhardwaj,

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<sup>25</sup> The representation of shrine as being diverse and not stable is in line with STS's view that material objects or technologies (here a built artifact) are situated, and they are configured in relation to both human and non-humans or in other words they are not separate entities operating on their own.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB118072271215621679>, accessed January 2018.

1997, p. x). In his study he argues that pilgrimage journeys contribute to the shaping of a 'pan-Indian' Hindu holy space (1973, p. 173).

Eickelman and Piscatori (1990b) look at Muslim travelers and juxtapose the Hajj (the obligatory Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca) with *hijra* (emigration), *rihla* (travel for learning and other purposes) and *ziyara* (visits to shrines, Arabic for *ziyarat*). Their approach helps to challenge the representation of pilgrimage as 'exceptional' practice, not only because they argue that motives for travel can be complex and mixed, but also because they mention how not just the sacred, but also the economic geography of Muslim travel can prompt deeply felt convictions. Thus '[t]he need to travel to saintly shrines or [...] the need of Turkish workers in Europe to travel back to Turkey, may be as compelling as the doctrinally enjoined pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina' (1990b, p. xiv). Similar nuances are evident in Tapper's research (1990), where she examines connections between gender, movement and exchange in a Turkish community. Tapper shows how, in the general sense, pilgrimage can be seen as a voluntary movement for the purpose of paying respect to a person or shrine, whose authority is thereby acknowledged (Tapper, 1990, pp. 236-7).

A connected notion to the diversity of places of pilgrimage, which looks at pilgrimage spaces as socially configured, is pilgrimage landscape. Alderman (2002) introduces the term 'pilgrimage landscape' to point to the relationships between people and place. No place is intrinsically sacred and holy. Rather, pilgrimages and their attendant landscapes, like all places, are 'social constructions,' which do not simply emerge out of nowhere but undergo what Seaton (1999, p.140, 2002) calls 'sacralisation'—a process by which certain spaces are marked as meaningful, religious sites.

In recent years, many have examined pilgrimage as a 'socio-spatial practice' (Urry 2000, p.49) involving mobility. And, as Turner notes, pilgrimage also involves 'kinetic practices' of mobility (Turner 1978, p. xiii), small micro motions (such as, in the cases of this thesis, dialing and/or holding the phone towards the golden dome of the holy shrine of Imam Reza), are seen as socio-spatial experiences; these micro movements are part of the enactment and experience of pilgrimage. In this thesis I argue that pilgrimage mediated by phone, or by leaving comments on a website or writing letters, also includes imaginative and virtual movement. Urry distinguishes between the physical movement of objects, imaginative travel, virtual travel (e.g. via the Internet), and the corporeal travel of people (2002, p. 256). When there exists a vast array of ways to be 'on the move', it becomes important to examine the complex and interwoven forms of distance and proximity that are inherent in the practice of pilgrimage: 'One should investigate not only physical and immediate presence, but also the socialities involved in occasional co-presence, imagined co-presence and virtual co-presence' (Urry, 2002, p. 256). Swatos asserts in his reflections on pilgrimage (2002, p. 120) that processes of globalization can stimulate the rediscovery of various kinds of particularism and localism. With the increased use of ICTs and a rise in economic and financial issues which limit Muslims' ability to physically travel to the shrine, many Iranians are experiencing particular and localized ways (which adhere to their culture and history) of experiencing pilgrimage. This thesis explores these particularities and localities of pilgrimage to Imam Reza.

Morinis (1992) discusses the problem of defining the 'sacred', proposing that 'it is the pursuit of the ideal, whether deified or not, that defines the sacred journey' (1992, p. 2). In this sense defining pilgrimage as a journey can be problematic since it does not take

into account the non-geographical aspect of pilgrimage or of sacred journeys more broadly. Hindu mystics and Sufis, for example, have developed a concept of the inner pilgrimage, by which the pilgrim visits sacred places within the microcosm of the mind and body. This concept provides what in Western terms seems to be a metaphorical sense of the journey (Coleman and Eade, 2004), or in Urry's (2002) words, an imagined journey.

In sufism pilgrimage means not only traveling through geography but also travel of the mind (Nikolaisen, 2004). The journey of the mind or the soul to reach closeness to God is intimately related to bodily movement through ritual (Nikolaisen, 2004, p. 93). Examples taken from other religious traditions include the notion of pilgrimage as a metaphor for the journey of the Christian soul (Morris, 2002, p. 2) or even Bawa Yamba's study of West African Muslims based in the Sudan. These pilgrims do not move as such, yet regard themselves as being in transit to Mecca, thus perpetuating 'an ideology of pilgrim-ness' (1995, p. 120). Viewing pilgrimage as a journey of the mind is accepted and practiced by Iranians Shiites. With this in mind, pilgrimage mobilities here are not necessarily about the physical mobility of the pilgrim's body such as walking. Rather, pilgrimage mobility may include small motions in the fingers when a pilgrim scrolls or clicks through pages on a religious website, or the imagined mobility or the journey of the mind and soul to reach closeness to God or an Imam.

In order to gain an understanding of pilgrimage we need to consider all forms of movement,<sup>27</sup> and not merely physical travel to the shrine. Kong (2001, p. 228) calls for investigation of pilgrimage 'beyond the officially sacred' sites of religion such as the

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<sup>27</sup> Chapter Six for example discusses what emotions do in relation to mediated pilgrimage, this discussion views emotions as slipping, sliding, sticking and circulating which all point to movement.

church, shrine or temple. In this sense Morinis argues that the analytical reduction of pilgrimages to another ritual of simpler structure and form, the rite of passage, cannot do justice to the complexity and diversity of the assemblages of meaning and practices that shape the phenomenon, just as strict boundaries between pilgrimages and other forms of cultural journeying cannot easily be demarcated (1992b, pp. 8–9). Despite these cautions, Morinis does acknowledge movement as an important part of understanding pilgrimage. He argues that ‘the (pilgrimage) term can be put to use wherever journeying and some embodiment of an ideal intersect’ (1992, p. 3) and that ‘the essence of the journey is movement’ (1992, p. 12). Patterns of the pilgrimage journey may differ—sometimes taking the pilgrim from home to a sacred shrine and back, sometimes tracing more spiral or irregular movements (like the whirling Sufi dervishes)—just as differing modes of locomotion may be adopted at various points, including crawling, dancing, and so on. By a logic of opposites, the symbolic meaning of pilgrimage movement may be informed by and juxtaposed with cultural representations of its opposite, stasis and immobility (Coleman and Eade, 2004). Chapter Seven discusses the spaces of remediated pilgrimage and the (im)mobilities that shape this particular practice among Shiite Iranian Muslims.

### ***Studies on Islamic pilgrimage***

The pilgrimage that is discussed in this thesis is a particular form of Islamic pilgrimage. From a theoretical perspective, studies of pilgrimages in the Islamic regions have adopted three main views; 1) that inspired by Durkheim, where pilgrimage is understood as a social phenomenon; 2) the Turnerian approach to pilgrimage as a

search for *communitas*;<sup>28</sup> and 3) the contestation perspective, building on Eade and Sallnow (1991), where pilgrimage is seen as a realm for diverse and often conflictual discourses and experiences. Boissevain (2017), looking at these approaches, argues that far from being mutually exclusive, these perspectives can and should be mobilized jointly to examine pilgrimages in the 'most complete manner possible' (Boissevain, 2017, p.97).

Many scholars who have turned their attention to the study of Islamic pilgrimage are not focusing on the ritual *per se*, but rather examine other aspects such as the journey to get to the destination, the regional context in which the pilgrimage journey takes place, urban development and the political issues that arise along these pilgrimage routes. Examples of this focus of attention can be found in the volume edited by Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Travellers* (1990), or Moussaoui's work on the south of Algeria, where the author includes in his discussions the question of space, mobility and sacrality. Two other edited volumes Chambert-Loir and Guillot (1995) and Ali Mir-Morezzi (1996) also include chapters on saint cults across the Muslim world in order to emphasize both their diversity and their mutual elements. These volumes examine the importance of local history in religious transformations. Over the past three decades there has been an emergent interest among scholars, particularly anthropologists and historians, to study holy cities across the Islamic world. These studies analyze not only colonial historiography but also engage with the wider social and political context of pilgrimage. Anthropologists view saint visitations as a devotion to the divine and the holy person and an embodiment of social relations, while at the same time focusing on

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<sup>28</sup> This thesis will not explore this concept as many scholars have critiqued this aspect of Turner's work (see Eade and Sallnow, 2002; Morini, 1984; Nikolaisen, 2004).

the preoccupations of pilgrims. Scholars have studied the various motivations for visiting a saint and the possible tensions or peaceful collaborations which are at play among different groups in this locus of power (Albera and Couroucli, 2012; Aubin-Boltanski, 2007). The innovative aspect of this perspective lies in the desire to take both sides of saint pilgrimage<sup>29</sup> into account: researching not only the lives and legends of saints through their historiography, for instance, but also analyzing the social issues involved through an exploration of pilgrimage practices during the journeys to and time spent in the saint's shrines (Amri and Gril, 2007; Boissevain, 2006; Kerrou, 1998; Mayeur-Jaouen, 2002).

When it comes to Islamic pilgrimage, the practice of pilgrimage is very diverse, as not only there are two major types of pilgrimage – Hajj and *ziyarat* – but also each of the two are viewed differently in relation to each of the major Islamic denominations (Sunnism and Shiism) (Figure 3.1). Islam is characterized by a number of internal divisions. The major division in Islam is between the Sunni and the Shiites. All denominations in Islam believe in the Oneness of Allah and the Holy book (Quran) and therefore the umbrella commonality persists (Mujtaba Husein, 2018). Shiites are the second largest denomination in Islam with the belief that after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, there was a chain of twelve pious descendants of the Prophet, known as Imams, who were meant to succeed him, beginning with his son-in-law Ali (d. 661 CE) (Aghaie, 2005). The Shiites consider these Imams to be infallible religious guides for humanity and Muslims, and also believe that devotion and loyalty to these imams brings them closer to God. The Shiite belief in the distinct sacredness of the Imams has

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<sup>29</sup> Muslims saints are holy Islamic figures such as the prophet Muhammad, and the Imams.

generated the practices of visiting and venerating the places where the Imams are buried, resulting in the emphasis on performing shrine pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) more than is the case for the Sunnis Muslims (Nasr, 2007, p. 255).

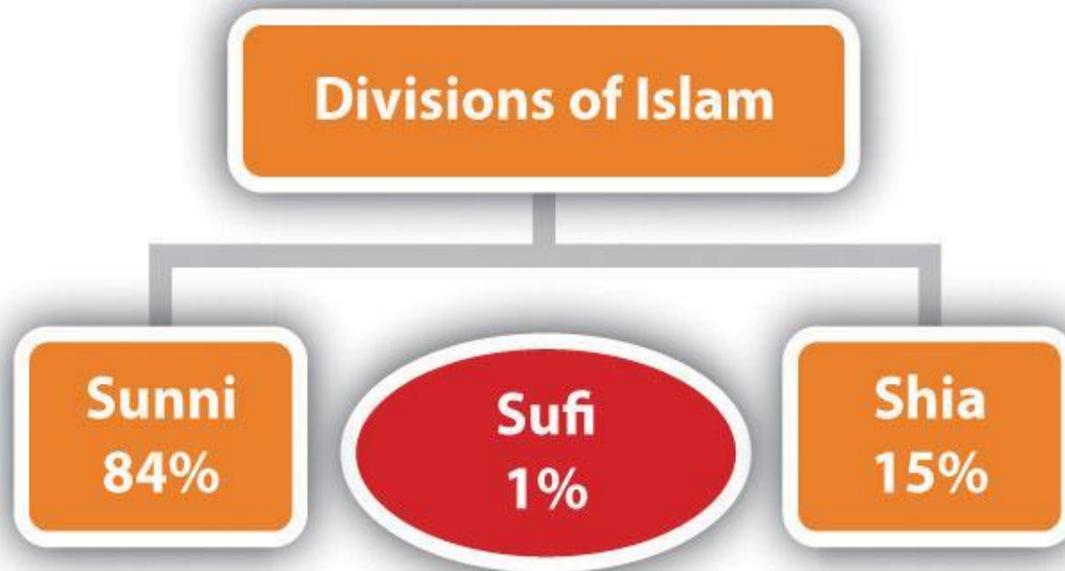


Figure 3.1 Divisions on Islam (source pinterest.com accessed May 2018)

The Practice of pilgrimage to Imam Reza is informed by both Hajj and *ziyarat* from other denominations, and is mostly practiced by Shiites, although Sunnis will also make this form of pilgrimage. Figure 3.2 shows the distribution of Shiites (Shia) and Sunnis among Iran and its neighboring countries.

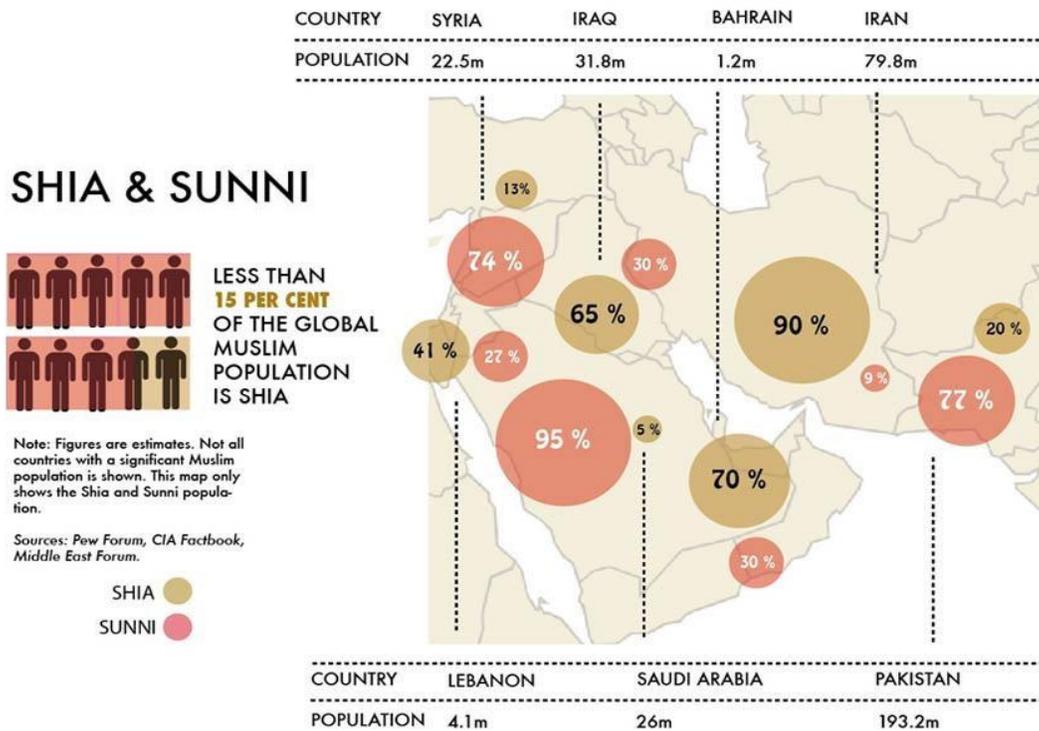


Figure 3.2 Shiite and Sunni distribution in the Middle East (source [www.islamireligion.com](http://www.islamireligion.com) accessed May 2018)

In the following sections I will give a brief summary of these two practices and how they differ slightly in each denomination.

### Hajj

Pilgrimage plays a great role in the religious life of Muslims and is a significant part of the fabric of the Islamic world, and from North Africa and the Middle East to Central and South / Southeast Asia, shrine pilgrimage<sup>30</sup> is common among Muslims. In Islam pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) has a significant place among all Islamic denominations. The

<sup>30</sup> Shrine pilgrimage is equal to saint pilgrimage or pilgrimage to holy Islamic figures such as Imam Reza.

Hajj or Great Pilgrimage is the last of the pillars of Islam<sup>31</sup> (Boissevain, 2017; Smith & Ernst, 1993). Pilgrims go on Hajj during the twelfth month of the Muslim year – Zul Hajja (the last month of the Arabic/Islamic calendar), and around three million visit Mecca annually (Boissevain, 2017). Pilgrimage to Ka'ba (Hajj) is mandatory in Islam and every Muslim is required to go on Hajj at least once in his/her lifetime if he/she is physically and financially capable. Furthermore, Hajj has official and predefined rituals that all Muslims follow in Mecca (Smith & Ernst, 1993). Many places in the Islamic world work as a substitution of Hajj, however. Chambert-Loir (1995) lists a few of them, from the Maghreb to Asia; for example, the mosque at Kairouan in Tunisia which, if visited seven times, equates to a Hajj pilgrimage (Boissevain, 2017). There are many Islamic pilgrimage practices that, if they are done in a certain way, are viewed as a substitute or an equal practice to Hajj.

With regards to the shrine of Imam Reza, pilgrimage to the shrine is very much emphasized among Shiites.<sup>32</sup> Below is a quote that is associated with Imam Reza's pilgrimage and its comparison to the Hajj:

Tell my Shiites that pilgrimage to my shrine equals to a thousand Hajj (Taha, 2010 cited in Hosseini, et al., 2013, p. 38).

Prophet Muhammad also stated that:

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<sup>31</sup> After shahada (profession of faith), salat (prayer), ramadhan (month of fasting) and zakat (alms giving) (Boissevain, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> For a more in-depth discussion on the importance of performing pilgrimage among Shiites see (Musa, 2013).

Whoever visits me or one of my descendants, I will meet him/her in the afterlife and I will save him/her from the wilderness of that place (Yousefi and Varshoie, 2009, p. 13).<sup>33</sup>

Alongside Hajj, Muslims practice other forms of pilgrimage that are non-mandatory and voluntary, such as Umrah, which is done in Mecca and can be done at any time during the year (Boissevain, 2017). In addition, pilgrimage to the tombs of the Shiite martyrs and saints (such as Imams) is an important feature of Shiite piety: from Morocco to Chinese Turkestan, the tombs of Islamic saints are places of pilgrimage for Muslims (Ebadi, 2016); these pilgrimages are referred to as *ziyara* or *ziyarat*.

### Ziyarat

*Ziyarat* is a practice that is believed to bring blessings to the life of Muslims. As Soucek, a historian specializing in Central Asian history, explains:

[Although] there was no canonization process ... Muslim saints were admitted - or believed by the masses - to perform *karamat*, a concept half-way between miracle and blessing bestowed by God; and in the absence of a canonical counterpart to the Christian saint, there were words like *wali* (Arabic for *wali Allah*, 'he who is close to God'), [...] which assumed that function. In their lifetime, these saints played ... catalytic roles in spreading or affirming Islam in all directions; these roles acquired a new and special lease of life after the saints' deaths, when their tombs became the centers of shrines or *mazars* (Soucek, 2000, p. 38).

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<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that the belief system of Muslims and in particular Shiites are directly dependent on Islamic hadith and sayings, such as the ones mentioned above (Yousefi and Varshoie, 2009).

Daneshvari (1986), Hällzon (2009), Lymer (2004), and Prager (2013 cited in Ebadi, 2016) discuss similar understandings in other parts of the Islamic world as well. For example, Prager, with regards to shrine pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) among Alawis in Turkey, notes:

One of the key concepts of the Alawi religion is the idea of a cyclical manifestation of God's revelation, resulting from the fall of the Light Souls (*nurani*) beginning with Adam and finding its closure with Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet (Muhammad). These cyclical revelations were closely connected to teachings about the reincarnation and transmigration of souls, the latter being essential for the understanding of Alawi ideas and practices surrounding the *ziyara*. (Prager, 2013, pp. 45-48 cited in Ebadi, 2016).

*Ziyarat* is rooted in the hearts of many Muslims and remains an important part of the Islamic tradition. Unlike Hajj which is a strictly formulated pilgrimage practice (Boivin, 2016), *ziyarat* is practiced in different forms among Muslims in different cultures. In other words, *ziyarat*, with its unwritten rules, illustrates the variegated culture of Islam in diverse regions. Writing about this topic Khosronejad (2012) states:

[*Ziyarat*] is a multi-dimensional phenomenon influenced by geography and local custom as well as by religious tradition... *ziyara*, in the Islamic context, are not only pilgrimage but also the culture of devotion, of which pilgrimage and saint veneration is an integral part. Therefore, *ziyara* did not always refer to making pilgrimages to shrines and tombs or sacred places (p. 13).

Saghaie et al. (2012) defines *ziyarat* as an intention in order to perform religious rituals. With regards to this meaning, *ziyarat* can be practiced either inside a religious site or in the direction of a religious and sacred site (Saghaie et al., 2012, p. 97). Bhardwaj (1998)

identifies various common features of the *ziyarat* and Hajj, defining the former as a 'non-Hajj pilgrimage', which expresses the regional Islamic culture of a population especially in non-Arab regions. These voluntary pilgrimages are similar to pilgrimage in Christianity, which people perform as a way of getting closer to God, gaining blessings in their religious lives, and celebrating famous saints from history. Bhardwaj explains this as follows:

*Ziyarat* [Sic.] seem to be composed of subsystems that have developed in several cultural contexts, each of which shares the universal characteristics of Islam, but also reflects [the regional] cultural distinctiveness [...] contrary to Hajj, the behavior of the individuals in the *ziyarat*, reflects the cultural context and the individual's existential quest [...] there are no uniformly prescribed rules [...] the individual pilgrim in the *ziyarat* follows the rules specific to the place and local culture [...] it is not uncommon to see pilgrims in *ziyarat* singing devotional songs, expressing their frailty, or asking for the intercession of local saint in personal problems (1998, pp.72 -79).

There are slight differences in *ziyarat* among three Islamic denominations: Sunnis, Sufis, and Shiites. These are briefly described below.

#### Sunnis

For Sunnis the main pilgrimage is Hajj. However, many believe that pilgrimage to shrines is temporally a search for union with God through synchronicity and closeness with the saint or Imam's shrine, and physically a way to the divine presence over the threshold of the Imam's tomb. The saint (Imam) becomes an intermediary whose intervention calls on special rituals, such as shrine visits (Boissevain, 2017).

Some Sunni religious figures, such as Muhammad Najib, accepted *ziyarat* wholeheartedly, and started his treatise by describing *ziyarat* as good sunna (religious tradition), that is, exemplary behavior based on the Prophet's word or deed (sec. 23 cited in Smith & Ernst, 1993). Another account is given in the treatise of `Ala' al-Dawla Simnan, who mentioned that pilgrimage to tombs increases one's spiritual concentration (*tawajuh*) through contact with the earthly remains of a Saint. Citing the example of the Prophet Muhammad's tomb chamber in Medina, he pointed out that while meditation on the Prophet at any time is beneficial, physically visiting the Prophet's tomb is even better, since the spirit of the Prophet senses the extra effort and hardship of the pilgrimage journey and assists the pilgrim in attaining the full realization of the inner meaning of the pilgrimage (Smith & Ernst, 1993, p. 72).<sup>34</sup>

### Sufism

Sufis have a slightly different understanding of *ziyarat*. In Sufism pilgrims' understanding of their encounter with a saint's spirit or tomb (*Khanegah* is the word used by Sufis in Farsi) is related to their intense cultivation of the master-disciple relationship, which for them goes beyond the limitations of life and death. Hence the *ziyarat* is not merely a journey to a place of burial, but a visit to a living saint (Barnes & Branfoot, 2006; Din, 1989; Lanquar, 2011; Schimmel, 1980; Van Bruinessen, 2008).

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<sup>34</sup> According to some orthodox Sunni Muslims, like Wahhabis, pilgrimage and worshiping the saints is an un-Islamic practice and they point out that the prophet Muhammad himself forbade prayers at his grave. Consequently, no shrines have been erected over the graves of the first three Caliphs. The exception is the grave of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth Caliph according to Sunni or the first Imām according to Shiites, which has a golden shrine erected on it. Today his shrine, along with the shrine of his descendants (including the shrine of Imam Reza), are the holiest Shrines of Shiite Muslims (Hällzon, 2009; Heck, 2006).

Privratsky (2001) writes about the significance of pilgrimage to the shrine of Ahmet Yasawi (a popular Sufi Saint) among Kazakhs. Performing pilgrimage to his shrine (which they call *ekinshi Mecca* which means 'second Mecca') three times is equivalent to a single Hajj. Montgomery, (2007), who studied the holy mountain in Osh in Kyrgyzstan, similarly reports on the religious rituals of *ziyarat* among local pilgrims who believe that it is only after visiting this mountain that an individual can become prepared to perform Hajj.

### Shiites

Among Shiites *Ziyarat* holds a specific place: they believe that the Imams<sup>35</sup> and their descendants (*Imam Zadeh* in Farsi) of prophet Muhammad, have the power to intercede with God on behalf of pilgrims (Yousefi et al., 2012). For Shiites the purpose of *ziyarat* among pilgrims is to seek the intercession of the saint or holy men (also known as *walis*), based on the belief in his *barakat* or *savaab* (God's grace), to ask for spiritual guidance, or fulfillment of a vow which could assist with various problems, and to seek redemption in the afterlife (Abramson & Karimov, 2007; Christia, 2016; Eickelman, Dale & Piscatori, James, 1990; Harris & Dawut, 2002). In addition, visits to shrines are considered to bring solidarity among Shiites (Christia et al., 2016). Besides getting spiritual blessings, these visits to the shrines help to reinforce 'complex socio-religious patronage and multi-generational family relationships,' and as such play an important role in community-building in Muslim societies (Khoo, 2014, p.98). In a study on Shiite Iranians, Hosseini et

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<sup>35</sup> An Imam according to the Shiites plays an important role as a major religious leader, in the whole Muslim's community (Umma). In the eyes of the Shitte Muslims, only the descendants of the Prophet Mohammad can assume this role. If the title of Imam is given to someone these days it would be an honorary epithet (Ebadi, 20016).

al. (2016) and Winstedt (1982), religious sociologists, also found that *ziyarat* in the context of Iran brings Muslim's a sense of solidarity, restoring Shiite identity and unity among Muslims.

In Iran, which is a Shiite country, many Muslims practice *ziyarat* and they believe that the practice of *ziyarat* will bring a lot of *barakat* (blessings) into their lives.<sup>36</sup> Annemarie Schimmel notes the role of *barakat* in shrine pilgrimage in Islamic countries such as Iran, arguing that for Shiite Iranians there is an 'inherited *barakat*,' or a blessing, that surrounds an Imam's shrine and *dargah* [lit. entering door] (Schimmel, 1980, p. 138).

In Iran, as part of the belief system, pilgrims while present in the shrine, taking the shrine or the saint buried in the shrine as an intermediary, share their problems with God, stating their wishes. This sharing of problems with the Imam or God is done mostly silently inside the shrine of Imam Reza. There are some pilgrims who may cry out loud or at times whisper some sentences, such as 'please Imam, heal my daughter,' but prayer is mostly done in silent or fragmented sentences. The prayers that are heard are mostly related to healing of sick family members (fieldwork notes taken in November 2013 inside the shrine of Imam Reza).

### ***Shiite Pilgrimage to Imam Reza's shrine***

I turn now to Imam Reza's shrine and the performance of *ziyarat* there by Shiite Iranians. Yosefi et al (2012) define *ziyarat* as an inclination and tendency – whether from a distance, or from a close proximity, or even just as a heartfelt connection towards an Imam. This definition of *ziyarat* is in line with the discussion of pilgrimage defined as a

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<sup>36</sup> For a distribution of Islamic denominations across the world see <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population> (Accessed Dec 2018).

journey of the heart and mind which was noted earlier in this chapter. This is how a pilgrim describes the emotions involved in Imam Reza's pilgrimage; to him the emotionality and the mourning is a kind of paying respects and worship through an expression of grief/love that takes place on the days of the anniversary of the death of the Imam:

Mashhad is now a pilgrimage site for many Muslims, and pilgrims are encouraged to pour out their emotions at the Shrine. This is to compensate for what was a cold-hearted, grief-less murder 1200 years ago (the martyrdom of Imam Reza). The crying and wailing of hundreds of 'mourners' is what separates Mashad from many other important Muslim cities [...] People even pray on the pavements [...].<sup>37</sup>

In Iran 98 percent of the population are Muslims, and the country is home to over five thousand shrines (*Imam Zadeh*), Mausoleums, and holy mosques. The total number of shrines or *Imam Zadehs* in Iran is around 10,615 (Aghajani and Farahani Fard, 2015). Farahani states that no other country has as many *Imam Zadeh* and religious buildings (Farahani, 2007, p.54 cited in Aghajani and Farahani Fard, 2015). Some of the most religious cities in Iran are Mashad, Ghom, Shiraz and Kashan (Aghajani and Farahani Fard, 2015), and these cities have a global reputation among Muslims. As an example, the number of visitors in Mashad (both from inside and outside the country) was estimated around 16 million in 2005 (Firoozjaian et al., 2014). Mashad is the second largest city in Iran after Tehran and is estimated to account for around 40% of the tourism revenue of the country, due to the Shrine of Imam Reza.<sup>38</sup> In 2014 around 24

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<sup>37</sup> Written by a Muslim blogger/traveller/author on his visit to Mahsad. Source <http://urbanduniya.com/traveller/in-the-mourning-mashhad-iran> (accessed July 2017).

<sup>38</sup> Source: [https://sacredsites.com/middle\\_east/iran/mashhad.html](https://sacredsites.com/middle_east/iran/mashhad.html) (accessed July 2017).

million visitors came to Mashad, in 2015 26 million, and in 2016 27 million (Saghaie and Javanbakhsh, 2012).

*Ziyarat* to Mashad in the context of Iranian Shiism is at times referred to as the poor man's Hajj (Rahmati ,1386/2008), in reference to the fact that only the very rich can afford to perform the Hajj, which includes traveling to Saudi Arabia to visit the Kaaba. For Many Iranians, visiting Mashad is a more accessible and affordable choice (Eshaghi, 2015).

During pilgrimage practice inside the shrine of Imam Reza, pilgrims report their experience of many emotional states, but one of the most common emotions described is feeling submissive respect and humbleness towards the Imam. In a study conducted by Yosefi et al. (2012), who interviewed six pilgrims in the shrine about their experience, one of the pilgrims talks of his experience this way:

I am too small, too small, every time I come close to Imam Reza I feel it, and then I know that above Imam Reza there is a God who is constantly watching over me, then, this feeling washes over me that I am too small. (Yosefi et al., 2012, p. 194)

Some scholars and historians believe that pilgrimage to Imam Reza is critical since it constitutes Shiite identity, and Shiism was brought to Iran after Imam Reza moved there (Mozafar, 1995). The shrine was originally built in a village called Sanabad, where Imam Reza died in 818 AD. Imam Reza, the eighth Shiite Imam, was born in Medina in 765 AD and was widely known to be a person of both extraordinary scholarship and saintly qualities. At the age of 51 he was appointed by the Abbasid Caliph Mamun (a Sunni Muslim) to become his successor as the next caliph. Mamun summoned Imam Reza to Sanabad, publicly proclaimed him his successor, and gave him his daughter in marriage.

Mamun's actions, while welcomed by members of the Shiite sect, deeply disturbed the rival Sunnis, with the result that several violent uprisings were initiated. After staying in Sanabad, Caliph Mamun and Imam Reza departed for Baghdad (to regain the city from political rivals) but during this journey Imam Reza fell ill and rapidly died. The suddenness of the Imam's death aroused suspicions among Shiite followers, who believed Mamun had poisoned him in order to quell the political unrest resulting from a Shiite Imam being proclaimed caliph-to-be of the vastly more numerous Sunni followers. Martin Gray a photographer and author on sacred architecture and pilgrimage sites (source: [sacredsites.com](http://sacredsites.com) accessed July 2017), describes how the Caliph built a mausoleum over the Imam's grave, adjacent to his own father's tomb. Because of the widespread Shiite belief that Mamun had murdered Imam Reza, the tomb and the village of Sanabad were given the name of Mashad–ol-Reza, meaning 'the place of the martyrdom of Reza.'

Because of his presence in Iran and Khorasan,<sup>39</sup> Iranians came to know Imam Reza as a Shiite Imam, and his religious personality and status played an important role in expanding Shiism in the region (Jafarian, 2008). After his martyrdom, his shrine brought many Shiite and Sunni<sup>40</sup> Muslims to perform pilgrimage; this has resulted in further commitment and attachment to not only Imam Reza but other Islamic Imams (Jafarian, 2008), which in turn led other countries to become allies of Iran (Mozafar, 1995). The presence of the shrine in Mashad also brought opportunities to establish linkages between different Shiite communities from other countries (Yousefi and Varshoie, 2009). Most of the foreign pilgrims to Mashad are from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain

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<sup>39</sup> The state in the north west of Iran where the city of Mashad is located.

<sup>40</sup> As stated before although the shrine is mostly visited by Shiites, Sunnis also visit it since they also believe in the holiness of Imam Reza and the fact that his *ziyarat* will bring *barakat*.

(Yousefi and Varshoie, 2009). In recent years the number of foreign pilgrims to Mashad was about 280,000, which accounts for 17% of the total foreign tourists that enter the country. Because of the high number of pilgrims pouring into the city of Mashad, the city has turned into the second religious mega city in the world (Saghaie et al., 2012).

The way that *ziyarat* is performed today in Mashad has to do with its long-standing history in Iran, which is related to two separate periods. The first refers to the time when Islam enters the country, up through the Safavid era (around 1451).<sup>41</sup> Although most Iranians were Sunnis during this period, many would visit the Shrine of Imam Reza and there was widespread respect for him (Foroozani, 2006). The second period is the post Safavid era, in which Shiism was established and expanded throughout the country. Ever since that time pilgrimage to Imam Reza has been one of the significant features of Shiite identity, and at times political benefits have been taken from promoting his pilgrimage (Foroozani, 2006; Jafarian, 2008; Mozafar, 1995; Niazmanad, 2004). In each era, depending on how much the government of that time paid attention to Imam Reza, his shrine would be further expanded and restored. The greatest expansion and restoration took place during Safavid, when the first Shiite government was in place, particularly by Shah Abbas (Halm, 1997; Mozafar, 1995). During this time many pilgrimage sites were restored and expanded, adding to the spiritual and religious status of these places, and increasing their pilgrimage significance among Shiite living in Iran (Niazmand, 2004). In other periods in Iran the expansion of Imam Reza's shrine was continued, and pilgrimage to his shrine has gained a significant status and popularity under the current Republic Islamic of Iran (Atarodi, 1992).

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<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of the shrine during pre-Safavid and early Safavid era see Farhat (2014).

### ***An overview of the shrine complex***

The Imam Reza shrine is a complex containing not only the Imam Reza's tomb chamber, but also the largest mosque in the world by dimension and the second largest by capacity. There are vast courtyards, to hold the pilgrims on special occasions surrounding the shrine. The grand complex of the shrine is round in structure and includes nine courtyards (Sahn) and twenty-six porches (Riwaq) (orujtravel.com accessed July 2017).

Contained within the present complex of the shrine are the Goharshad Mosque, a museum, a library, four seminaries, a cemetery, the Razavi University of Islamic Sciences, a dining hall for pilgrims, vast prayer halls, and other related buildings. Figure 3.3 shows a courtyard leading to the shrine.

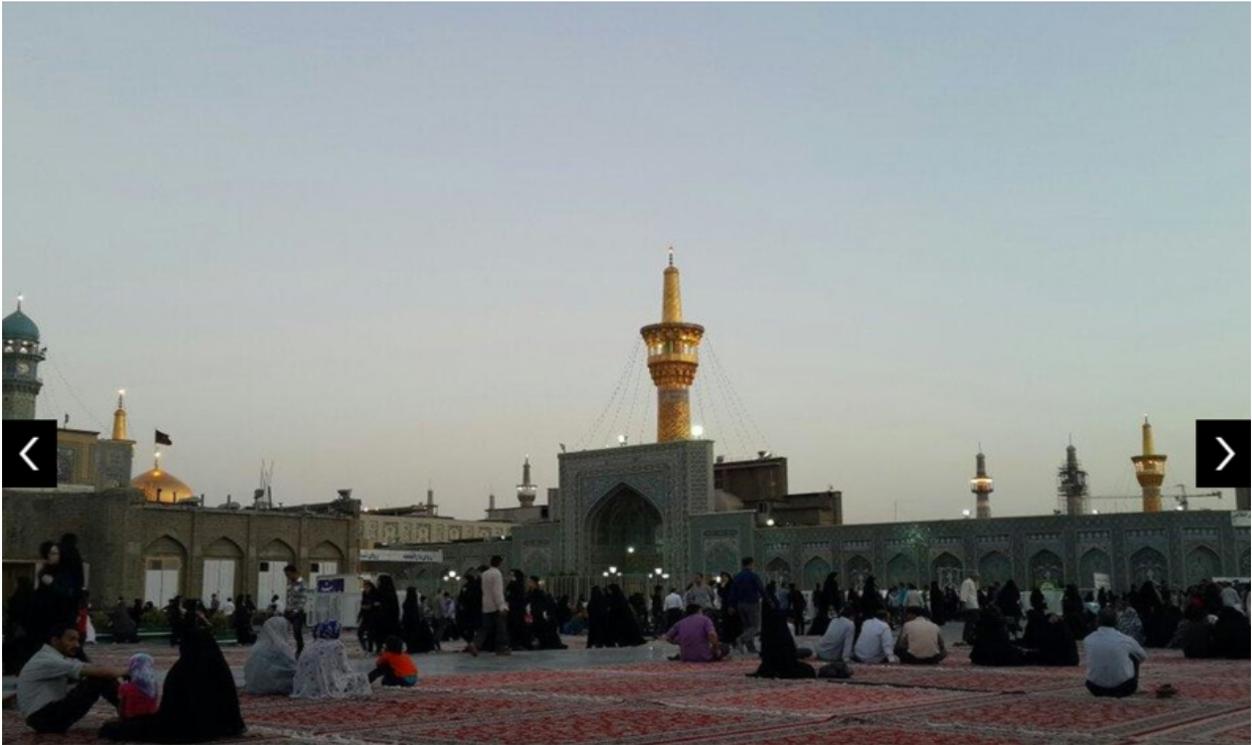


Figure 3.3 Courtyard (source: tripadvisor.com accessed July 2017)

The whole complex including the shrine and the seven courtyards which surround it cover an area of 598,657 square metres. Additionally, the whole complex has been excavated for multiple roadways plus a parking lot, which can accommodate over a thousand cars. The complex is astonishingly decorated, both the exterior with mosaics and tiles and the interior with more mosaics, often mirrored, and chandeliers (Figure 3.4 and Figure 3.5).

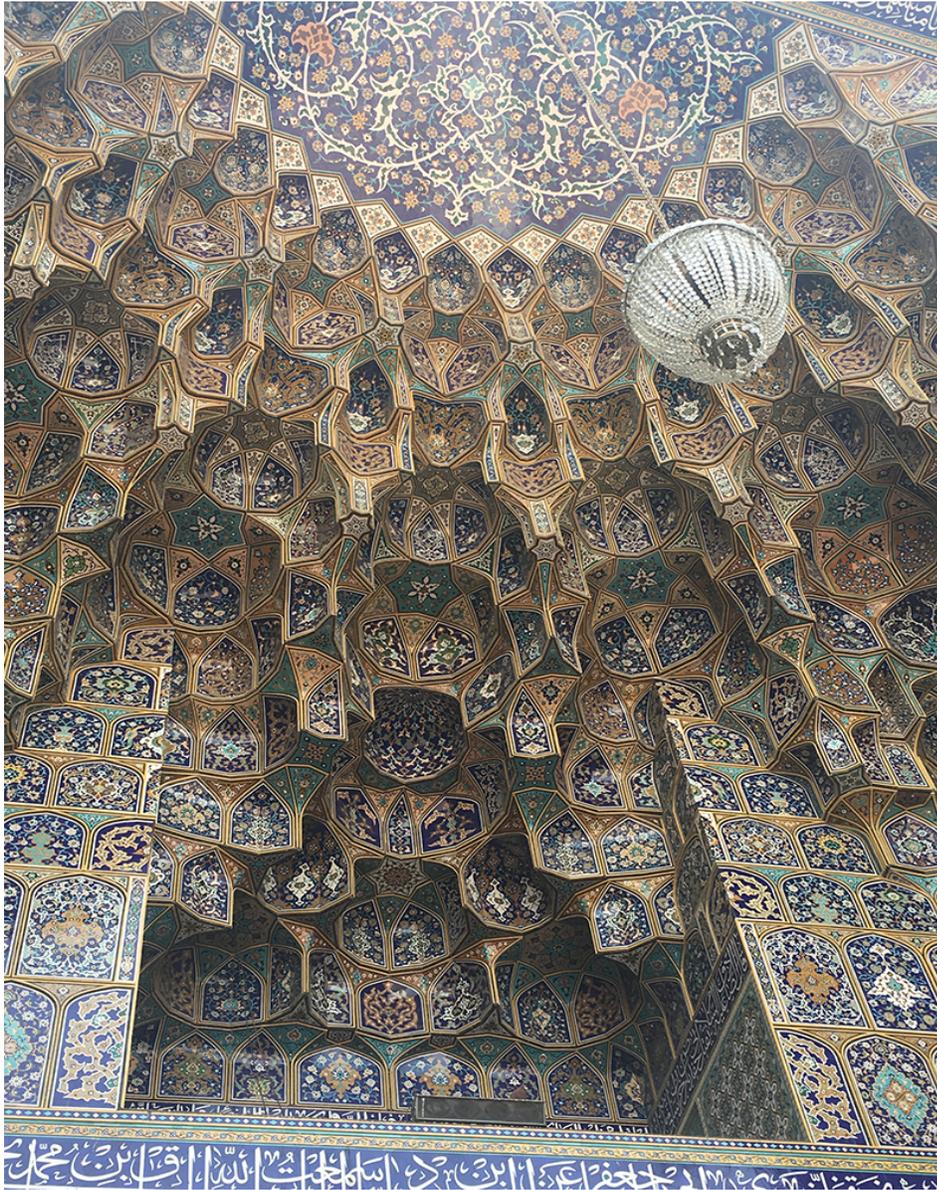


Figure 3.4 Shrine decorations (source: [rjbastian.wordpress.com](http://rjbastian.wordpress.com) accessed July 2017)



Figure 3.5 decoration (source: rjbastian.wordpress.com accessed July 2017)

As one enters the shrine there are always people sitting on the rugs in the courtyards, either individually or in groups. Some are surrounded by children. Many perform prayers from these rugs, while others chat with their family and friends and some eat. To enter the golden shrine, there are multiple rooms where you can leave your shoes. These are called Kafshdari, they are run on a voluntary basis by Shrine servants (*Khadem*). Women

and men have separate chambers to enter (my observations Winter 2013); below are photos of the female and male chambers:



Figure 3.6 Female section (source: [rjbastian.wordpress.com](http://rjbastian.wordpress.com) accessed July 2017)



Figure 3.7 male section (source: ajammc.com accessed July 2017)

*Khadems*<sup>42</sup> are everywhere, and they serve pilgrims, from guiding them, to answering their various questions. A pilgrim to the shrine describes them as follows:

There are also men dressed in black with peaked hats and feather dusters directing traffic. The feather dusters, yellow and bright green, looked particularly bizarre, but are used to signal movements of people around the building in a peaceful manner (rjbastian.wordpress.com, accessed July 2017).

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<sup>42</sup> *Khadems* or servants are men and women volunteers who work in the shrine, their responsibilities include collecting pilgrim's shoes, rolling out rugs in the courtyards, giving directions to pilgrims or answering calls (my observations winter 2013).



Figure 3.8 *Khadem* (source: [rjbastian.wordpress.com](http://rjbastian.wordpress.com) accessed July 2017)

Once you enter the shrine (or *Haram* in Farsi), you will see pilgrims sitting on the marble stone floor praying or doing the same thing standing up. Close to the tomb chamber there is always a crowd trying to touch and grasp the tomb chamber; many hold their kids and infants up and ask them to touch the tomb chamber (*zarih* in Farsi), and there are some pilgrims who throw letters or money inside the *zarih*. A pilgrim describes her experience of touching the *zarih*:

To see, and to touch the tomb is an essential part of the pilgrimage and was indeed a profound moment for myself. It was an experience almost beyond belief, and one that I know I will have trouble matching.<sup>43</sup>

The walls around the *zarih* are covered in marble up to 20 centimeters, with the next 92 centimeters covered with Sultan Sanjari tiles. Quranic verses and the sayings of the *Imam Zadehs* have been carved into these tiles. Around the walls are inscriptions by Ali Reza Abbasi, a famous calligraphist of the Safavid period, of the Surah Jumah (orujtravel.com accessed July 2017), above *zarih* there are candles and flowers which are renewed everyday by the shrine's servants. The *barakat* (blessing) of the tomb is known to be the greatest; that is why pilgrims like to touch and kiss the *zarih*.

Sheikh Abbas Ghomi in his book *Mafatohol jenan* (cited in Yousefi et al., 2012) has listed customary ways to perform pilgrimage to Imam Reza, including *Vozoo* (washing hands and face), wearing clean and scented clothing, taking short steps, being humble, saying prayers, avoiding negative talks, seeking permission from the Imam to get inside his shrine, getting close to his tomb chamber, standing up while reading the pilgrimage prayer, performing pilgrimage prayer, reading the Quran and saying goodbye to Imam while leaving his shrine.<sup>44</sup>

### ***The use of ICTs and pilgrimage to Imam Reza***

Today the capacities of new technologies have brought opportunities for pilgrims who have restrictions of time and geography to perform pilgrimage to the shrine. The Shrine

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<sup>43</sup> source <http://urbanduniya.com/traveller/in-the-mourning-mashhad-iran/> (accessed July 2017).

<sup>44</sup> For more descriptions of how to perform Imam Reza's ziyarat check Ebn Babooneh, Muhammad ibn Ali (1993), translated by Mostafid and Ghafari.

complex, run by Astan Quds Razavi, a charitable endowment that oversees the holy shrine of Imam Reza, has provided many tools and modes of access to pilgrims who, for whatever reason, are not capable of physically traveling to the shrine, including 3D online panoramic photos, and videos broadcast from inside the shrine on the Internet.<sup>45</sup> In 2015, Hujjat al-Islam Sayed Jalal Hussein on behalf of Astan Quds Razavi, stated, 'the Qur'anic programs and lectures of the holy shrine are going to be covered by modern media devices through broad monitors mounted in the courtyards and porticos' (globe.aqr.ir accessed February 2017) He also remarked that they provided the possibility of virtual pilgrimage from pilgrims residing in different parts of the world through the Razavi TV website:

The virtual pilgrimage of Razavi Holy Shrine has been made possible for pilgrims from all over the world [...] via razavi.tv. Allowing for the audiences in any part of the world to watch live pictures of the Razavi Holy Shrine, razavi.tv website has been designed for meeting the spiritual needs of the Shiites and lovers of the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.) across the world so that the audiences all around the world could watch the live pictures of the Razavi Holy Shrine and make spiritual connection with this holy threshold. (Source <http://globe.aqr.ir/> accessed July 2017).

Figure 3.9 is a pilgrimage prayer from a pilgrim posted in Imam Reza's website, written in English:

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<sup>45</sup> Some of these can be found here: <http://globe.aqr.ir/en> (accessed July 2017).

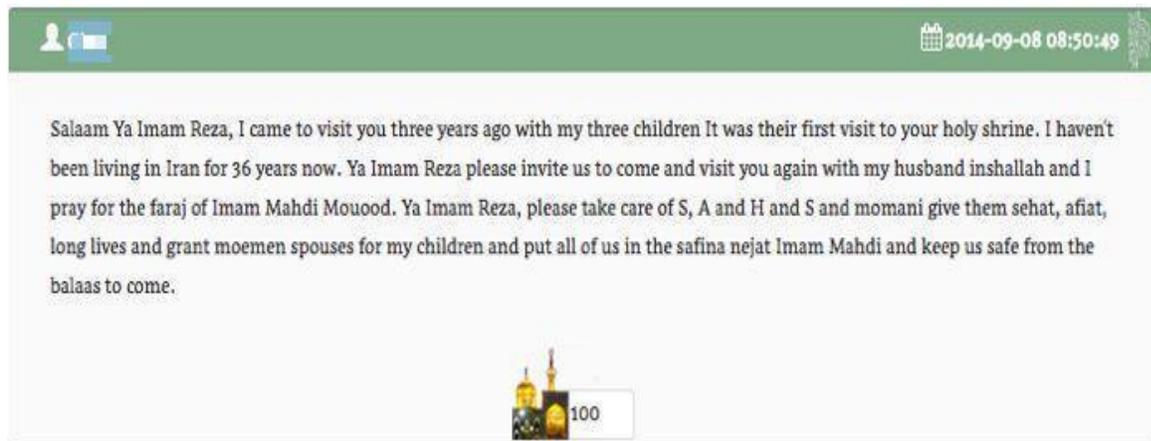


Figure 3.9 Pilgrimage prayer (Source: <http://razavitv.aqr.ir/en> accessed July 2017)

There are only two studies conducted with regards to virtual pilgrimage in Iran. One was done by Ali Mehdi and Montazer Ghaem (2014), who interviewed 41 pilgrims from the city of Kerman, which is relatively far from Mashad in terms of distance (900 kilometers). They mainly focused on panoramic (360-degrees) photos of the shrine (Figure 3.10).<sup>46</sup> They report from their interview-based study that what is expected from this platform is to encourage online users to take the pilgrimage trip to Mashad and visit the shrine in order to perform pilgrimage inside the shrine, creating a spiritual connection between the pilgrim and Imam Reza, and providing various kinds of information to pilgrims before they start their pilgrimage practice (Mehdi & Ghaem, 2014, p. 121).

<sup>46</sup> <http://photo.aqr.ir/UserFiles/File/Multi%20Media/dtree/index.htm>.



Figure 3.10 Online pilgrimage through panoramic photos of Imam Reza's shrine (Source: [photo.aqr.ir/UserFiles/File/Multi%20Media/Virtual%20pilgrimage/sahne\\_jomhorey.html](http://photo.aqr.ir/UserFiles/File/Multi%20Media/Virtual%20pilgrimage/sahne_jomhorey.html) accessed July 2017)

Based on analyzing their research data, Mehdi & Ghaem also define *ziyarat* as something that is internal and starts from the heart and mind, rather than being a practice that requires being physically present in the shrine. The concept of *ziyarat* here, they argue, differs from pilgrimage as it has been defined in previous research, which emphasizes the physical journey (Mehdi & Ghaem, 2014). A second study done by Arabtani and et al. (2015), reports that in the online world pilgrims feel a close spiritual connection to the Imams; they do not have a sense that an Imam is buried in a tomb and the tomb chamber and the space which surrounds it is a space where prayers are answered, but instead it is deep mental and heartfelt connection to the Imam that makes the pilgrimage possible. In this experience, certain physical movements such as clicking with

a mouse replaces other movements like walking inside a shrine (Arabani & et al., 2015, p. 71).

Ameli notes:

In an online space, we get closer to religion, this happens because of the lack and inaccessibility of a physical location, it is the relation and meaning of being between present and absent, in which an absent personality can be present (in your heart and mind). This is what is common between religion and an online space (Ameli, 2006 cited in Partazian, 2009 p.12).

The next chapter turns to examine more closely the practice of mediated pilgrimage to Imam Reza's shrine with the use of ICTs, beginning with the landline telephone and mobile phones.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter offered the context for the thesis, with an emphasis on Shiite pilgrimage and more specifically pilgrimage to Imam Reza's shrine. It briefly discussed some relevant prior research with regards to understanding pilgrimage practice. Pilgrimage in a broad sense means a voluntary movement or visitation to a person or a shrine whose authority and sacredness is acknowledged within a certain religious group. Connected to pilgrimage is movement and journey. Pilgrimage is also viewed in terms of a virtual or an imagined journey, or journey of the mind and soul to God or a religious figure.

The chapter moves to studies on pilgrimage in the Islamic context, focusing on Hajj which is an obligatory form of pilgrimage for all Muslims and *ziyarat* which is a voluntary form of pilgrimage but may be equally as important to Hajj. I offered a brief discussion

of pilgrimage among Shiite Muslims, then moved to pilgrimage in Iran and to the shrine Imam Reza in particular. I introduced Imam Reza, the eighth Shiite Imam, followed by an overview of his shrine complex in Mashad. The chapter ends with a brief introduction to some emergent remediated pilgrimage practices using ICTs. In the next chapters, drawing on my research materials, I delve more deeply in to the topic of this thesis, remediated pilgrimage through the use of ICTs.

## ***Chapter Four: Remediated pilgrimage and the telephone - calling the shrine***

This chapter examines practices of calling the shrine as a mode of performing remediated pilgrimage. The discussion is based on three kinds of calls through which pilgrims make connections to the shrine and Imam Reza:

- Calling the shrine using dedicated landline phones that are answered by operators (*khadems*) inside the shrine's telephone rooms, which face the golden dome.
- Calling the mobile phone of shrine volunteers, located in different parts of the shrine.
- Calling an automated number in the shrine.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the role of authority and the legitimacy of the act of calling the shrine as a form of mediated pilgrimage. The data for this section is derived from two publicly available online discussions: one which appeared in Cloob.com and the other in khbartar.blog.ir, both of which were introduced in the first chapter.

### ***Calling the shrine***

Many Shiites who are not capable of travelling to the shrine and being physically present call the shrine's official number or the mobile phones that belong to the *khadems* who perform various jobs and tasks inside the shrine. When receiving a call these people typically will be asked to hold their phones towards the golden dome. This performance of stretching the hand towards the golden dome, along with the

knowledge that the person who holds the phone is standing inside the shrine, combines with the sounds from around the tomb chamber to configure the person on the other side of the phone as a pilgrim and enable them to experience pilgrimage and say their prayers. Below is an example, which appeared in the Iranian news website [tasnimnews.com](http://tasnimnews.com), that explains how a woman would call a servant working inside the shrine (Javad) on a regular basis to perform pilgrimage.

Javad is a voluntary servant (*khadem* in Farsi) of the shrine. He is 63 years old and he tells a story of a woman from Ghazvin, who once came to the shrine of Imam Reza:

When she came here, I realized she was suffering from a bad disease, she took my [mobile phone] number and [when she went back home] she would call me every once in a while to listen to us sweeping the courtyards of the shrine early in the mornings, or to listen to the religious ceremonies and sermons inside the shrine, or she would call me sometimes [...] just to listen to the sound that can be heard around the shrine [...] she had such strong beliefs that [Imam Reza] finally healed her (Javad [tasnimnews.com](http://tasnimnews.com) 2011 accessed September 2017).

Sound has the capacity to not only connect disparate bodies (LaBelle, 2006, 2010), but also to change them (Kanngieser, 2015). LaBelle argues that sound 'may be heard as registering a particular vitality within the cultural and social sphere' (2010, p. xxiii). In this case it configures a space that affords a pilgrimage experience. When it comes to connecting to Imam Reza with the phone, hearing the sounds of other pilgrims, and the ambient sounds that can be heard around the shrine, plays an important role. Sound here acts as a material artifact that aids pilgrims in escaping their current spatial constraints or transporting themselves imaginatively into the shrine. The acoustics of the shrine and the ability of the phone to transfer audio waves enacts sonic sensibilities,

instilling a sense for the woman in the example above that she is inside the shrine and connected to the Imam. The sound of birds mixed with the sound of the sweeping broom (Figure 4.1), heard from a phone device, would mean that she is now hearing the sounds from outside the tomb chamber from one of the courtyards, which instigates closeness to the Imam and expands her understanding of the various spaces that she imagines herself in. The complexity and multiplicity of the acoustic landscape of the shrine is performative, it configures imagination, prayer and in the case of the example above, is even interpreted as having led to healing from a 'bad disease'.



Figure 4.1 Servants sweeping the shrine courtyards (Source: Instagram.com accessed Jan 2018)  
Listening to sounds evokes space, direction and movement; it enacts affective, material and embodied effects. There are semiotic associations produced by listening, including

triggering certain memories (Gallagher et al., 2017). Listening to sounds shapes spaces by marking out territories (LaBelle, 2010), creating acoustic arenas (Blessner & Salter, 2009), generating affective atmospheres, and contributing to the production of space (Gallagher, 2014). Sound both produces spaces (as certain spaces inside the shrine are configured and enacted for the pilgrim only when she listens to them) and is produced by them (as when she hears the sweeping sounds of the brooms, which occurs when they touch the grounds of the shrine's courtyards).

The growing number of pilgrims calling the shrine and wanting to hear the sounds, to connect to the Imam or to say their pilgrimage prayers, led the shrine officials to install a dedicated line<sup>47</sup> for this purpose. The story outlined below is an excerpt from a documentary on pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Reza. The dialogue is between a woman pilgrim and a telephone operator inside the shrine.<sup>48</sup>

Pilgrim: Hello

Operator: Yes?

Pilgrim: excuse me could you please move the telephone handset towards the dome of Imam Reza's shrine?

Operator: you want to talk to the shrine? Hold on a second. (youtube.com<sup>49</sup> accessed Jan 2015).

From watching the documentary, the conversation took place in the shrine on a sunny day. The operator, who is also known as a servant of Imam Reza, is sitting in a room that

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<sup>47</sup> I do not know the exact time when this line was set up; I learned about it through watching a documentary that was made in 2005, so I assume that it was before that year.

<sup>48</sup> The nature of emotional movement evident in this story will be examined in Chapter Six.

<sup>49</sup> The name of the documentary is Rezaie Rezvan. Directed by Majid Majidi and produced in 2005. Full documentary can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvmwsmyUrPU> (accessed Jan 2017).

directly faces the golden dome of the shrine. In front of him there is an old green telephone, which keeps ringing throughout the day, as calls come in from all corners of the world, inside and outside Iran. When the telephone rings, the servant/operator picks it up, and assures the caller/pilgrim that the call was correctly made to the holy shrine. The sound of the phone ringing implies that someone is calling to say their pilgrimage prayers to the shrine. When answering these calls, the operator asks 'you want to talk to the shrine?' Only a few sentences are exchanged between the pilgrim and the operator. The conversation between the two is limited to acknowledging that the pilgrim has called the shrine and is requesting to talk to the Imam.

When the pilgrim asks to talk to the Imam, the operator raises the hand holding the telephone handset towards the golden dome. The operator then shifts from being a conversational interlocutor to become one element of a technology configured to bring the pilgrim closer to the shrine. His hand, previously engaged in picking up the phone to initiate a conversation, is now holding the phone towards the golden dome. It is the entanglement of the operator with the telephone that connects the pilgrim to Imam Reza. This configuration of caller, operator, and landline telephone enacts pilgrimage experience. In this case remediation requires the presence of an operator, who is present throughout the pilgrimage encounter.

The pilgrim, knowing that she is now connected to the shrine, and that the handset is held towards the shrine, performs what Iranian Shiites refer to as the *ziyarat* (Figure 4.2). In the case above, the pilgrim spoke to Imam Reza as follows:

Greetings Imam Reza, I am calling you from afar. Sir please respond to my greeting, to the pains in my heart, you already know what they are [...] Oh Imam Reza whoever has any wishes, any dreams any requests [...] however they reach out to

you [...] Oh Imam Reza grant their wishes and answer their prayers. (Youtube.com accessed Jan 2015).



Figure 4.2 Pilgrimage enacted with landline telephone (Source youtube.com accessed Jan 2015)

The operator's question, 'you want to talk to the shrine of Imam Reza?', personifies the shrine, as if the shrine and the Imam Reza are the same; this indicates that the shrine as a built artifact may hold a similar position to the prophet buried there in the minds of Shiite Iranians. Similarly, the woman asks the operator to 'hand the phone to Imam Reza.' If one did not know the context of this phone conversation, one might assume that Imam Reza is someone who is alive and present in the vicinity of the operator's reach, that he would be walking towards the phone, to take the handset and engage in a phone conversation with the pilgrim. The use of everyday expressions such as 'hand the phone to Imam Reza' illustrates how pilgrims anthropomorphize the shrine itself.

Once the pilgrim is assured that the operator is holding the phone towards the shrine, the operator and the phone get disengaged from the conversation and their presence fades away. Agency in this case is not only distributed (through the phone and the operator), it also appears and disappears. The operator is at first part of the conversation with the pilgrim, an active agent, but after a few seconds becomes a taken-for-granted part of the sociotechnical configuration. The act of staying silent and absencing oneself on the part of the operator enables pilgrimage for the woman on the other side of the phone. It is in this mediation that subjectivities and objectivities are shaped, as the woman who calls the shrine is transformed from being only a caller to becoming a pilgrim and the operator, whose initial act was to answer the phone, becomes only a silent mediator in the background. The interaction between the woman and the operator underscores the fact that remediation of pilgrimage is a social practice. There are obligations and responsibilities that are involved; the operator is designated as someone who is responsible to be alert to these phone calls, and to make sure pilgrims on the other side of the phone get connected to the shrine; there is an established sequence of conversation and bodily movements.

### ***An automated operator***

The form of remediated pilgrimage just described is no longer available. I was not able to determine the date when the shrine decommissioned this service, but perhaps the sheer number of pilgrims calling the shrine every day and the unavailability of enough operators to answer calls, or the desire of Astan Quds (the organization responsible for running all aspects of the shrine) to adopt a more efficient system, led to the installation of an automated phone system. Today pilgrims can call a certain number and, instead of an operator, they will hear an automatic reply: 'Dear pilgrim, after you greet the

Imam, you will be connected to his holy shrine[...]’ (source <http://arsannews.ir/> accessed in October 2017).<sup>50</sup>

There are now microphones installed on top of the tomb chamber, and once the phone connection is made, pilgrims are able to hear the sounds from inside the tomb chamber. However, the call only lasts for two or three minutes and the connection is then automatically dropped, so if pilgrims want to continue talking to the shrine they will have to call again.<sup>51</sup> This number was shared on social media such as Facebook, Iranian news websites and many blogs (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3 A photo of telephonic pilgrimage to Imam Reza (Source <http://www.cloob.com> accessed September 2017)

An engineer who was involved in this project writes on the website [hammihan.com](http://hammihan.com):

<sup>50</sup> [goo.gl/LxL1Cpcontent\\_copy](http://goo.gl/LxL1Cpcontent_copy).

<sup>51</sup> Sources: <http://sehrane.mihanblog.com/post/28>, <http://forum.roq.ir/t44658>, <http://www.hoseynienet.ir/>.

When you call this number, after the connection is made, you will be connected to the microphones that are installed inside the tomb chamber, your voice will be aired inside the room [tomb chamber] and you will hear the voices and sounds of pilgrims who are gathered around the tomb [...] this is a live connection [...] it is a project done by the daily work of a group of Iranian engineers, the design and the installation of it has been executed by the company that me and my father own (Naser, <https://hammihan.com/post/8785806>, posted on January 2016, accessed in September 2017).

The engineer assumes that pilgrims are configured in a way that when they call they will speak their prayers out loud and that their voice will 'be aired inside the room.' However, as the online comment below indicates, pilgrims are configured differently:

When I call, I listen to the sounds and voices from inside the shrine, and then I will silently talk to the Imam [...] it makes me so peaceful and calm (anonymous pilgrim, source <http://khabartar.blog.ir> accessed September 2017).

Naser's post explains that the tomb chamber is configured with microphones installed that amplify the sounds produced inside the shrine, and the pitch, directionality and duration of the sounds heard from inside the tomb chamber contribute to the configuration of the tomb chamber as a space of pilgrimage. As Gallagher et al. (2016) note, sounds enact spatial boundaries, as well as the material qualities of landscape surfaces. Depending on where the microphones are installed, how loudly or softly they will transfer the sound, pilgrims will have a different perception of the tomb chamber. How this transformation of sound is engineered and implemented has a certain capacity to remediate the tomb chamber and produce an affective and spiritual atmosphere which interfaces with the bodies of the pilgrims, or with auditory and other listening

registers (see Peter Adey et al., 2013; Anderson & Ash, 2014; Duff, 2010; McCormack, 2008). This affective aspect of sound is rooted in the relations and exchanges and movements between pilgrims, and the material artifacts that are involved, such as the microphones, the phone and the tomb chamber.

Soroosh, a pilgrim, writes about his experience of calling the shrine:

When I call this number, I first need to place my hand on my heart, because right after the connection is made, a special greeting to the Imam is played, and then I will directly get connected to the shrine, this means that my heart is only a few meters away from his tomb and I can talk to Imam and no one can hear my voice it is just me and him [...] I should remember that I do not have much time when I hear the first beep that means there is someone else behind the line, Imam Reza has many lovers, then I only have a few seconds [...] to say goodbye since the connection will get dropped, but even these few minutes are enough for me since I cannot be present (inside the shrine) there at the moment (source <http://www.cloob.com/u/2015aryan/119690575> accessed September 2017).

As Soroosh's post shows, even when the remediation of the shrine is experienced through the automated phone, he will still feel the connection to the Imam. This remediated pilgrimage includes as well bodily gestures. The pilgrim is holding the phone with one hand and placing the other hand on his heart, while saying his prayers. While this remediation of the shrine forces the pilgrim to hear an automated greeting

for the Imam, Soroosh is content with the lack of human interference since it removes the possibility of a third person eavesdropping on his prayers.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, this kind of pilgrimage practice has a time limitation. It offers a disrupted pilgrimage experience, in which the line automatically gets disconnected and the pilgrim has no control on when the connection ends. The sound of the beep is an indicator that the pilgrim should wrap up her/his prayer and get ready to say goodbye to the Imam, since a few seconds after the beep the call is automatically disconnected. This forces pilgrims to either shorten their prayers or attempt to call the shrine back to complete them. In the case of the landline telephone and the operator, or the mobile phone calls that are made inside the shrine, or online pilgrimage (discussed in the next chapter), pilgrims are not limited to a certain length of time to do their prayers.

At times the line gets busy or for other reasons pilgrims are not able to connect to the shrine. One pilgrim who was not able to call the shrine in a prayer comment, shared this:

Greetings Imam Reza, I called a few times, but I never got connected, I am so bad that I can't even connect to you even with the telephone! (source khouznews.ir accessed September 2017).

When this pilgrim tried to call Imam Reza and she was not successful, she started to rely on a different platform to connect to the Imam; the Internet. Instead of saying her prayers on the phone she switched to typing them as a comment prayer, a practice that I discuss at length in the next chapter. It seems that some believers can 'move' to the shrine in many different ways. If one route is blocked, they choose another, illustrating

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<sup>52</sup> it should be noted that with the automated phone, if pilgrims do decide to say their prayers out loud their prayers still cannot be discerned as the tomb chamber is already filled with noise from pilgrims inside of it.

both the strength of their feeling of commitment to prayer, and their flexibility regarding the medium.

### ***Questioning the legitimacy of calling the Imam***

Despite the number of pilgrims calling the shrine, some have questioned the legitimacy of these practices as a form pilgrimage. Many social media and online platforms provide a comment section that allows pilgrims, and Muslims more widely, to reflect on the practices of mediation in a critical way and to express views for and against mediated pilgrimage. The debates that take place online depict the ways in which the Internet has become a forum for debating the legitimacy of mediated pilgrimage. The internet is relevant here not as a pilgrimage platform itself (discussed in Chapter Five), but as a democratizing medium for debates over the authenticity of using the telephone for pilgrimage, as well as for asking how the practice is done. This section starts from an online discussion on the legitimacy of calling the shrine that takes place on cloob.com. It then moves to a blog post which appeared on khbartar.blog.ir, asking how to initiate a mediated pilgrimage with the phone; this conversation then leads back to a discussion of the legitimacy of the shrine, and of how and why Shiites distant from the shrine feel the need to experience mediated pilgrimage through the phone.

Most objections to the use of the phone or the internet stem from the belief that Imam Reza does not need to be contacted through those media, but rather can be accessed through a heartfelt connection no matter where the pilgrims is. One online user wrote a reply to a post about calling Imam Reza on Cloob.com:

Aren't these all superstition and an alteration of religion? [...], don't our Imams hear our voices from our own cities? [in a sarcastic tone].<sup>53</sup> And say your requests [to Imams via phone]?! Meaning God has a lower place than the Imams? You should have said ask the Imam to be mediators not directly requesting the Imams [...] (Yasamin, source Cloob.com accessed September 2017).

Yasamin in the above comment, believes that praying to Imams and asking them to grant our requests should not be done in a way which assumes that they have full power to grant us our requests, their role is only to act as intermediaries between Muslims and God. God is the only one who has full power, and pilgrims should consider Imams as mediators rather than as people who have the same control and power as God does.

Other users write similar comments:

He is an Imam, he is present everywhere, there is no need to dial a number [to connect to him] (Cloob.com accessed September 2017).

For us to talk to them, Imams should be in our hearts, what does it even mean to call them? This is nonsense[...]. (Iran-Muslim source cloob.com accessed September 2017)

[in a sarcastic way] thank God that we have technology to come and assist religion [...] do you have Imam Reza's personal mobile phone number to give it to me?! (Shiamuslim source cloob.com accessed September 2017).

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<sup>53</sup> 'Users' comments have been translated from Farsi by the author. Farsi allows speakers to include sarcasm, humor, or other affective colorings implicitly. Where this is difficult to translate into English, in these cases to convey better meanings I will use square brackets, for example here I have added a comment in square brackets, such as [in a sarcastic tone].

Doesn't Imam Reza hear the sound of our hearts [and all our heartfelt prayers]? There is no need for these daily [technological] systems [such as telephone to contact him]. (Iran-Muslim source cloob.com accessed September 2017).

The discussion here points to the premise that the Imam is everywhere, and that pilgrimage does not require the use of the telephone or any other material artifact. Nonetheless, there is also a compulsion for many Shiites to have some tangible, sociomaterial connection to the shrine. In response to the last two above comments above, another online user wrote:

Any kind of connection with the Imam that includes and declares a friendship, loyalty and commitment, is preferable. It is true that one needs to love them in a heartfelt way, but with this interpretation [that Imams can be connected through a heartfelt connection and there is no need for calling him], one can argue that there is no need to even physically travel and perform pilgrimage to the Imam, and we all know that based on hundreds of religious sayings, it is beneficial and preferred to physically perform their pilgrimage. So, a telephone connection which takes us to a spiritual and religious atmosphere and renews our commitment and love [for the Imam] is beautiful and hopefully God will accept that [kind of pilgrimage] (Latifi, source cloob.com accessed September 2017).

The supporters of remediated pilgrimage report feeling a stronger and closer connection to the Imam when using technology and argue that if a telephone conversation with the Imam is an unnecessary form of pilgrimage, then the same should hold for physically traveling to his shrine and performing pilgrimage there. In this respect, the Internet provides the platform for the reproduction and 'reanimation' (Olson, 2013, p.149) of different discursive framings of pilgrimage practice.

Along with the debates, one finds more practical queries about how to actually go about using the phone, which then loop back to discussions of the legitimacy of doing so. Note that the following poster acknowledges the debate in the opening sentence.:

Hi guys it's been a while since, I wanted to call Imam Reza (I know I can talk to him in my heart as well [...] but something tells me to call him [...] but I don't know what to tell the person who is going to pick up the phone. Has anyone done this before? Does the person who pick up the phone hear our prayers? (anonymous source <http://khabartar.blog.ir> accessed September 2017).

This user has concerns similar to Soroosh; she also does not feel comfortable that other people like telephone operators might listen to her prayers. There are many replies to her post, assuring her that there won't be anyone on the other side as the phone call will be automated; some say that they would call this number 'every once in a while' and a 'recorded voice will be played which confirms the connection is made and another recorded voice will be played which greets the Imam', assuring her that she can say whatever she wants and no one will hear it.

In the same thread of comments, a user called Afaghani wrote:

This is an alteration of religion. I am sorry but the Imams will not pick up our phone calls [...] they are present everywhere and inside our hearts, we only need to remember them. Our Imams are different from yours, they do not have access to technology, instead of connecting with us with a telephone, they connect to us with our hearts (<http://khabartar.blog.ir> accessed September 2017).

Muslims are caught up in these clashing narratives about pilgrimage, which means that the choices that they make about the correct way of performing pilgrimage also says

something about what kind of Muslims they are and how they frame closeness to the shrine and Imam. Afaghani, who identifies himself as someone from Afghanistan, is a typical participant in these debates and adopts the argument that Imams are inside Muslims' hearts and there is no need to call. At the same time, he distances himself from Iranian Muslims, by saying 'our Imams are different.' The suggestion here is that in his religion, they pray to the real Imams and Iranians do not. In this instance the Internet provides a platform for highlighting borders such as those between Iran and Afghanistan, creating further geographical and territorial boundaries between the two by enabling Muslims to discuss the differences in what they believe in terms of practicing pilgrimage. On the other hand, Roy (2002, 2008) also notes that online communities, such as [khabartar.blog.ir](http://khabartar.blog.ir), are globalized and carry Muslim identities that cross frontiers. We see in this communicative space both the erosion of national differences, as some Iranians support what the Afghan user posts, and also the divide between religious nationals as some Iranians disagree with what the Afghan shares. This makes the discussions on the legitimacy of calling the shrine, a contested, unsettled and complex one.

Afaghani's post initiated a plethora of comments, both in agreement and disagreement. Some comments that are too harsh or maybe too anti- pilgrimage are removed by the website moderator (see Figure 4.4, where some responses have been deleted by the authorities and replaced with "\_" or "\*"). One user responding to that comment wrote:

To Afaghani: There is no doubt that Imams are in our hearts, but when you call the shrine and you hear the sound and voices of other pilgrims, it seems like you are standing right in front of the shrine, your heart becomes tender and your

connection [to the Imam] stronger (<http://khabartar.blog.ir> accessed September 2017).

This comment points to the compulsion for Shiites to have some tangible sociomaterial connection with the shrine; it is the sound and voices of other pilgrims that engender the necessary tenderness of the heart which is brought to the pilgrim by the use of the phone. Religion may be a deeply felt 'internal' and individual experience, but it is also a social practice and the sociality of the practice – as in this case – can be an integral component of the pilgrims' experience.

Afaghani then replies:

Before you post anything here, please use a [real] name[...] does going to the holy shrines and calling the shrine from a thousand kilometers away [constitute something] equivalent? Are these the same, or even comparable, that you use it as an example? Where did you get this comparison? From which religious book or leader? [...] maybe your God is similar to your Imams and has the same position? I recommend instead of storytelling [...] engage in some thinking [...]' (<http://khabartar.blog.ir> accessed September 2017).

The website moderator not only interferes in this heated debate but also supports remediated pilgrimage by phone, expressing his/her disagreement with the Afghani commentator, and adding that 'this thread is for people who believe in these things [remediated pilgrimage with telephone], this is not the place to argue against this issue.' (<http://khabartar.blog.ir> accessed September 2017). He indirectly tells the Afghani that his (virtual) presence is not welcomed here.

Among the online users who support Afghani's belief is one whose comment gets deleted by the website moderator (Figure 4.4). A user with the name of MJ wrote a comment, but his comment was then censored and replaced with '\*'. At the top of his comment the website moderator wrote '[...]this comment that is demarcated with '\*' has been deleted by the website moderator', and at the bottom the website moderator repeats his view on this matter by posting 'Hi, this post belongs to those who believe in these stuff' (<http://khabartar.blog.ir> accessed September 2017). It seems that in this case the role of website moderator works as a loose religious authority.



Figure 4.4 The censorship of comments by website moderator (Source <http://khabartar.blog.ir> accessed September 2017)

Censorship here is not a complete removal of commentator's posts: rather, the website moderator left the comment evident, with the date when it was posted and the name of the commentator (MJ).

In a different comment MJ wrote 'I have not seen it in any religious book or any other books, that you can pray to people [Imams] who are sent by God'. Again, MJ is referring to religious sources to back up his disagreement with calling Imam Reza. Another user

replies to his comment by adding two verses of Quran which oppose his view and references text which supports praying to the Imams. His comment reads just 'Maedah verse 35, Yousef verse 97' (<http://khabartar.blog.ir> accessed September 2017).

As the authenticity of remediated pilgrimage is questioned by online users, the website moderators play an active role in the discussion. They not only write their own comments, but they also instruct some users about what is allowed to be discussed and what is not. These new practices of transnational Islam, and the growth of different Muslim identities that are emerging in such online communities, are enacted in part in relation to the legitimacy of digitally remediated pilgrimage itself, as the views of these Muslims are shared in online platforms. The result of this is not necessarily the individualization of authority or the configuration of Islamic subjective opinion over religious knowledge, but instead a multiplication of competing authorities (see Turner, 2007). At the same time, the Islamic authority does not stop Muslims from exploring the internet to find a perspective that is in line with what they are looking for (For studies of Islam and Internet use see e.g. Beckerlegge, 2001; Bunt, 2003; Linjakumpu, 2010; Sands, 2009).

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter discusses three interrelated ways to experience remediated pilgrimage. In the first, when pilgrims call the *khadem*'s mobile phones, the phone, and the sound of his broom sweeping the shrine's courtyard along with the other sounds that can be heard, are sociotechnical configurations that mediate the pilgrimage experience and reconfigure the spatial boundary and acoustic space of the shrine. The second case involves pilgrims calling the official number dedicated to mediated pilgrimage by the

shrines, where the calls are again answered by an operator/*khadem*. Once the operators hold the handset towards the golden dome they move from being a conversational interlocutor to joining the sociotechnical configurations that mediate the shrine, disappearing from the pilgrim's experience of it.

The third configuration involves calling an automated number which connects pilgrims to the shrine. These automated calls remove the risk of eavesdropping, however calls are marked by a beeping sound before they end, and they usually last between two to three minutes; these are standardized features that are brought about by the phone's automation.

With regards to using the telephone as a mode of mediated pilgrimage, I tracked some heated online debates about the legitimacy of these calls. Online platforms allow Shiites, and Muslims more widely, to reanimate different discursive (often clashing) framings of pilgrimage practice, and the pilgrims' competing narratives on the legitimacy of mediated pilgrimage converge with their use of technology as a medium for debate. The result is not necessarily the individualization of authority or the configuration of Islamic subjective opinion over religious knowledge, but instead a multiplication of competing authorities. This makes the discussions on the legitimacy of calling the shrine complex, and still contested and unsettled. While some advance the premise that the Imam is everywhere and pilgrimage does not require the use of a telephone or any material artifact, there is also the compulsion for many Shiites to have some tangible/sociomaterial connection to the shrine, however mediated. The internet is relevant here not as a pilgrimage platform, but as a democratizing medium for debates over the authenticity of using the telephone for pilgrimage. The use of the internet as a platform for remediated pilgrimage is the topic of next chapter.

## ***Chapter Five: Remediated pilgrimage and online tools***

The aim of this chapter is threefold: (1) to bring into view the at times invisible, and often-overlooked, collection of agencies that take part in remediated pilgrimage through online tools; (2) to explore further the blurring of roles of religious authorities in shaping remediated pilgrimage; and (3) to offer insight into how digitally remediated pilgrimage is lived and practiced, including how pilgrims are inadvertently drawn into co-designing these new ways of doing pilgrimage, how sociotechnical configurations are made and remade, and finally how the latter may fail to mediate pilgrimage successfully.

Tracing the history of digitally mediated pilgrimage and attending to its temporality is crucial in understanding how it is being practiced today. Hence in this chapter in the first section I will investigate two online remediated pilgrimage platforms. The first is Imamreza.tv, an online platform offering live videos of the shrine (active from 2005 till 2012). This platform was Iran's first attempt at introducing pilgrimage on the Internet. It is no longer in use as it has been replaced by razavitv.aqr.ir (the second platform that will be discussed here), which is still running and actively being used by pilgrims.

### ***The first online tool to remediate pilgrimage: Imamreza.tv***

Imamreza.tv<sup>54</sup> was the first private and independent website run by Astan Quds Razavi (introduced in the previous chapter) and was initially designed to support online pilgrimage for Muslims by providing access to live video feeds from cameras installed both inside and outside of the shrine. The platform was designed to be used by both

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<sup>54</sup> This website was decommissioned and replaced with another on March 2012. The work of this section is based on a downloaded version of this website as the site is no longer available.

English speaking and Farsi speaking Muslims, supporting both languages on some sections. The website was established around December 2005.<sup>55</sup> It was a webpage with a background showing a photo of a blue, clear sky with some clouds in the top center of the photo, with rays of sun beaming out of the left corner of the cloud (Figure 5.1). Based on the fact that in Islam Imam's faces and heads are represented as a circle of light to indicate their holiness, this use of light may have been a way a way to emphasize the holiness of this site. In the foreground, there is a window with four sections, each with a separate tab. Depending on which tab is selected, the main window will show video feeds from that section of the shrine. These include Rozeh (shown in Figure 5.1), which shows the male entrance to the tomb chamber, as well as a part of the tomb chamber itself.

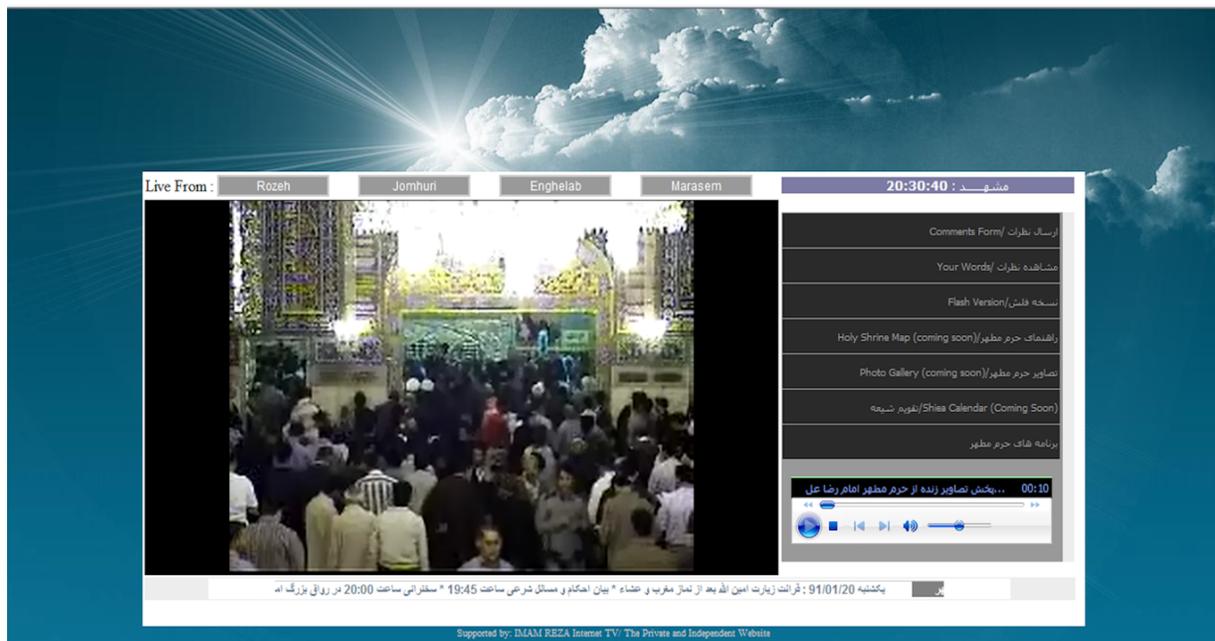


Figure 5.1 Male entrance to the tomb chamber (source: Imamreza.tv accessed April 2012)

<sup>55</sup> This is an approximate date based on the date of the first comment that was posted on the website.

The other views are of Jomhuri, showing the shrine dome and minaret from the outside; Enghelab, which shows the shrine from the Enghelab courtyard; and finally, Marasem (Figure 5.2), which refers to religious ceremonies. This section was intended to broadcast videos of sermons and religious ceremonies that were held in parts of the shrine. These area names are written in English and there is no Persian equivalent of them on the website, suggesting that perhaps this was a feature intended as an invitation to non-Iranian Muslims or English-speaking Muslims.

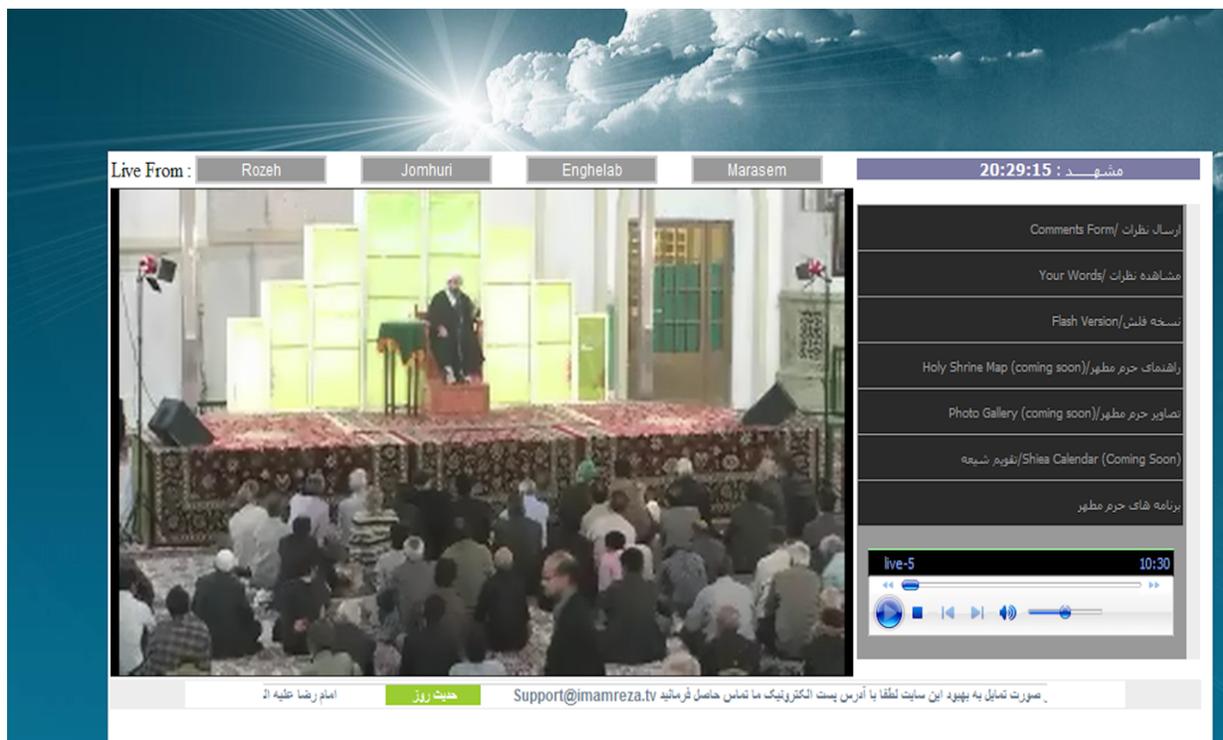


Figure 5.2 Religious ceremony (Marasem) (source Imamreza.tv accessed November 2015)

Pilgrims could double click on the video and zoom in, so they could get a closer look of each area, for example the tomb chamber (Figure 5.3).

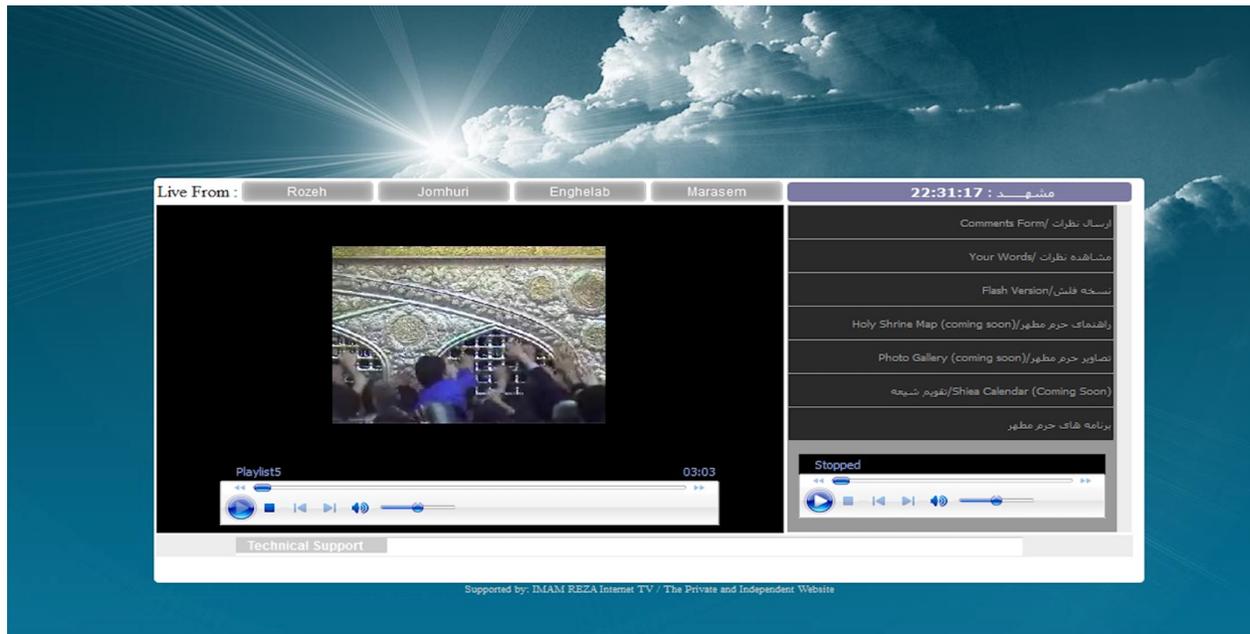


Figure 5.3. A close-up view of the tomb chamber (source: Imamreza.tv accessed April 2012)

On the very top right corner of the main window there is the local time in English, followed by Mashad in Farsi letters. On the right side there is a menu which reads 'comments form,' which links to a section for submitting comments and suggestions, then 'Your Words', which allows you to view all comments, then a Holy Shrine Map (indicated as 'coming soon'), Photo Gallery ('coming soon'), Shia Calendar ('coming soon') and, lastly, events inside the shrine. Except for the last item (events in the shrine), the rest of the titles are written in both English and Farsi with a forward slash to separate the two languages. Below this menu is an audio tool which occasionally plays sermons, or a recital of religious prayers. At the very bottom a line reads the date along with the forthcoming events inside the shrine.

Since this platform supported English, it enabled a visibility into the community of Shiite Muslims who were away from the shrine and were using this platform on a daily basis. Helland (2007) notes that the development of the internet and the applications and tools

that are made available through it has brought members of the diasporic religions together. A glance at one of the pages of the comment section reveals that not only Iranian Shiite Muslims inside Iran would utilize this platform for pilgrimage practice, but also Iranian pilgrims from across the world. Figure 5.4 shows prayers from Iranians inside Iran, but also from Canada, Germany, India, Korea, Canada, United States, and Poland.

<p>باسلام وتبریک میلادبزرگوار امام رضا(ع):1-در صفحه اصلی امروز این مناسبت بزرگ راجع نکرده ایدوتبریک نگفته 2-اقدام به راه اندازی این سایت هر چند بسیار دیر انجام شد ولی جای تقدیر و تشکر دارد 3-درجای از صفحه سایت لینک ارتباط مستقیم با کربلارا اگر بگذارید بسیار شایسته است 4-مناسبت های ویژه که مراسم های معنوی در حرم شریف برگزار می گردد راه تصویر یکشیدوبرای کسانی امکان دیدن مستقیم وجود ندارد بتوانند آن را بعدا ببینند/باتشکر و احترام فراوان اجر شما با افاضلی (ابن موسی الرضا)ع</p>		Iran, Islamic Republic Of 2007-02-25 05:02:36
<p>سلام هنوز هم باهات قهرم امام رضا جون ، ولی دلم خیلی برات تنگ شده بود... دیدن و حاجت گرفتن لیاقت میخواد که من ندارم و نداشتم خودت از دلم خیر داری ... می دونی چی میگم بازم میام بیشت دیکه بلد نیستم چیزی بگم بغض گلومو گرفته... به امید دیدار</p>		Iran, Islamic Republic Of 2007-02-25 04:59:19
<p>ba salam va khashteh nabashid sakhte in site behatarin kare momken baraye nazidikiye har che bishtare iranihayeh moghime kharez az keshvar be emam reza bod. az shoma be kahter faraham avordnaeh in emkan tashakor faravan daram. babak ,Toronto,CANADA</p>		Canada 2007-02-25 04:58:13
<p>ba salam vagean dasteeton dard nakone barnameye zende kilii alye dar panahe hag</p>		Germany 2007-02-25 04:54:57
<p>salam-o-alikom ajre hame shoma baEMAM REZA lotfan emkann didan tasavir ra afzayesh dahid khoda negahdar</p>	SPAINA	India 2007-02-25 04:53:58
<p>با سلام و تحیت و تبریک ولادت امام هفتم(ع) زبان از بیان تشکر و قدردانی از اقدام بسیار پسندیده قاصر است. اجرتان با امام هشتم(ع). چند پیشنهاد نیز به حضورتان webcam شما در استفاده از نیز از فیلم زنده dialup عرض میکنم: 1- ترتیبی اتخاذ فرمایید که بتوان با اینترنت های کم سرعت استفاده نمود 2- زیارتنامه آقا را در زیر فیلم قرار دهید تا زائران از راه دور مثل اینجانب زیارتنامه را نیز بخوانند 3- با گذاشتن چند گزینه صوتی الف- صدای محل 2- زیارتنامه 3- قرائت قرآن توسط بیننده انتخاب گردد. در ضمن قرائت فعلی قرآن بسیار مناسب انتخاب شده است. اجرکم عندالله وحید مباشری</p>		Iran, Islamic Republic Of 2007-02-24 20:30:00
<p>سلام علیکم واقعا نمی دانم چگونه از اینکار شما باید تشکر کرد فقط باید گفت اجرکم عندالله امیدوارم همیشه پایدار باشید</p>		Korea, Democratic People'S Republic Of 2007-02-24 09:42:58
<p>Much appreciate for preparing this website ,</p>		Canada 2007-02-24 09:27:49
<p>kheili kare ghashangi kardid , lotfan seda ro ham vasl konid , hamchenin age jaye doorbinha ro nazdiktar bezarid kheili mamnoon mishim , masalan yeki ro balaye sare hazrat . ba sepas</p>		United States 2007-02-24 09:26:38
<p>ba arze salam va khashte nabashid .man az iranian moghim kharez az keshvar mibasham yani be internete nesbatan por sorat dastresi daram va mitavanam tasavir ra be khobi daryaft namayam amma tasavire daryafti seda nadarad nemidanam dalil chist.va dar zemn sahne marboot be ziyarate ashooora dar liste dorbinha nist !!?lotfan mara rahnamaee konid ba tashakkor...eltemase doa</p>		Poland 2007-02-24 09:26:02

Figure 5.4 Prayers from Iranians (Source Imamreza.tv accessed in November 2015)

### ***From 'can you make the videos bigger?' to 'greetings Imam Reza, help me'!***

This online platform was built for the purpose of connecting pilgrims to the shrine of Imam Reza with the aid of live videos, but like many websites, it contained a section for

comments. The English title for this section was 'comment form' and the Farsi translation was 'sending suggestions', and as the titles suggest the designers of this platform created this option as a way to communicate with the visitors and pilgrims who used the platform. The titles 'sending suggestions' and 'comment form' indicate a place where users can post their requests and suggestions and share issues that they may encounter in relation to the website. In the first months that the platform was up, most comments that were posted were targeted towards the website administrators; that is, they were posted and publicly shared in this section. Later on, however, the comment section was filled with not only suggestions but also pilgrimage prayers that addressed the Imam.

In order to leave a comment, users/pilgrims should provide an email, a name, and the country where they were writing the comment from, followed by their comment or pilgrimage prayer. The comments were mostly suggestions for better delivery of this service, such as adding more cameras, or reporting technical issues such as the poor quality of the videos. Mojtaba's post from Afghanistan says:

In the capital of Afghanistan (Kabul) the audio (of this site) is great, but the video has issues [...] (Source Imamreza.tv posted on 2006 August).

or Bahram, a pilgrim, writes:

Hi, please give us a view from inside the *zarih*, the current cameras are not installed in the right locations (Source Imamreza.tv posted on 2007 January).

Pilgrims felt not only an absence of views from inside the shrine, but also a lack of enough cameras to allow them to view more spaces around the shrine. This points to the fact that absences are not things that exist in themselves but are made to exist through relations that give these absences significance. They come to matter through

the interaction between the pilgrims and the online platform, in this case expressed in the form of comments.

In contrast, one comment in this section expressed appreciation for this tool and thanked the administrators for making this connection between pilgrims and the Imam possible. Abbas from France wrote:

This is great, thanks for this great work, it enables us to perform pilgrimage to the holy shrine from afar (source Imamreza.tv posted on 2006 August).

The website administrator would at times reply to these comments under the name 'website manager', usually writing his/her reply below the comment and separating it with some dots (Figure 5.5).

<p>مدیریت شبکه : با عرض سلام خدمت شما دوست گرامی و عزیز _____ tasvir ra bozorgtar konid شما می توانید با دوبار کلیک کردن موس بر روی تصاویر بخش زنده سایت آن تصاویر را به صورت تمام صفحه مشاهده نمایید .</p>		<p>Iran, Islamic Republic Of 2006-10-02 21:09:05</p>
<p>با سلام خدمت شما عزیزان اجر شما با خود امام رضا (ع) آیا امکان تصویر برداری از داخل حرم را دارید؟ ----- مدیریت شبکه : با عرض سلام خدمت شما زائر محترم از راه دور آقا علی ابن موسی الرضا علیه السلام ، به اطلاع شما میرسانیم که ما در مواقعی که مراسم های خاص و مهمی که در حرم مطهر برگزار می گردد بصورت زنده بر روی سایت بخش می نمایم . با تشکر فراوان از شما</p>		<p>Iran, Islamic Republic Of 2006-10-02 07:51:48</p>
<p>السلام عليك يا علي بن موسي الرضا: دست کليه کسانی که در این سایت زحمت کشیده اند درد نکنه اگر امکان دارد دوربینها را از زوایای دگر از جمله ضریح مطهر افزایش دهید (اجر شما با اقا امام رضا) التماس دعا..... ----- مدیریت شبکه: انشاء الله بزودی تعداد دوربینها و کیفیت آنها افزایش خواهد یافت. با تشکر فراوان از شما</p>		<p>Iran, Islamic Republic Of 2006-10-18 18:21:55</p>
<p>ضمن عرض خسته نباشید اگر امکان دارد تعداد دور بینها را بیشتر کنید (حتما در ضریح مطهر هم دوربین بگذارید ----- مدیر شبکه: انشاء الله بزودی تعداد دوربینها و کیفیت آنها افزایش خواهد یافت</p>		<p>Iran, Islamic Republic Of 2006-10-18 18:20:10</p>

Figure 5.5 Replies from the website manager (source Imamreza.tv accessed in November 2015)

Below is a written conversation between a pilgrim and a website manager:

[...] is there a chance for taking videos from inside the shrine? [...] website manager: greetings to you dear pilgrim from afar[...] when we have certain ceremonies and religious events taking place inside the shrine we will broadcast it live on this site [...] (Soudeh October 2006).

It becomes evident that website managers are essential agents in the remediation, as technical people who are responsible for running, designing and managing the platform. Their replies on the platform include as well giving assistance and information with regards to online pilgrimage. For example, Leyla asks '[...] why is the video image blurry and not clear?' and the website manager replies ' [...] the quality of the videos depend upon your internet speed and bandwidth' (Figure 5.6).

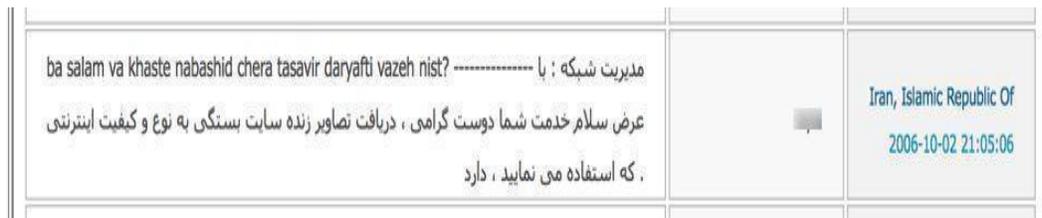


Figure 5.6 Website manager's response (Source Imamreza.tv accessed in November 2015)

Pilgrims as well are actively taking part in shaping the tool to enhance the pilgrimage experience. Mohammad Mehdi, an Iranian who lives in Europe writes:

[...] I suggest, if it is possible to make the videos bigger [...] also, if possible to add more cameras inside the shrine [...] for now this (tool) is great, thank you so much, it is useful for all, especially for us who are abroad and in Europe [...] (Source Imamreza.tv accessed in November 2015).

Many pilgrims, besides reporting issues and suggesting new features, began to post their pilgrimage prayers in the comment section addressing Imam Reza directly. Sadate Razavi, from the United Kingdom, wrote:

Greetings Imam Reza, help me, after God I don't have anyone else to rely on, save me dear sir, [...] help me to be with you all the time [...] (Source Imamreza.tv accessed in November 2015).

The presence of more and more pilgrimage prayers posted in the comment section marked the absence of a section of the platform which was explicitly dedicated to pilgrim's prayers. The website managers subsequently renamed this section, reconfiguring its purpose.

### ***A hybrid of comments and prayers: From the 'comment form' to the 'green connection'***

This was a gradual shift. In 2006 some comments were a mix that contained a little prayer, and a suggestion. Some would, for example, greet Imam Reza and the website moderator, and then add their comment. Others would only write their prayers. The implicit bottom-up or participatory design approach of Astan Quds Razavi, in which they welcome and incorporate pilgrims/users feedback on the platform, along with the sheer number of prayers that were addressing the shrine and Imam Reza, resulted in the renaming and redesigning of this section. In late 2006 the website moderators changed the name from 'comment form' to 'the green connection', which refers to the holy connection between the pilgrims and the Shrine. Green in Shiism is a color that represent something as holy and sacred.

This feature of the Imam Reza website was then redesigned specifically for the purpose of connecting pilgrims to the shrine and Imam Reza, and the name of the section anticipates the path of actions and projects possible use for pilgrims. Like any object that offers cues that indicate possibilities for action (Gibson, 1978; Hutchby, 2001; Norman, 1988), 'the green connection' invites us to pray, it is a thing 'that make us do something' (Caronia & Cooren, 2013, p.45; see also Cooren, 2010; Cooren & Bencherki, 2010). As Licoppe & Dumoulin (2010) state, objects make a difference in the unfolding of actions. At the same time, 'the green connection' is a heterogeneous tool. For Iranian users, its meaning is situated in the website and the shrine: it is not a road sign with no consideration of the social, technical and physical world that surrounds it (see Scollon and Scollon, 2003). This means that it remediates the shrine as a built artifact, and by addressing users of this platform as pilgrims, it attempts to send the message to users that your pilgrimage experience is not only holy and spiritual, but also that pilgrimage here is as authentic as that done inside the shrine. In sharing and posting prayers online, however, pilgrimage prayers are configured in a way that differs from what is experienced inside the shrine.

### ***The configuration of pilgrimage prayers in Imamreza.tv***

Pilgrimage prayers inside the shrine, as stated in the previous chapter, are rarely spoken out loud and if they are, these prayers are ephemeral.<sup>56</sup> On the website, in contrast, pilgrimage prayers are written, and shared publicly. Many include very personal requests

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<sup>56</sup> There is a difference between the prayers that are said out loud in the shrine and the ones that are shared in the web-based remediates pilgrimage platform as comments. Prayers in the shrine are shared with the knowledge that someone may hear them so they are not very private, or embarrassing, the ones that are shared online can be posted anonymously so they may include more private and embarrassing prayers. There are interesting private/public differences between the two.

from the Imam or contain what would normally be private issues. In one extreme example one pilgrim shared suicidal thoughts in his pilgrimage prayer to the Imam:

Dear sir, I am so sick and tired, I am sick of being abroad, I am tired of this world and its people, Sir I want to cry, [...] Sir I need your help [...] I am afraid I might commit suicide [...]. (Source Imamreza.tv accessed in November 2015).

Users cannot leave a comment under prayers like the one above, and I could not find any reactions from the website managers to this prayer either.

Many pilgrims express their financial problems. For example, a pilgrim is asking the Imam to help him pay 20 million Tomans:<sup>57</sup>

Hi Imam Reza, I only request your help [...] I'm in a bad situation [...] how can I get 20 million [Tomans]? [...] Imam Reza I will lose my dignity [...]. (Source Imamreza.tv accessed in November 2015).

Prayers that include private issues in life such as being depressed to the point where you want to commit suicide, or being in debt for 20 million Tomans, are not shared publicly or expressed out loud inside the shrine<sup>58</sup>. Being able to post prayers with a pseudonym on the platform likely contributed to the fact that pilgrims would publicly share their deepest prayers and struggles. The realm of public/private boundaries are in that sense reconfigured and experienced differently compared to presence in the shrine. And as I discussed in the previous chapter, these modulations of public/private boundaries have implications for the negotiation of religious authority and agency.

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<sup>57</sup> Toman is Iranian currency, each US dollar is about 3430 Tomans (google finance, October 2017), so this would be a debt of \$5,830, when the average income in Iran is equivalent to \$470 per month.

<sup>58</sup> Inside the shrine some prayers are said out loud but they are rarely private prayers.

***'My parents are inside the shrine but not me!': Absence as performative in pilgrimage prayers***

While comments from pilgrims indicate that they managed to feel a deep connection to the shrine, many pilgrims also used this tool to acknowledge their absence from the shrine. In the prayers that they posted on the platform, they often pointed to this absence as 'being away from the shrine' or as 'my parents are inside the shrine but not me.' For example, here are two such pilgrimage prayers, in which the pilgrims highlighted their absence. Zohreh wrote:

Hi, I do not know how to say thank you for this beautiful work of yours [referring to Imamreza.tv platform], it lifts my heart while being away from the shrine, and places it towards the shrine. It seems like I am, in any moment, inside that holy space [...] (2009 April).

Mohammad Reza wrote:

My parents are now inside the shrine but not me, ever since I opened this website I am transformed, I cannot leave it, and I cannot hold my tears, Imam Reza what did you do to have so many lovers? [...] you (website managers) have given me the most beautiful feeling ever (2009 May).

Both Zohreh and Mohammad Reza are explicitly acknowledging their absence from the shrine, but they also immediately focus on enacting virtual presence. Absence as an agency is given life through the corporeal act of typing prayers in 'the green connection': prayers are embodied and they are a response to a feeling of longing to be present in the shrine. The integration of online platforms into the practice of

pilgrimage highlights how virtual proximity is perceived by pilgrims and how physical propinquity and co-presence (Boden and Molotch, 1994) to the shrine plays a central role for Shiites. This virtual presence inside the shrine has an affective energy of its own: 'I cannot hold my tears'. Mohammad Reza's emotional prayer is informed not only by his lack of presence inside the shrine but also by not being with his parents. Absence is about lack of presence, but it manifests itself in concretely mediated spaces. It is embodied, enacted, remembered and contested. In a similar vein another pilgrim, Alireza wrote:

Imam Reza thanks for proving to me that 5 thousand kilometers will not disconnect us from each other, you have shown me that you will not leave me alone, whether I am in Mashad or Switzerland, being abroad I am happy that I am not alone, I adore you, you kind Sir (2009 May).

The quote above indicates how Iranians' preoccupations with absence – being abroad and five thousand kilometers away from Mashad – is constituted and enacted through remediated pilgrimage. It is evident from the prayer that this online platform brings to the foreground the importance of space, place and distance (Castells, 2002). Alireza thinks of himself and the shrine as 5 thousand kilometers apart, and he thinks of himself as being absent from the shrine. Zohreh's, Mohammad Reza's, and Alireza's posts all attest to the fact that this platform plays a key role in reinforcing these diasporic pilgrims' territorial attachments. These pilgrims deploy remediated pilgrimage platforms to reproduce the shrine territories and pilgrimage practice in both their intimate spaces, such as their homes, and public religious space such as this platform. This observation goes against the claim that the internet has reduced the impact of geographical places and in particular cultural and religious experiences (see Appadurai,

1988; Clifford, 1992, 1997; Giddens, 1990). It is argued here that this remediated platform strengthens rather than loosens pilgrims' relation to their homeland and to the shrine of Imam Reza. This is because the platform helps to reproduce the geographical settings of homeland in diasporic Iranians' living spaces in their receiving cities or countries. Moreover, the pilgrims' posts above illustrate that the boundary between home and abroad, to some extent, is destabilized.

The online prayers that are posted in this platform illustrate that this form of online mediated pilgrimage creates a sense of immediacy among pilgrims, not only to other pilgrims but also to the shrine and Imam Reza, which shrinks distances and allows for a level of interactivity and accessibility for the pilgrim that has not been available in the past. This is, as Helland (2007) notes, a 'new dimension to the growing and developing context of religion on the internet, one that is having significant impact on real-world religious activity' (p. 974).

The performativity of absence in this online platform is not limited to the absence of pilgrims inside the shrine. As I discussed in Chapter Four, the absence of sound from inside the shrine was a recurrent topic in pilgrims' online posts. Many of the comments and requests point to the lack of audio corresponding to the live videos. A comment from Vahid, an Iranian, expresses appreciation for the tool and thanks the moderators, but at the same time asks the moderators to include the sounds from each location (comment posted in 2007 February). Similarly, Alireza from the United States writes 'please connect audio as well' (posted in 2007 February), and Mohammad from Poland writes '[...] I am an Iranian living abroad, I have access to high speed internet, and I am able to view all images and videos clearly, but none of the videos contain an audio, I don't know why? [...]' (2007 February). As discussed in the previous chapter, hearing the

noises inside the shrine (such as *khadems* sweeping the courtyards) and the sounds of other pilgrims (for example in the automated phone calls to the shrine), plays an important role in enacting mediated pilgrimage practice. This active consideration of audio is based on making a relation in this space, on specific knowledge of the capabilities of this sociotechnical configuration, that together allow pilgrims to notice the absence of audio and consequently bring it to their experience of online pilgrimage. Audio absences in this platform need memories to fill them with life and to enact them, just as they need traces in the sociotechnical configuration that can draw them into a present situation. These memories were made during the days in which pilgrims were actually present in the shrine, their pilgrimage experience was filled with the various sounds that can be heard from the courtyards and the tomb chamber, and now that these pilgrims are away they notice the absence of audio and wish their online mediated pilgrimage would fulfill their pilgrimage experience in a similar way. Remediated religious practice here is perceived as a malleable phenomenon (see Ivakhiv, 2006) which pilgrims have a role in shaping. As Dittmer states, religion is composed of 'systems of meaning derived from cultural resources by active agents, who come to affectively embody those meanings' (Dittmer, 2007, p. 738). As pilgrims acknowledge their absence in the shrine, this explicit acknowledgement and their immersion in mediated pilgrimage configures them as pilgrims who are different from those who are inside the shrine.

### ***The configuration of pilgrims in Imamreza.tv***

It seems that pilgrims are taking different agentic capacities in their use of online media (Coole, 2005, 2013); that is, there are multiple addressees evident in their posts. They are both acting as pilgrims talking to the Imam – 'Imam Reza what did you do to have

so many lovers?' – and then stepping away from their connection to the Imam and addressing the website managers 'you have given me the most beautiful feeling ever.' This raises interesting questions of the relations between website managers and the shrine as mediators of prayer. The users of this mediated pilgrimage tool are configured as pilgrims who talk to the Imam, and at the same time as users who communicate with the website managers. Moreover, the ways in which the connection between pilgrims and Imam Reza is shaped online, and that pilgrimage is practiced, differ from practices inside the shrine. In the shrine the connection manifests itself with touching, bowing and kissing the walls and gates of the shrine.<sup>59</sup> On the platform, the tool itself is negotiated, and prayers are shared as they are posted online. Pilgrims are forced to identify themselves in the form of a name or the country from which they are posting their comments and prayers, something which is hidden inside the shrine. Pilgrims are defined not only by their interaction with this tool, but also by the ways in which this particular pilgrimage platform constructs them as pilgrims, which is by their names (or pseudonyms), their geographical location and the content of their pilgrimage prayers. This configuration of the pilgrim is very different from that which is taking place inside the shrine, as no pilgrim inside the shrine publicly shares their name or geographical place of origin or residence. Pilgrims in this reconfiguration of their practice are people who not only pray, but also get engaged in other pilgrims' prayers or in communicating with the website managers. The documentation of their comments/prayers attests to

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<sup>59</sup> Kissing the doors and walls of the shrine implies not only respect and honor towards Imam Reza but also leads to an active relationship to his shrine, it is a symbolic act of asking for help (see Musa).

the different agentic capacities that they can take on during the time they spent with this mediated pilgrimage platform.<sup>60</sup>

### ***Replacing imamreza.tv with razavivt.aqr.ir: Introducing this platform***

Seven years after imamreza.tv was established, in March 2012, it was decommissioned and replaced by another platform, razavivt.aqr.ir. This website, which is also designed and managed by Astan Quds Razavi, offers similar capabilities as the previous platform with some added features. The main page of the new site has the logo of the website with the *zarih's* (tomb chamber) photo on the banner, and in the center a window that shows live videos of the shrine (see Figure 5.7). On the right side of this window there is a prayer which can be read by pilgrims as a greeting, as this is a prayer that is read by pilgrims inside the shrine as a greeting to the Imam before they enter the *zarih*. The presence of this prayer on the website suggests that by reading it online pilgrims enter the *zarih* and the shrine complex, just as if they were inside the shrine. The video has a larger window compared to the previous site (imamreza.tv), and the quality of the video is significantly better, with sharper images so that you can see more details of the spaces in the shrine. This platform not only supports live videos, but it also provides live audio. There is a list of images at the bottom of the main screen that tells you, if you hover your cursor over them, what they represent. These include the Jame Razavi courtyard, Azadi courtyard, Jomhoori courtyard, Inqilab courtyard, and the holy tomb chamber (*zarih*). Unlike the previous platform where English and Farsi were included in one page, separated by a forward slash, this website gives you the option of switching between

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<sup>60</sup> This was also seen in remediated pilgrimage through the landline telephone which was discussed in the previous chapter, where pilgrim's agency moves from being callers to being pilgrims; similarly, operators from being operators to becoming part of the sociotechnical configuration which mediate the shrine.

Farsi, English and Arabic. Figure 5.7 is a screenshot of what it looks like in the English version. Similar to the 'green connection' section this platform also has a dedicated section for posting pilgrimage prayers.

فارسی :: العربية :: English

Home Page Archive Contact Us

www.razavi.tv

Low Quality Medium Quality High Quality

السلام عليك يا ولي الله، السلام عليك يا حجة الله، السلام عليك يا نور الله في ظلمات الأرض، السلام عليك يا عمود الدين، السلام عليك يا وارث آدم صفة الله، السلام عليك يا وارث نوح نبي الله، السلام عليك يا وارث إبراهيم خليل الله، السلام عليك يا وارث إسماعيل ذبيح الله، السلام عليك يا وارث موسى كليم الله، السلام عليك يا وارث عيسى زوج الله، السلام عليك يا وارث محمد رسول الله، السلام عليك يا وارث أمير المؤمنين عليّ ووليّ الله، ووصي رسول رب العالمين، السلام عليك يا وارث فاطمة الزهراء، السلام عليك يا وارث الحسن و الخسین، سيّدی شباب أهل الجنة، السلام عليك يا وارث عليّ بن الحسين زين العابدين، السلام عليك يا وارث محمد بن عليّ باقر علم الأولين و الآخرين، السلام عليك يا وارث جعفر بن محمد الصادق الباقر، السلام عليك يا وارث موسى بن جعفر، السلام عليك أيها الصديق الشهيد، السلام عليك أيها الوصي الباقر، أنهدئك فذ أفتت الشدة و آتيت الزكاة و أمزرت بالمغزوف و نهيت عن المنكر و عبثت الله (مخلصاً) حتى أتاك اليقين، السلام عليك يا أبا الحسن و رحمة الله و بركاته.

Play tune

Select a music: Imam Reza's particular prayers(by Haj Reza Ansari)

Download

The newest on RazaviArchive.aqr.ir

Heart notes

Itrat Batool Naqvi  
MAY ALLAH BLESS us, really we are thankful for live broadcasting.

Gissu  
Salaam Ya Imam Reza, I came to visit you three

Latest clips

Figure 5.7 English version (Source: <http://razavivt.aqr.ir/en/> accessed in July 2017)

At the bottom of the shrine's homepage there is a section labeled 'Heart notes'. This is the place where pilgrims can post and share their prayers. The Farsi translation of this

section is '*del neveshteh*', meaning written words that come from the heart. This section attempts to serve pilgrims in a somewhat similar way to the 'green connection' section on the imamreza.tv platform. If a pilgrim opts to share a pilgrimage prayer on the '*del neveshteh*' section, pilgrims are directed to a page where they are asked to choose a 'name' for themselves. This page is filled with pilgrims' real names, the name of their city, a pseudonym, pilgrim's initials, or any character on the keyboard. It can also be left empty. Some pilgrims use the name of their city or country as their names, which indicates that pilgrims sometimes prefer to identify themselves with their home location. In this platform pilgrims can also leave the name section blank and still be able to leave their prayers (this was not supported in the previous platform), which makes it easy to leave prayers in an anonymous way.

Leaving the name section blank is only one way to leave a prayer anonymously: hiding your identity is manifested in a myriad of ways, for example, pilgrims use names such as 'someone who misses the *zarih*', 'help me', 'someone with a broken heart', 'greeting sir', 'a servant of the Imam', '(.)', and '(\*)'. Pilgrims need to include their email address (which is hidden and not shared publicly). There is also a box that they can tick if they are requesting a pilgrimage practice, meaning that someone inside the shrine would perform it on their behalf (see Chapter Six for an extended discussion of this practice). Unlike imamreza.tv, however, there is no option for sharing your country,<sup>61</sup> so this platform does not categorize pilgrims based on their demography. Each prayer has a date and time attached to it.

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<sup>61</sup> When leaving a prayer, pilgrims are asked to provide their names and their email along with their prayers. Some may include the name of their city or country as part of their name, but geographical location is not a required question that needs to be filled before a pilgrim is allowed to post his/her prayer.

The image below shows the page where pilgrims can enter their prayers to Imam Reza (Figure 5.8).

The image shows a web form titled "ارسال دلنوشته" (Send Prayer). It contains the following elements:

- A header bar with the title "ارسال دلنوشته" and a small icon.
- A text input field labeled "نام و نام خانوادگی" (Name and Surname).
- A text input field labeled "پست الکترونیکی (E-Mail)".
- Two checkboxes: "امکان نمایش دلنوشته برای دیگران" (Allow others to see my prayer) and "درخواست انجام زیارت نیابتی" (Request for proxy pilgrimage).
- A large text area labeled "متن دلنوشته" (Text of the prayer).
- A security code section labeled "کد امنیتی" (Security code) with a refresh icon and a CAPTCHA image showing the number "202".
- A green button labeled "ارسال" (Send) on the left.
- A red button labeled "بازگشت به صفحه" (Return to page) with a right-pointing arrow on the right.

Figure 5.8 Del-neveshteh online form (Source: <http://razavitv.aqr.ir/> accessed June 2017)

One difference between the 'del neveshteh' section and 'the green connection' is that website moderators do not engage with pilgrims directly in 'del neveshteh'. Instead the website has a section labeled 'contact us', in which pilgrims can, as the website indicates, 'tell us about your comments and suggestion so we can use it to give a better quality and delivery of this website' (source: [http://razavitv.aqr.ir/index/contact\\_module](http://razavitv.aqr.ir/index/contact_module) accessed 2017 March). Unlike 'the green connection' this section separates pilgrimage prayer posts from suggestion and comments, which indicates a difference in who is addressed (the Imam or the website moderators). This form of infrastructural categorization separates doing pilgrimage from commenting on the tool. While there

are some pilgrims who resist this feature and still send their comments, suggestions and complaints through the *'del neveshteh'* section, most of the comments are dedicated to prayers and pilgrimage.

***'Why don't you post prayers correctly': Time lag and the role of Website moderators as people who filter prayers***

As discussed in the previous chapter, some comments are filtered by website managers if they are judged to be anti-islamic. When pilgrims write their prayers to Imam Reza in the *'del neveshteh section'*, these prayers are not posted on the razavitv website right away. This time lag is evidence of the presence of another agency; that is, a person who is a member of the Razavitv team. He receives these prayers and reviews them to assess whether the prayers are in line with the Islamic doctrine and related to Imam Reza before they are posted and shared online. He says:

I read them every day, we want to make sure that there are no disrespectful words in pilgrim's prayers, or anything that is irrelevant, all these prayers you see in the *'del neveshteh'* section are read either by me or a colleague of mine before they are posted, most of them are fine but we still want them to go through a human filter before they are shared on our website (Javad, interview December, 2013).<sup>62</sup>

Javad is a young man in his twenties, who is also involved in the design and maintenance of the razavitv website. While he is proficient in managing a website, he does not have

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<sup>62</sup> It seems that what is shared on this website is curated to exhibit a particular form of Islam and pilgrimage, this points to the debates with regards to democratization of data and decentralization of authority, which is not the main topic of this thesis. Sociotechnical configurations make these changes more complex and open up new contestations in different ways and scales (see Bennett, & Segerberg, 2011; Holmes, 2006; Ünlü, 2017).

any religious education. Nonetheless, he was told by the religious men who overlook the platform to filter out any comments that are anti-Islamic or any prayers that he judges do not align with Islamic pilgrimage or are too personal and would disrupt the religiosity or spirituality of the platform. All the comments in his view need to follow the Islamic doctrine and any deviation will lead to them not being shared publicly (interview notes December 2013).

This account points to the fact that not all of the human agents that are engaged in the website are visible to pilgrims and the public, and one way in which this agency comes to matter is when pilgrimage prayers are written by pilgrims and do not get posted right away, or do not get posted at all. Remediation is then stretched, in this sense, from the time that the pilgrim posts her prayers to the time they are approved by a 'human filter' and are consequently posted and shared online. Some of the comments posted on this section indicate that when prayers are written, pilgrims constantly check back and try to find their prayers in the postings. In other words, pilgrimage practice does not end for pilgrims at the point where they watch the videos and write their prayers: they check the 'del neveshteh' section constantly to not only make sure their prayers are posted but also perhaps to see how many 'likes', or in better terms prayers, their post received (I return to the practice of 'liking' other prayers below).

The delay in posting prayers at times causes dissatisfaction. Ghasem is a pilgrim who writes to the website operators:

Why don't you post prayers correctly, we write with a lot of hope [that our prayers might get answered], when we write these prayers, yesterday at 5 AM one of [my] prayers disappeared, and [today] at 2PM again, this is happening again and again, please be fair (Source: <http://razavitv.aqr.ir/> accessed June 2017).

The disappearance of Ghaseem's prayer might have been caused by a technical issue on the website or have something to do with the human filter who reads these prayers. But the lag and disappearance of prayers leads to distress for Ghasem. Inside the shrine pilgrimage prayers are read, or said by heart, and there is no notion of a time delay for prayers to reach the Imam. When the geography of prayers moves to a different space, as in the space of '*del neveshteh*', writing prayers does not suffice, but rather there is an expectation for the prayers to be posted and appear publicly on this section.

Ghasem believes that if his prayers are not posted online, they might not get answered: as he mentions, 'we [the pilgrims] write with a lot of hopes'. This indicates that the '*del neveshteh*' has become such a powerful agent in remediating pilgrimage that any malfunction in this technology, or any delays on the part of moderators, will count as an unfinished pilgrimage experience. In other words, the relationship and the connection between the pilgrims and Imam Reza is heavily dependent on the appearance of their pilgrimage prayers in this textual space.

Similar to the '*green connection*', the '*del neveshteh*' section carries in its name the place where you share the thoughts and prayers of your heart. The name of this section, although not equivalent to the word prayer, has been used interchangeably for that by pilgrims. Somayeh, a pilgrim, wrote this to Imam Reza (Figure 5.9).



Figure 5.9 Pilgrimage prayer (Source: <http://razavitv.aqr.ir/> accessed June 2017)

I don't know if you will read these *del neveshteh(s)* or not (addressing Imam Reza), but they [pilgrims here], write all kinds of *del neveshteh(s)* here, seems like they believe that you [Imam Reza] come here and you read them all [...].

While Somayeh is uncertain about the fact that Imam Reza is present here and would actually read her prayers and others, she acknowledges the belief that pilgrims have when writing these *del neveshtehs* that Imam Reza is present in this online space and reads their prayers. Implicit in comments such as Ghazem's and Somayeh's is that this online platform also weaves together the posting of pilgrimage prayers as something that is publicly shared. If they are not posted the Imam is believed to have no knowledge of them, and consequently they will not be answered.

### ***An interactive tool which brings solidarity and a sense of community***

There are more kinds of communication taking place in the '*del neveshteh*' section compared to the 'green connection', due in part to new features that were not present in the older platform. The '*del neveshteh*' section is an interactive platform, on which pilgrims not only communicate with people who manage the website, but they also

engage in subtle communication with other pilgrims. The ways that pilgrims use this section include not only typing and sharing their prayers to Imam Reza. Pilgrims also read other pilgrims' prayers, mention others' names in their prayers, and let other pilgrims know that they have read and prayed for them. This act of acknowledging other prayers is supported by the website, as below each prayer post there is a little photo of the shrine, and if you hover your cursor over this image, it reads:

I prayed for this '*del neveshteh*' (accessed in June 2017) (Figure 5.10).



Figure 5.10 pilgrimage prayer (Source: <http://razavitv.aqr.ir/> accessed June 2017)

The figure shows a pilgrimage prayer from Atefeh, and at the bottom of her prayer, the shrine icon can be seen, along with a small box on the right corner which shows number 87: this means that 87 pilgrims have read her prayer and prayed for her. Pilgrimage prayers on this platform are not only defined by and identified with the pilgrim who wrote them, or the content of the prayer, but also prayers are rated by the number of prayers or clicks they get from other pilgrims. This is a feature comparable with the 'like' button on Facebook; the difference, however, is in the meaning of the click, which does not refer to the act of liking but to an act of praying. This increases the level of interactivity between visitors to the site. In contrast, inside the shrine pilgrimage prayers are not interactive; they are ephemeral, they are not always spoken aloud, shared with

other pilgrims, or heard and responded to by other pilgrims. Online, not only do pilgrims have access to the content of other pilgrims' prayers, they also get the opportunity to comment, or publicly share with other pilgrims that they have prayed for them. A pilgrim named 'a human' posted a prayer writing:

Greetings Imam Reza [...], dear sir, when I read these [pilgrimage posts] prayers, I start to cry, all of us humans are sinful [...] take our hands Sir [and help us] (accessed July 2017).

As Woodhead observes (2012), in the context of religion, technology such as the internet (and in this case the '*del neveshteh*' section) links the like-minded to one another in different forms of religious alliance. In addition, the interaction between these pilgrims brings new forms of solidarity and recreates a sense of Shiite community building among Iranians. This is not only limited to Iranian Shiites, moreover, as some comments are written by non-Iranians and in other languages such as Arabic, hence linking different communities of Muslims together. For example, Christine, a pilgrim who identifies herself with a non-Iranian name, is asking other pilgrims to pray for her:

Whoever is reading this, can I ask him/her to please pray for me, I don't know what to do in this lonely land (accessed October 2017).

Mohammad Reza Fadakar wrote 'Imam Reza in this dear night, take a look at us Shiite Muslims' (accessed October 2017). Another pilgrim wrote, 'Imam Reza I read a saying from you that if your Shiite community is upset you will get upset as well'. (accessed October 2017). Aminshiri wrote:

[...] I hear you [Imam Reza] have a giving hand [...]. take our [pilgrims] hands so we can make Islam and all Muslims proud, Sir I want healthy and happy life for all the soldiers of Islam and my leader [...] (accessed October 2017).

These prayers indicate that some pilgrims are identifying themselves as Shiite ('take a look at us Shiite Muslims'), while others are praying for all of the Muslim community ('make Islam and all Muslims proud'; 'Sir I want healthy and happy life for all the soldiers of Islam'). As Helland (2007) notes, the internet enables religious practitioners to adhere to different religions around the world and also sustain links and connections to distant homeland religious communities and traditions.

### ***A failed virtual pilgrimage***

Despite the agencies afforded by the redesigned *razavitv.aqr.ir* platform, the agency of digital artifacts is not guaranteed, and at times the online technology fails effectively to remediate pilgrimage. I turn to another section of the website, which uses 360-degree images of the shrine.<sup>63</sup> It is designed, as its name 'the virtual pilgrimage of the shrine of Imam Reza' suggests, as a tool with which pilgrims can practice pilgrimage. Similar to the '*del neveshteh*' section, it is translated to English, Arabic and Farsi. Below is a photo of the first page (Figure 5.11).

The 360-degree images provide views from different angles of the shrine. For example, when you scroll the cursor/mouse up it seems as if you are looking up at the sky, when you scroll down it imitates a pilgrim's head when he/she is looking down at the floor. However, users of this platform find this aspect of the images 'confusing', and

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<sup>63</sup> It is accessible from *razavitv.aqr.ir/panorma\_pilgrimage*, built, designed and managed by Astan Quds Razavi.

something which differs from their experience when they are actually inside the shrine. My discussion of this is based on a study by sociologists Ali Mehdi and Montazer Ghaem, in a paper published in Farsi in 2014. Mehdi and Ghaem (2014) interviewed 41 pilgrims from the city of Kerman, which is relatively far from Mashad in terms of distance (900 kilometers). Their study focused on the panoramic (360-degrees) photos of the shrine.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> <http://photo.aqr.ir/UserFiles/File/Multi%20Media/dtree/index.htm>.

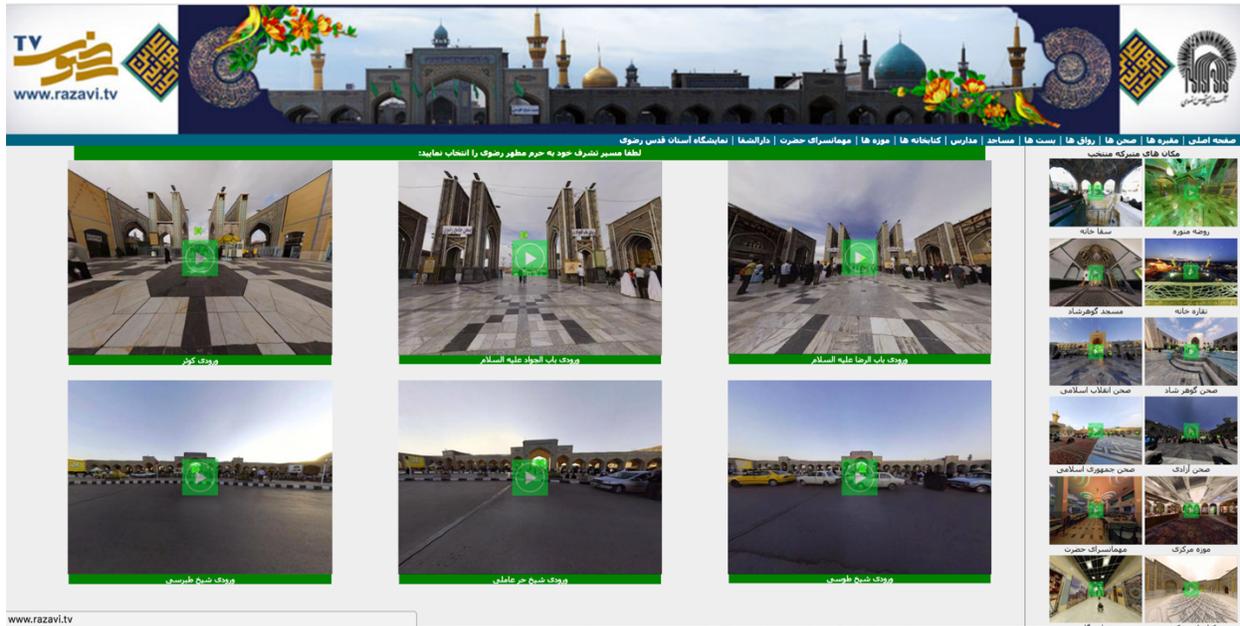


Figure 5.11 360 images (source: [http://razavitv.aqr.ir/panorma\\_pilgrimage](http://razavitv.aqr.ir/panorma_pilgrimage) accessed August 2017)

### ***A fragmented shrine***

It becomes clear from pilgrims' responses that the virtual pilgrimage is not a neutral or innocent tool, as it changes and manipulates the image of the shrine of Imam Reza in a plethora of ways. The shrine is categorized by different areas in the shrine complex. As shown in Figure 5.11, on the top right, in the blue band, there is a list of places, including domes, minarets, entrances, courtyards, etc. This representation gives pilgrims access to a fragmented shrine, where locations inside the shrine are grouped and categorized based on their structural similarities, rather than in the order that pilgrims would encounter them as they walk through the shrine. If you select 'courtyards,' a dropdown menu will appear which lists all of the courtyards inside the shrine, such as Enghlab Eslami, Ghods, Goharshad, etc. This view of the shrine separates areas of the shrine

based on their functionality, but it does not entail the connections and links between each location. For example, if you want to enter the shrine from a certain entrance, such as Kowsar entrance, and then enter Kowsar courtyard (which is physically attached), you will not be able to do so as the image of the Kowsar entrance covers only the area of the entrance and does not offer a way into the courtyard. On the other hand, the Kowsar courtyard does not include the entrance area. In other words, the platform does not consider a pilgrim's body moving within these spaces. In order for a pilgrim to virtually walk from the entrance to the courtyard, he/she is forced to return to the homepage and view these areas separately. This means that the platform does not allow pilgrims to mirror the movements of pilgrims who are inside the shrine, as the online locations are not interconnected.

When choosing a location inside the shrine, there is also a time lag until the page is fully loaded. In addition, these panoramic 360-degree images are not still, they constantly move at a certain speed with a specific angle, as if you are standing in a certain spot but rotating. So this rendering of the shrine influences how pilgrims move and what they view, even before they decide to move their mouse/cursor to traverse different courtyards or locations inside the shrine complex.

In some of these images there is a green arrow; if you click on the arrow, it will take you to a different view of the same area. (The arrows will not lead you to other areas or courtyards, however, as locations are not interconnected.) You can also move the cursor on your screen to get a different view of the area that you're 'standing' in. The users of this platform note that the speed, the shape of the arrows, and the automatic movements inside these images, do not give them a feeling of closeness to the shrine. (Figure 5.12). Rather, Mehdi and Ghaem (2014) report that certain features in this

platform hinder pilgrims from connecting to the Imam, so that it works only as an informational platform, and not as the means of virtual pilgrimage that it was intended and designed to be. A user notes regarding this site:

Instead of giving me a sense of pilgrimage, it satisfied my sense of curiosity, I was able to see the shrine of Imam Reza from different angles (in Ali Mehdi & Montazer Ghaem 2014, p. 133).



Figure 5.12 Green arrows (source: [http://razavivt.aqr.ir/panorma\\_pilgrimage](http://razavivt.aqr.ir/panorma_pilgrimage) accessed August 2017)

*Exaggerated light, and absence of pilgrims and sound*

In the site's rendering of the tomb chamber area, in which the tomb of Imam Reza is located, there is an exaggerated green light across the whole room. This may be intended to indicate the sacredness of this location inside the shrine (Figure 5.13)



Figure 5.13 Exaggeration of colors (source: [http://razavitv.aqr.ir/panorma\\_pilgrimage](http://razavitv.aqr.ir/panorma_pilgrimage) accessed August 2017)



Figure 5.14 A typical day around the tomb chamber (source <http://razavitv.aqr.ir/index> accessed August 2017)

But pilgrims complain that the representation of the tomb chamber does not mirror what is seen every day in the shrine itself. The image of the shrine depicts an empty, silent tomb chamber with no pilgrims around it and no activities taking place. This room is the most packed, crowded, noisiest and vibrant room in the whole complex and it is always filled with pilgrims reaching towards the tomb (Figure 5.14). The absence of sound appears again here, as, a user who had tried this tool commented:

When I entered this platform, and clicked on the virtual pilgrimage, [...] I saw the tomb chamber, I waited to see if I can get a sense of closeness to the Imam[...]. It was cold and emotionless [...] maybe if there was sound [from inside the tomb chamber] that was accompanying these images, this connection would have been easier (Ali Mehdi & Montazer Ghaem, 2014, p. 133).

As mentioned before, the shrine is tied to its sonic spatiality, and listening is woven into the practice of pilgrimage: listening for pilgrims here is 'hermeneutic disposition' (Revoll, 2013, p. 58), which is connected to a feeling of closeness to the Imam and presence inside the shrine. While sound from inside the shrine is not easily deciphered as there is a lot of noise that comes with it, it is not considered as something that disrupts pilgrimage experience but rather as something that aids pilgrims in their prayers and contributes to a sense of closeness to the shrine and the Imam.

### ***Encouraging pilgrims to travel to Mashad***

Mehdi and Ghaem (2014) report from their study that their interviewees were incapable of interacting with the tool in a way that gave them a sense of presence inside the shrine, or to feel a connection to the Imam. As a consequence, they observe, this online platform fails to encourage Iranians to perform pilgrimage online, and instead acts as a way to encourage online users, and Iranians in particular, to take the pilgrimage trip to Mashad and visit the shrine to perform their pilgrimage inside the shrine. In that context, the platform provides information for pilgrims before they start their pilgrimage (Mehdi & Ghaem, 2014, p. 121), and acts as a tool so that pilgrims can familiarize themselves with different areas of the shrine prior to their physical journey to it.

In their study of panoramic images of the shrine of Imam Reza, Mehdi and Ghaem (2014) note as well that pilgrims enjoy using the virtual pilgrimage because it enables them to experience new locations and corners of the shrine that they have never been to when they were physically present there. One reason for this is the fact that some areas in the shrine are too crowded with pilgrims, which it makes it hard for other pilgrims to visit them. Another reason is due to the gender separation of spaces inside the shrine; for

instance, some rooms are only accessible by female pilgrims and vice versa. In this regard, a male pilgrim mentioned:

The time I spend every year inside the shrine is limited, usually around 4-5 days and during this time I am mostly praying so I don't get enough time to visit other parts of the shrine, however the virtual pilgrimage enabled me to visit courtyards and places in the shrine that I had not visited before, [...] such as rooms that only females are allowed to enter (Mehdi & Ghaem, 2014, p. 132).

### ***Accessibility to non-Iranians***

As mentioned, the website is translated in two other languages beside Farsi, so that pilgrims can view it in English<sup>65</sup> and Arabic. Inside the actual shrine, there are only signs in Farsi, so for someone who does not read Farsi it is hard to find his/her way around. In the virtual pilgrimage website, in contrast, English and Arabic speakers can know where they are, and can familiarize themselves with different areas and corners of the shrine.

Mehdi and Ghaem (2014) observe that feeling close to the Imam and getting a sense of presence in the shrine may have been possible if the online platform was designed to include fast delivery of photos, easy navigation between locations, the incorporation of religious sounds, being able to see a crowd of pilgrims in the shrine,<sup>66</sup> along with better quality of the images. For this tool to have the capacity to enact mediated pilgrimage, the authors of the paper conclude that the online platform should offer two separate

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<sup>65</sup> [http://razavitv.aqr.ir/panorma\\_pilgrimage/en](http://razavitv.aqr.ir/panorma_pilgrimage/en) (accessed in October 2017).

<sup>66</sup> This idea of watching a crowd of pilgrims while experiencing online pilgrimage was also discussed in Arabtani et al. (2015). They argue that when pilgrims watch online videos of the shrine which included other pilgrims, they do not feel they're experiencing pilgrimage by themselves or saying prayers alone, but rather they see themselves as part of a large crowd of pilgrims who are all connected to the Imam.

sections: one dedicated to getting to know the shrine and one for practicing pilgrimage, as each section will cater to a different audience (Mehdi & Ghaem, 2014).

In Don Ihde's terms (Ihde, 199), the virtual pilgrimage tool establishes hermeneutic relations between the shrine and the pilgrims who are using it, producing a representation of the shrine which needs to be interpreted by its 'readers' (p. 74). Moreover, the tool itself embodies a 'material interpretation' of the reality of the shrine; in this case, one that is fragmented and does not mirror a pilgrimage experience inside the shrine. Furthermore, some spaces, such as the tomb chamber, represent an empty room with an exaggerated lighting and color, which renders the shrine as a spectacle rather than a site of prayer (Figure 5.13). The agency of this technological tool is not innocent, in other words: it does not provide a neutral window into the shrine, but actively remediates a specific version of the shrine and of the experience of pilgrimage.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter examines remediates pilgrimage in relation to two online platforms. It began with tracing the temporality of the practice that was taking place in imamreza.tv, until the platform was replaced by razavivt.aqr.ir. The configuration of pilgrims within these two online platforms differs from that experienced inside the shrine. Pilgrims are not only connecting with the Imam and posting their pilgrimage prayers, but they also engage in communicating with the website managers or at times with other pilgrims. The communication that takes place within these platforms brings solidarity and configures a sense of Shiite community among Iranians, as well as expanding the space to include others. Because the platform allows for anonymous comments, there is a plethora of pilgrimage prayers that illustrate the issues and struggles of some Iranian

Shiites, such as suicidal thoughts that cannot be shared by pilgrims inside the shrine. Absence is a recurrent topic that is lived, embodied, remembered and performed in this remediated pilgrimage practice, as many pilgrims acknowledge their physical absence from the shrine. This acknowledgement attests to the fact that the platform plays a key role in reinforcing diasporic pilgrimage territorial attachments, as well as mediating their distance from home.

Taken together, these materials demonstrate that remediated online platforms are not neutral or innocent configurations, but rather they render the image of the shrine of Imam Reza in multiple ways, not all of which are successful in mediating pilgrimage. They show as well that remediated pilgrimage practice is filled with emotions; what emotions do, how they stick and circulate, is the topic of the next chapter.

## ***Chapter Six: Emotion and remediated pilgrimage***

Objects and artifacts in their capacity to symbolize and depict meanings, values, relationships, and identities have attracted considerable scholarly interest (e.g. Bonsu & Belk, 2003; Grayson & Shulman, 2000; Holt, 2004; Moisio, Arnould, & Price, 2004). Material culture studies have focused on the material quality of objects while emphasizing the mutual and co-constitutive, rather than merely representative, nature of their interweaving with meanings, symbols, subjectivities, and relationships (e.g. Aronczyk & Craig, 2012; Beckstead, Twose, Levesque-Gottlieb, & Rizzo, 2011; Borgerson, 2009; Craig, 2011; Douny, 2011; S. V. Smith, 2009). Familial socialization and interaction (e.g. Chitakunye & Maclaran, 2012; Holttinen, 2014; Smith, 2009; Madianou & Miller, 2011; Miller 1998), as well as membership in religious communities (D'Alisera 2001; Tarlo, 2007), are understood to be objectified and mediated by objects that are enmeshed in people's social lives, including clothes, accessories, Skype, food, mobile phones, cassettes, and television, etc. The enactment of identities, relationships, and communities may take place in ways that conform to (Douny, 2011; Naji, 2009; Tarlo, 2007) or resist and challenge (Smith, 2009) dominant moral or religious norms and hierarchies. Such processes involve the weaving of materiality and symbolism (e.g. Bartmanski & Woodward, 2013; Craig 2011; Curasi, Price, & Arnould 2004; D'Alisera 2001; Douny 2011; Epp & Price, 2010; Holttinen 2014; Kravets & Orge 2010; Sandikci & Ger, 2010). The relationships and ideals that are materialized, experienced, and negotiated through objects and practices – such as provisioning (Miller, 1998), preparing food (Holttinen, 2014), watching television (Chitakunye & Maclaran, 2014), exchanging written letters and audio recordings in the context of the family (Madianou

& Miller, 2011), or making clothes that materialize mother–daughter and kinship bonds (Margiotti, 2013), are also intrinsically emotional.

With regards to pilgrimage as a religious practice, this chapter addresses the following questions:

- How do emotions configure pilgrimage, and what do they do?
- How do emotions that are experienced in relation to Imam Reza orient or disorient bodies? What do these bodies get attached to and what objects/bodies do they become a part of?
- How do pilgrimage emotions bring subjects together or disconnect them from each other? How do these emotions stick and circulate? What are the localities from which emotions move and flow?

### ***Theorizing emotions***

Sara Ahmed (2004) proposes the concept of 'affective economy' to deconstruct emotions. She observes that 'emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments' (2004, p. 119). Her notion of affective economy encompasses the circulation of emotions between social agents, as well as between objects, texts and images; thus this 'economy' not only relates to the emotions that individuals feel, but also to the emotions they (individuals and/or objects) elicit. Instead of focusing on emotions as psychological traits, Ahmed suggests that we need to look at how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, as well as between the individual and the collective. In her extensive research on emotions with reference to asylum seekers and international terrorists, she

illustrates that emotions work by sticking figures together (adherence); this sticking generates the very effects of a collective (coherence).

Ahmed's framework of emotional economy proposes that while emotions do not inhabit the contours of a body or a figure, they work to bind subjects together; it is in this sense that emotions are 'sticky' and they 'circulate' with bodies and objects. In her words 'the nonresidence of emotions is what makes them "binding".' (2004, p. 117). Subjects are merely a nodal point in that economy, rather than the root or origin. The nonresidence of emotions can be viewed in term of remediation; emotions do not reside in either objects/technology or subjects/social beings but circulate between these entities, binding them together.

Thinking of emotions and remediations together, emotions can be seen as mediated through an arrangement of a technical/digital artifact, the practices that involve the use of the artifact, and the social agents that are part of this configuration. Drawing on Ahmed (2004), Harris & Sørensen (2010) note that material objects create and are inherent to 'affective fields': webs of emotionally evocative connections amongst objects, things, and places (cited in Kuruoğlu & Ger, 2015, p. 210).

This concept of affective fields provides a linkage between Ahmed's affective economy and objectification. Practices and configurations that materialize relationships also draw individuals into the affective fields generated by those configurations. Subjects who are drawn into an object's affective field become connected to others who have been similarly affected across time and space. They come to have a similar repertoire of experiences, emotions, and relationships to that particular object, and they take a certain stance towards it. In other words, they are oriented. This orientation, in turn, can be expanded to encompass a more general way of relating to the world – in Bourdieu's

terms, an emotional habitus. This concept has been used by several scholars (e.g. Calhoun, 2001; Gould, 2009; Illouz, 2013; Kane, 2001) to describe:

The deeply internalized, unreflexive, and partially conscious 'structure' that shapes relations and (re)actions to objects or situations. The emotional saturation and circulation of objects thus generate affective fields and attune people into common orientations and dispositions. Thus, we can extrapolate: objects, by generating, embodying, and circulating emotions across space and time, also play a part in shaping an emotional habitus. Through their encounters with these objects, individuals and collectivities become habituated (Kuruoğlu & Ger, 2015, p. 215).

As Ahmed and others have noted, emotions can (dis)orient, or move people towards or away from other bodies and objects, and into shared ways of being and acting (Ahmed, 2004; Burkitt, 1997, 2002; Kuruoğlu & Ger, 2015; Calhoun 2001; Harris and Sørensen 2010; Kane, 2001). Hence bridging Ahmed's perspective on the circulation, and stickiness, of emotions with literature on materiality and remediation, I can extrapolate that configurations of objects, people and practices can become sticky and intense with various emotions, and this stickiness is central to the materializing and symbolic nature of these configurations. Objects, artifacts, built environments or even memories, by creating, embodying and circulating emotions across time and space, also attune individuals into certain ways, or collectives by binding them together while at the same time delineating others as non-members.

### ***Emotional socio-material configurations***

In this section, taking emotions as an analytical category,<sup>67</sup> I attempt to recover the lived experience, and the embodied and situated interactions, of social agents, objects, artifacts, built environments and the particular assemblages that they're embedded in, as the affective economies of Shiite pilgrims. Throughout this chapter, I will use the word 'object' as the general term for the orientation of a subject, 'artifact' for things that are made, and 'built environments' to refer to the holy shrine of Imam Reza. I investigate how these arrangements remediate emotions, and how the expression of sensory experiences reveals an aspect of sociomaterial configurations that helps to illuminate our understanding of both the practice of pilgrimage and how it is remediated through novel configurations. Throughout this chapter, I am concerned not with what it means to have emotions, but rather with what emotions do to the bodies that experience them. This chapter touches as well on ways in which the 'labor' of pilgrimage emotions, and the 'language' of these emotions, work in relation to Imam Reza and his shrine.

I will be working with multiple sources of data including my own observations and interviews inside the shrine of Imam Reza, documentaries that are public on the internet, various websites which focus on Imam Reza and his pilgrimage, as well as a large number of online material and postings including online comments and prayers that are shared on social network websites such as Facebook and Instagram.

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<sup>67</sup> For example, see Gopaladas, (2014) and Illouz (2009), although not related to religion and pilgrimage, both of these studies take emotions as an analytical category to expand and delve into the sociology of consumption and consumers' behaviors.

As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, emotions are not only 'sticky' but they also circulate among individuals. Furthermore, performing and experiencing pilgrimage is tied to generating shared dispositions (emotional habitus) and binding collectivities. When it comes to pilgrimage and Shiite practices of pilgrimage, my interest is what assemblages and configurations evoke and mediate emotions, and how these socio-material arrangements bind the Shiite community together, generate dispositions and materialize communal, familial and religious collectivities. In this part I present two stories to trace the emergence of an emotional configuration, enacted through pilgrims, practices and objects (human or non-human), which in turn not only mediates the shrine of Imam Reza but also the emotionality that circulates between and binds together bodies and objects, animates communities and familial relationships, and attunes Shiites and pilgrims into shared dispositions.

### ***The Iraqi pilgrim***

The first story is related to an Iraqi pilgrim who connects to the shrine of Imam Reza through virtual reality glasses. My first encounter with this story was a video post, which was published on Instagram;<sup>68</sup> later on I found out that bafghkhabar.ir, an Iranian news website, also published a page on this story.<sup>69</sup> The video was taken in a place called *Movakebeh* Imam Reza (Figure 6.1), which is located in Iraq.

*Movakebeh* Imam Reza is a place or a station where pilgrims who walk towards the shrine of Imam Hossein<sup>70</sup> can stay and take some rest. There are several stations on the

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<sup>68</sup> Video can be accessed here: [https://www.instagram.com/p/\\_Y9KR8SmVx/](https://www.instagram.com/p/_Y9KR8SmVx/) (Accessed July 2016).

<sup>69</sup> For a similar video see <http://www.nasrtv.com/modules/video/singlefile.php?lid=11395> (Accessed January 2018).

<sup>70</sup> Imam Hossein was the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Reza is a descendent of Imam Hossein.

way for these pilgrims and each offers their own services: this particular station offers overnight accommodation, cultural, medicinal, and electronic and message services to pilgrims. It also includes a small library and free of charge phone service, including a space in which people can charge their mobile phones. Pilgrims can also connect to free Wi-Fi. Below is a view from the second floor of the *Movakeb*:

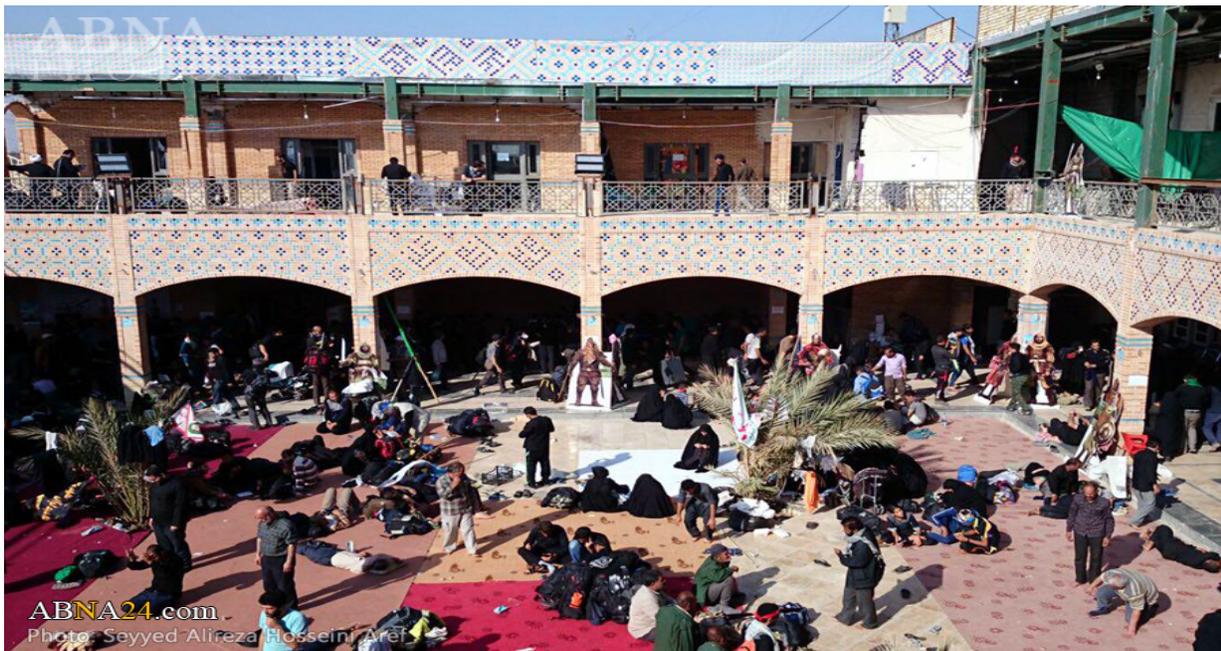


Figure 6.1 *Movakebeh* Imam

There is also a replica of the shrine of Imam Reza in this location, which appears to make pilgrims feel closer to Imam Reza (Figure 6.2). The video of an Iraqi pilgrim was taken in this location; what follows is a translation from the *bafghkhabar.ir* coverage of this story:<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Full story can be accessed here: <https://goo.gl/NkhRdv> (Accessed July 2016).



Figure 6.2 Replica of the shrine of Imam Reza

This description, along with a video, has been shared and circulated across social network platforms such as Facebook and Instagram among Iranians and Shiites:

The engineers working at Astan Qods Razavi (the organization with which the shrine of Imam Reza is affiliated) have designed virtual reality glasses, or VR glasses.<sup>72</sup> When a person wears these glasses he/she finds him/herself inside the shrine of Imam Reza. Tilting the head to left and right one would feel that he/she is actually present inside the shrine. The 3D photos of these glasses are designed

<sup>72</sup> 'Virtual reality or virtual realities (VR), also known as immersive multimedia or computer-simulated reality, is a computer technology that replicates an environment, real or imagined, and simulates a user's physical presence and environment to allow for user interaction. Virtual realities artificially create sensory experience, which can include sight, touch, hearing, and smell' (Isaac, 2016) (Source completegate.com Accessed January 2018).

in a way that one becomes completely detached from the surroundings, and fully immersed into the spiritual environment of the shrine (bafghkhabar.ir 2015).<sup>73</sup>

The video depicts a pilgrim's experience using the VR glasses; both the description and the video received hundreds of viewers.

Below (Figure 6.3) is an image from this video which shows the Iraqi pilgrim wearing the VR glasses. Close to him is a religious man who owns the glasses (wearing a white turban):



Figure 6.3 the Iraqi pilgrim (Source: Instagram accessed November 2016)

<sup>73</sup> This report was published on Dec 2015, full report can be find here: [goo.gl/pyHcHl](http://goo.gl/pyHcHl) (accessed January 2018).

The replica of the shrine is also visible in this photo, located behind them. What follows is a recounting of this story told by the owner of the VR glasses, which was also published in Bafghkhabar.ir:

Two days prior to Arbaeen,<sup>74</sup> I was standing in front of *Movakebeh* Imam Reza, and I was giving the VR glasses to the pilgrims of Imam Hossein, so that they're able to perform pilgrimage to his shrine. However, I tend to offer the glasses to non-Iranian pilgrims since I knew they had more thirst and eagerness to perform this pilgrimage. Two young Arab guys who were smoking, and taking photos came towards me; without hesitation I told one of them 'pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Reza' and immediately placed the glasses on his eyes. All of a sudden, he got shocked, as if he had never seen his shrine before; he lost control, dropped the cigarette in his hand to the floor, and burst into tears. People who were passing by would stop and gaze at him, wondering what is going on. I could tell that he was moving around the shrine and once he was standing in front of Imam Reza's tomb chamber he said hello and became intensely emotional, he was raising his hand in front of him as if he was grasping the grids of Imam's tomb chamber. Once I took it off from his eyes he held me tight as a thank you gesture (bafghkhabar.ir, 2015 translated from Farsi).

Objects such as the VR glasses evidently have affective potentialities. When these objects are deployed by pilgrims, they mediate the shrine of Imam Reza. What is mediated through the glasses appears from the cleric's story and accompanying video

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<sup>74</sup> A sacred Shia Muslim ritual. Arbaeen, also known as Chehlum, commemorates the end of the 40-day mourning period after the killing of Imam Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, in a battle in 680 AD.

to contribute to an outburst of emotions such as shedding tears, and expressions of bodily emotion such as kneeling on the ground. The description suggests that when the pilgrim wore the VR glasses he became detached from his immediate surroundings and appeared to be transported to the shrine of Imam Reza.

'Tele-cocooning' is a concept that was developed by Habuchi (2005) to describe close human-computer interaction; it is linked to communication between people without physical co-presence. The concept is relevant when it comes to connecting to the shrine of Imam Reza using various mediated aids. It is through his connection with the VR glasses that the pilgrim can interact with Imam Reza and his shrine, or with a virtual rendering of them. This story suggests that we might extend the concept of tele-cocooning from human-computer interaction or connections between technological artifacts and human beings, to non-material objects such as 3D images of the shrine or even a memory of the shrine.

The linkage between the VR glasses and the pilgrim enacts certain emotions and sensibilities, which become interwoven with the whole experience of remediated pilgrimage. The emotions that are enacted and are part of the pilgrimage experience are mediated through an artifact – here a digital device – but this digital device is not the mere instigator of these affects. The practices that revolve around the use of this artifact; that is, putting on the VR glasses, trying to grasp the tomb chamber, kneeling on your knees, moving your head and hands, or walking virtually through the shrine, are all part of an emotional enactment. It is notable as well that even after the pilgrim takes off the glasses, he still remains affected by the experience. The emotionality extends as well to the person who has given him the glasses, as he reaches out to the pilgrim who sobs on his shoulder. This practice, of getting into contact with another body, adds

another node in the configuration, which is the cleric; it also illustrates how emotions stick and circulate between bodies and objects.

These configurations reveal that pilgrims make connections to Imam Reza when they carry pain and suffering. The following story sheds further light on this argument. The story is drawn from Chapter Four, but here I am looking at it from a different angle, that is from the perspective of the role that emotions play in this remediation. The following example is a translation of a section of a documentary called '*Reza-e Rezvan*' (the English equivalent is 'Heaven's Reza'), which was made by Majid Majidi in 2005, about the shrine of Imam Reza and performing pilgrimage there:<sup>75</sup>

Pilgrim: Hello, is this the shrine of Imam Reza?

Operator: Yes, how can I help you?

Pilgrim: Excuse me could you please move the telephone handset towards the dome of Imam Reza's shrine?

Operator: You want to talk to the shrine? Hold on a second.

As noted earlier, the operator's question, 'you want to talk to the shrine?' demonstrates the close connection between the holy shrine and Imam Reza; so much so that at times the shrine and Imam Reza are used interchangeably by Shiites. Time and again I have heard Shiites saying things like 'I miss the golden dome of his shrine', or when a pilgrim calls his mother saying: 'I'm calling you to see if you want to talk to the shrine.' Throughout this call it is noticeable, from the caller's trembling voice, that she is crying. The configuration of the phone, the operator and the practices that are attached to them, including dialing the shrine's number, taking part in a conversation with the

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<sup>75</sup> This documentary was discussed in Chapter Four in relation to agency and the reconfiguration of the pilgrimage practice.

operator, and having the phone pointed towards the dome, all shape the emotions that are elicited in the pilgrim's experience. The emotions that are evoked attest to the conditions from which the pilgrim is initiating the call. The pilgrim says, while audibly weeping:

Greetings Imam Reza, I am calling you from afar, Sir please respond to my greeting, to the pains in my heart, you already know what they are [...] Oh Imam Reza whoever has any wishes, any dreams any requests [...] however they reach out to you [...] Oh Imam Reza grant their wishes and answer their prayers.

The pilgrim's pain and suffering are conveyed both in her voice and in plea for relief. As Fortunati (2009, pp. 42–43) suggests, in the case of the telephone an extension of the ear and the voice takes place, which is a kind of an extension of sensorial experience. On the telephone we become our voice to the extent that our voice becomes our audio portrait (Friedman and Weiss, 1987 cited in Livholts & Bryant, 2013). The voice has specific potency on the telephone, since it is a part that speaks for the whole (Esposito, 2007 cited in Livholts & Bryant, 2013). Through the pilgrim's voice — her tone, her inflection, and how loudly or softly she speaks — we can discern how desperate and emotional she is. When the pilgrims tell Imam Reza 'please respond to my greeting, to the pains in my heart,' she is already crying and speaking with a higher pitch in her voice, as though if she speaks louder, the Imam would hear her better. When she says 'you already know what they are [...]' she speaks with a softer voice; there is a sense of comfort in her voice, as if she is confident that Imam Reza already knows about the pain in her heart.

As Sara Ahmed (2004) points out, emotions aren't in either the subject or the object; rather, emotions produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and

the social to be delineated. In exploring pain, Ahmed suggests that it is through a sensual experience such as pain that we come to an understanding and a sense of our skin as bodily surface (see Prosser 1998, p. 43 cited in Ahmed, 2004), as something which keeps us separate from other surfaces and bodies: it is through painful contacts between a body and other objects (including other bodies or non-material objects) that surfaces are felt as being there in the first place (Ahmed, 2004, p. 24).

It is through the encounter of the pilgrim with the phone or the VR glasses – of the body with other objects including other bodies – that multiple surfaces are felt: In Ahmed's words 'the impression of a surface is an effect of such intensifications of feeling' (2004, p. 24). Judith Butler writes similarly of 'materialization' – the effect of boundary, fixity and surface' (Butler, 1993, p. 9). Intensification is a useful term, as Ger and Kuruoğlu (2015) note, since it entails temporality: 'the circulation of an object, as it continues through time and space, leads to more intense emotionality' (p. 215). It is through the intensification of pilgrimage emotions, enacted as crying or kneeling on the ground, that bodies and worlds materialize, are delineated and take shape, or that the effect of boundary, surface and fixity is produced. These emotions are mediated through these arrangements and configurations, while at the same time they materialize the elements that configure these arrangements in the first place.

### ***Intensification and the stretch of emotionality***

As I discussed above, configurations that materialize relationships also draw individuals into the affective fields generated by those configurations. Subjects who are drawn into an object's affective field become connected to others who have been similarly affected across time and space. As Ahmed puts it, emotions can (dis)orient, or move people

towards or away from other bodies and objects, and into shared ways of being and acting (Ahmed, 2004).

This orientation, and how it is extended through time and space, is observed as well in online prayers that are shared in social media as comments. When the video of the Iraqi pilgrim was circulated on Facebook, many shared/reposted this video. 140 people like the video, but also many left comments. Here is a snapshot of some of them:

See Translation  
Like · Reply ·  1 · July 25 at 6:31am

 **Hamid Balochi**  
يا امام رضا غريب شرمندم از اين همه گناه  
قربون گنبد طلات

See Translation  
Like · Reply ·  2 · December 25, 2015 at 3:13am

 **[Redacted Name]**  
السلام عليك يا امام رضا اقاشرمندهايم

See Translation  
Like · Reply ·  1 · July 25 at 12:54am

 **[Redacted Name]**  
سلام بر امام مهربان

See Translation  
Like · Reply ·  1 · December 25, 2015 at 4:46am

 **[Redacted Name]**  
السلام عليك يا ضامين آهو

See Translation  
Like · Reply ·  1 · December 25, 2015 at 4:05am

 **[Redacted Name]**  
سلام بر اقايم يا امام رضا

See Translation  
Like · Reply ·  1 · December 24, 2015 at 4:04pm

 **[Redacted Name]**  
سلام عليك يا امام رضا ع ادركتى

See Translation  
Like · Reply ·  1 · July 25 at 9:40am

 **[Redacted Name]**  
سلام بر امام رضا غريب

See Translation

Figure 6.4 Pilgrimage prayers under the Iraqi pilgrim's post (Source: Facebook accessed November 2016)

The comments above are posted below the video post. These comments have an element of temporality; as seen in the screenshot above, their dates of posting extend from December 2015 to July 2016. If we were to visit the page now there might be further comments posted at later dates. Of the 15 comments posted below the video

as of September 2017, all include a greeting to Imam Reza in various words, such as 'Greetings to the Kind Imam', or 'greetings to my Sir, Imam Reza'. Thus, as the video gets circulated online, it not only sticks to the individuals who view the video but also enacts a somewhat similar experience and practice among them. Greetings to Imam Reza is part of the pilgrimage practice; it is customary that when pilgrims enter the holy shrine, or at times when they get a glimpse of his shrine, they lift one of their hands, place them on their chest, while bowing or tilting their head down and saying greetings to the Imam. This is an act that shows faithfulness and respect towards the Imam.<sup>76</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Two this act of greeting is highly sedimented (Rosenberger, 2014), meaning that it is steeped in a long-developed habit that is now being remediated through the relation that pilgrims have with this Facebook post.

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<sup>76</sup> For photos of how pilgrims bow in the shrine to show respect: <https://goo.gl/i6NfRj> (accessed July 2016).



Figure 6.5 Bowing pilgrims (Source: <http://morahem.com> accessed Jan 2018)

When expressing emotions through new socio-material configurations, certain dispositions are repeated, albeit in a somewhat different manner: in this case emotions are extended and intensified in a unified way, in the form of greeting the Imam. Greeting the Imam is a part of the pilgrimage practice, which is stretched to the online world whether by typing your greetings in the comment section of a Facebook page or reacting to other's greetings by liking their posts, as seen in Figure 6.4. In reproducing pilgrimage practices such as greeting, the participants post their comments on Facebook as itself a form of mediated pilgrimage. The comments that are posted below the Iraqi video also point to the fact that the Iraqi pilgrim is not the only one who is moved into experiencing pilgrimage. When his video is shared on Facebook others who come to watch it are affected by it; they join the affective field of the VR glasses and

become engaged in a somewhat different form of pilgrimage to Imam Reza, which is to greet him.

Connecting Ahmed's ideas on the circulation of emotions with the literature on materiality can help us to understand how the Iraqi pilgrim's emotions also extend to the cleric, as he reaches out to him and cries on his shoulders, or how the circulation of his experience on Facebook instigates further prayers and emotions among other pilgrims. The affective field that is generated here draws together not only the cleric who is standing next to the Iraqi pilgrim but also many other Shiites who watch the video from a distance on Facebook or stand around the pilgrim (Figure 6.6). This affective field, and the emotions that are involved in it, holds and binds bodies of Shiite Muslims. Ahmed (2004, p.13) notes that as emotion 'intensifies', emotions, whether hate or love, 'stick' bodies together while at the same time binding them as a unified community. In this sense, the intensification is twofold: not only does it shape our understanding of which bodies configure 'us', or in the case of this study 'pilgrims', it also constitutes and marks certain bodies as 'others' or non-pilgrims (I will come back to this point later in this chapter).

### ***Emotional boundaries***

Remediated interaction with Imam Reza does not exclusively entail connection. For example, although the arrangement of VR glasses and pilgrim discussed above brings the pilgrim into contact with the Imam and his Shrine, at the same time it also entails a disconnect. Specifically, the mediation draws the pilgrim's attention away from his geographical surroundings, and into a different context and experience. This act of disconnecting from the pilgrim's surroundings not only instigates emotions, but also

configures and delineates new boundaries. In the vignette outlined in Chapter Four, similarly, once the pilgrim knows that the phone is pointed towards the shrine by the operator she becomes evidently reoriented, disconnected from her conversation with the operator and seeming to enter a completely different world in which she is aware of the presence of the Imam but unaware of the presence of the operator. In the same vein, as the cleric is recounting the story of the Iraqi pilgrim, he mentions that once the young Iraqi man wears the VR glasses, and is exposed to the shrine of Imam Reza, he drops his cigarette and starts to cry, as if he is dislodged from the *Movakeb* and transferred into the holy shrine.

I have also observed directly the disorientation and reorientation of pilgrims who were connected by their loved ones to the Shrine and Imam Reza via a mobile phone. Inside the shrine I talked to a mother who came to perform pilgrimage in the Shrine from Ahwaz, a city in the southwest of Iran. She calls her son with her mobile phone and after talking for a few minutes she tells him that she is standing right in front of the golden dome and that she will hold her phone towards the dome so that he can talk to Imam Reza and say his prayers. I notice how her son drifts away from his conversation with his mother into talking to the Imam. I could often hear on other occasions as well, albeit with difficulty and not too clearly, that while the phone was held towards the golden dome the person on the other side was crying and saying prayers as if they were now inside the shrine and in contact with the Imam. In my observation of the mother and her son, after a few minutes the mother brings the phone back to her ear and then immediately towards the dome again, and whispers to me that 'he is crying and saying his prayers, he is not done'. This happens again and the mother tells me 'he is still talking to the Imam' and she then points the phone towards the dome again: on her third

attempt, their conversation resumes and after a minute it ends. This example not only shows how connections are made and unmade – when the son was saying his prayers his disconnection from her and connection to the Imam was acknowledged by his mother – but also shows the intricacies involved in this arrangement. The mother respects the connection of her son to the Imam by not interrupting it, indicating that this is a private spiritual connection between them. At the same time, it can be challenging for participants to observe when these connections are created and when they are unmade, as we see the mother repeatedly bringing the phone back to her ear and then holding it up again to the shrine, until she hears that her son is talking to her and not the Imam. This connection and disconnection is a negotiated practice between mother and son, and it is the emotionality of the pilgrimage that enacts it.

### ***Emotions and intimate bonds***

The use of new media by pilgrims not only brings Muslims together, and connects individual pilgrims and collectivities, but also strengthens familial relationships. Maryam, a pilgrim in the shrine who was visiting from the northern part of the country, told me:

Every time I come to the shrine of Imam Reza I make sure to make mobile phone calls to my parents, in-laws and other close relatives such as my uncles and aunts. We will talk a bit about our daily experiences and then I will ask how they are doing and then will let each one of them know where I am standing now in the shrine and will ask them to say their prayers through my phone.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Interview inside the shrine September 2013.

Zahra another pilgrim told me that prior to her taking a trip to Mashad, she went to visit her best friend to say goodbye. She asked her friend if she needed anything from Mashad and she replied 'I don't need anything just pray for me and say hi to Imam Reza on my behalf.' Zahra then told her 'you know what, I will not do that I will call you when I'm inside the shrine and you can talk to Imam Reza yourself and pray as long as you want'.<sup>78</sup>

Maryam's relatives enter an affective field generated by her love of family, and through the use of mobile phone they become oriented and then habituated or reoriented to saying their prayers and experiencing pilgrimage through configurations that allow them to do so in new ways. Pilgrimage inside the shrine is no longer a private experience, as pilgrims not only share their own pilgrimage experience with friends and family through the mobile phone, but also allow them to engage in their own pilgrimage experience from afar. Pilgrimage emotionality in this sense objectifies intimate and familial relationships (see Miller, 1998). My findings suggest that this experience is part of a common repertoire of 'being a Shiite pilgrim': as in the case of Maryam, the mobile phone and her love and care for family during her pilgrimage experience objectifies, mediates and strengthens interpersonal and familial bonds. Thus, the object and practices that enact these relationships not only craft 'love' (Madianou & Miller, 2011) and negotiate family identity (Holttinen, 2014), but also contribute to the strengthening and maintaining of the emotional culture of pilgrimage among the Shiite community. Experiencing pilgrimage thus has broader consequences that transcend temporal and geographic locales. Pilgrimage experiences continue to exist in the prayer comments that are shared after viewers have seen an experience of pilgrimage online (such as the

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<sup>78</sup> Interview inside the shrine September 2013.

video of the Iraqi which was posted on social media). The practice is no longer limited to the location of the shrine, as it surpasses the limitations of geography when pilgrims are connected online or through the mobile phones of their friends and family.

### ***Emotions and community***

In asking what emotions do, following Ahmed (2004), I noted that they circulate, stick to, and also thicken the threads that weave together a collectivity, solidifying a sense of 'us' or, in this case, of being Shiite pilgrims. As described above, when the Iraqi pilgrim is experiencing pilgrimage through the VR glasses, others who are walking by are drawn to his experience. When he takes the glasses off, he reaches out to the cleric and cries. His emotions not only extend and stick to other bodies, but also contribute to our understanding that he is the pilgrim and the ones surrounding him are not. When the video of this pilgrimage is uploaded on the Internet, these emotions are reproduced in future experiences of pilgrimage as the video is shared, viewed and commented on by other potential pilgrims; in this case, it is through social media that emotions circulate and stick. The Iraqi's pilgrimage video has been shared on both Instagram and Facebook. The video on Facebook has been shared and circulated 46 times and viewed by 2.7K viewers (Figure 6.6). The technical features inherent in the VR glasses, and social network platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, include capabilities that allow these emotions to circulate. According to the cleric's story, which was posted in social media, he has shared the VR glasses with other Shiite Muslims as well, and the further sharing capabilities of the social network platforms contribute to the extension and circulation of emotions in relation to Imam Reza's pilgrimage, making them more tangible as the video continues to circulate and be viewed. When these videos are circulated and

shared on the Internet, they enable audiences experience somewhat similar emotions, therefore generating a shared repertoire.

All of the comments that were posted below the video on Facebook express love for Imam Reza. They include various greetings to him, statements of how the commentator longs to visit his shrine, or the use of emoticons to illustrate eagerness and express love towards the shrine (see Figure 6.6).

با عینک سه بعدی به زیارت امام رضا

Top Latest People Photos Videos Pages Places Groups

POSTED BY

- Anyone
- You
- Your Friends
- Your Friends and Groups
- ... Choose a Source...

TAGGED LOCATION

- Anywhere
- Santa Monica, CA
- Mashhad, Iran
- ... Choose a Location...

DATE POSTED

- Anytime
- 2016
- 2015
- 2014
- ... Choose a Date...

See Translation

140 15 Comments 46 Shares 2.7K Views

Like Comment Share Top Comments

Write a comment...

السلام عليك يا امام رضا دلم خيله براي حرم باصفات تنك شده الطماس دعا دوستان  
See Translation  
Like · Reply · 1 · July 25 at 6:31am

يا امام رضا غريب شرمندم از اين همه گناه  
قربون كنيد طلات

Figure 6.6 Sticking other bodies into the affective field (source: Facebook accessed Nov 2017)

Moreover, all the comments are addressed directly to Imam Reza, as if the viewers feel the presence of the Imam after watching the video. The circulation of emotions in relation to pilgrimage, in this sense, brings Muslims together, uniting them across different geographies: this again attests to the stickiness of emotions. The VR glasses

and the Internet, along with the pilgrim, the cleric and all of the practices that revolve around them are the configurations that unite these audiences (both online and the ones who are surrounding the Iraqi pilgrim in the video), enabling them to be touched by the emotions that the Iraqi pilgrim felt. The emotions that are expressed through posting comments, in turn, comprise an emotional repertoire (Madianou & Miller, 2011; Nussbaum, 2003) that is enabled by the affective field (Harris & Sørensen, 2010) generated by these configurations. These configurations play a part in orienting or shaping an emotional habitus, joining a collectivity, which is formed around the VR glasses into a broader 'Shiite' community.

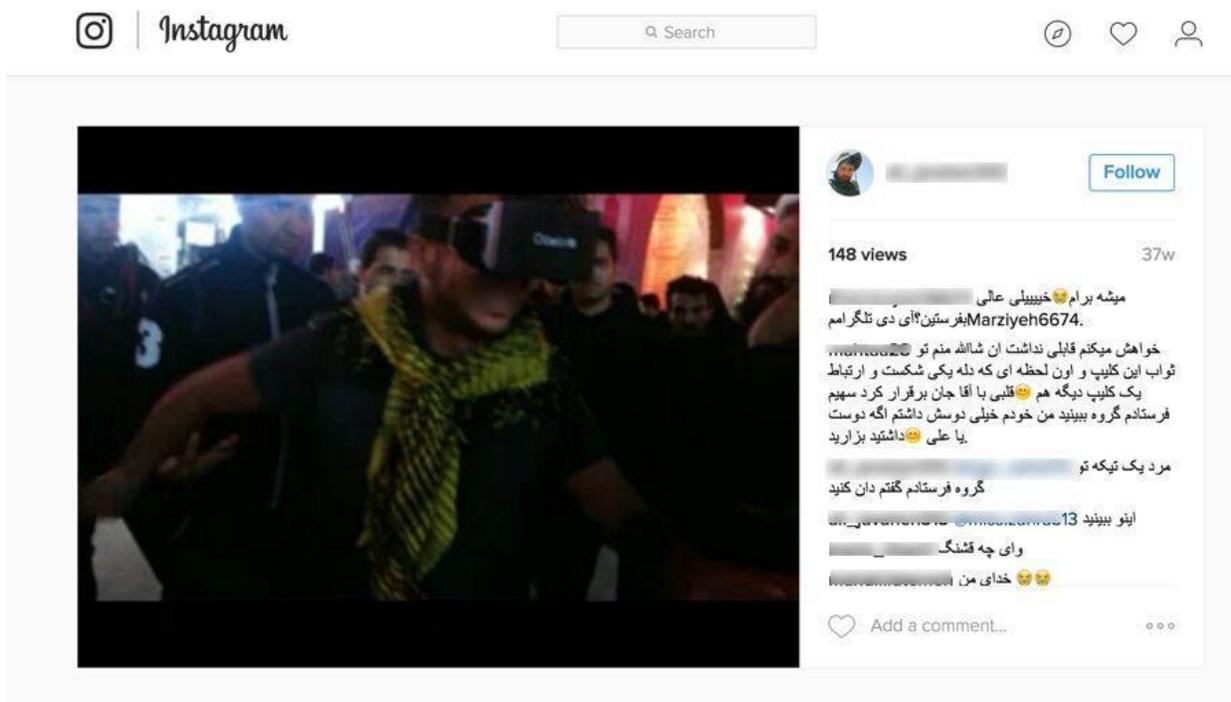


Figure 6.7 Iraqi pilgrim (Source: Instagram accessed November 2017)

### ***Longing to connect and daily struggles of Shiites***

Not only do the configurations of VR glasses and telephones mediate emotional connections and delineate boundaries (such as immersing some into pilgrimage and positioning others as audiences as we saw in the Iraqi story), they also make evident an urge or longing – in the cleric’s words, a thirst – to connect to the shrine of Imam Reza.

As Parkinson notes, emotions are intentional, meaning they’re ‘about’ something; they entail a ‘direction or orientation towards an object’ (Parkinson 1995, p. 8 Cited in Ahmed, 2001). This ‘aboutness’ suggests a certain stance on the world, or a certain way of apprehending the world. All of the pilgrims in the documentary discussed above expressed sorrow and desperation during their phone calls to the shrine and prayed against life’s adversities. Hence emotions expressed during pilgrimage not only reveal how pilgrims are apprehending pilgrimage, Imam Reza and his shrine, they also reveal something of why they make calls in the first place, and what emotions instigate the call. Acknowledging these emotional orientations leads us to the contemporary conditions and struggles of Shiite Muslims in Iran and outside.

The following is an example of the prayer of a pilgrim who is unemployed and is desperate to find a new job. His prayer was posted and shared publicly on Razavivt.vqr.ir, a website dedicated to Imam Reza and his pilgrimage that I introduced in the previous chapter. He has been leaving online prayers for Imam Reza for a few months in the hope that Imam Reza would provide him with a job somewhere. This prayer illustrates the difficult conditions of sustaining a career in Iran.

Name: need a job

Country: Iran

Prayer: My dear sir, oh the eighth Imam, I've come here many times, it's been months since I've been begging for a career, begging you to give me a job, can't you grant me my request, I don't know how to say prayers, but you're kind, please take a look at me, so I can hear the good news tomorrow[...] Find me a job somewhere good and appropriate. I am requesting from everyone (pilgrims) to pray for me[...]79



Figure 6.8 Pilgrimage prayers (source: razavitv.aqr.ir Accessed January 2017)

The next example shifts attention from problems of unemployment to loneliness among diasporic Iranians:

Name: Mojtaba

Country: Great Britain

Prayer: Greetings Sir, I'm greeting you from abroad, Sir help me, I need your assistance. I'm lonely like always.

<sup>79</sup> Source: [http://razavitv.aqr.ir/index/delneveshte\\_module/show\\_all](http://razavitv.aqr.ir/index/delneveshte_module/show_all) (Available 10/6/2016).



Figure 6.9 Pilgrimage prayers source: razavitv.aqr.ir (Accessed January 2017)

The short prayer, which was written by a pilgrim residing in Great Britain, illustrates the use of pilgrimage platforms by diasporic populations.

This next example depicts a woman's struggle to find a life partner:

Name: ...

Prayer: Oh Imam Reza [...] today I'm heartbroken again [...] from what others say [...] that I tried so hard [...] I have problems with studies [...] I'm unemployed [...] oh God please solve these issues [...] help me marry someone who is great and spiritual so that with that marriage I'll be happy [...] I'm getting older [...].



Figure 6.10 Pilgrimage prayers (Source: razavitv.aqr.ir accessed January 2017)

The above excerpt from an anonymous pilgrim is one example among many of a pilgrim who asks the Imam and God to find a suitable husband for her. In Iran and especially among the traditional and religious families, pre-marital relationships are not common, and most marriages are arranged. However, the social and economic barriers in the

country have restricted the ability of youth to settle down and marry, which has resulted in an increase in age of marriage for women. It is mainly women who make these marriage requests to the Imam, and not their counterpart male pilgrims. Other prayers ask the Imam to get accepted for university entrance exams, or for healing and recovery for someone with serious or terminal illness.

The inscriptive power of digital technologies such as the Internet and social network websites enables certain emotions that are too personal or shameful to share in public by pilgrims who are inside the shrine to be made public and be openly shared within the digital realm. Lasen (2013) notes this effect more generally for social media (see also Ahmed, 2001; Lasén & Gómez-Cruz, 2009). In the case of the shrine's website, pilgrims evidently dare to say or show what would remain silenced and hidden in face-to-face encounters. The distribution of pilgrimage prayers that are filled with personal issues, shared in blogs and social network websites among friends and strangers, marks a change in what is considered to be embarrassing or shameful. But it also reveals more of what pilgrims say, and feel, when performing pilgrimage. Traditionally, the content of pilgrimage prayers has not been textually shared, recorded and made public inside the shrine. However, the inscriptive power (Ferraris, 2005) of digital technologies, tied to anonymity, makes it possible to unpack more details of why and how people experience pilgrimage. As an example, in general Iranian boys and girls, when they get to a certain age, will seek a life-time partner and plan to get marry. The expression of a desire to marry is frowned upon, particularly among girls, thus girls will never talk about their feelings in public if they're desperate to get married. What I found interesting in relation to online pilgrimage prayers was that many have clearly and openly noted in their prayers that they are lonely, and have asked Imam Reza to help them find their

significant other; they even go further than that, and share what type of person they're interested in.

Further examples reveal that pilgrims share secrets about their lives in the context of online pilgrimage, and write prayers regarding hurting someone they loved, or even in one case ask for forgiveness because they have committed burglary. Digital devices offer great possibilities for these emotional intensities to be shared and experienced (Featherstone, 2010, p. 210).<sup>80</sup> This reading goes against the writings of scholars like Jameson and Baudrillard who have argued for the loss of emotionality and the 'waning effect of affect' (Jameson, 1990, p. 10 see also Featherstone, 2010) with the emergence of new electronic media.

In contrast, these examples of online, textual prayers illustrate how the use of new media sets the stage for emotions, experiences and narratives to circulate. The social, material, and historical properties regarding the ways in which pilgrimage is performed, recorded, shared and viewed, shapes an affective field. Affective fields that manifest intense longing for the Imam, sorrow, sadness, desperation or the pain felt by pilgrims continue to stick and circulate as these stories are shared online, being intensified even after the original pilgrimage experience is done. These structures of feeling, as they continue to live and extend to the online realm, become stronger through time, as emotions are intensified (Ahmed, 2004) and come to entail a broader constituency. In enacting socially mediated pilgrimage, the community of Shiites is imagined as larger but also as more solid, and the boundaries against others become more delineated.

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<sup>80</sup> A similar observation can be found in Tobias Raun's study of emotions and vlogs (Raun, 2012).

Another example, which depicts the solidarity and shared disposition among Shiite Muslims is the practice of clicking a small button above a pilgrimage prayer that is posted online. This feature, which is similar to the 'like' button on Facebook, points to the fact that the person who read the pilgrimage prayer is not only acknowledging that s/he has read someone else's prayers, but also lets them know that s/he has also prayed for that pilgrim to the Imam.



Figure 6.11 pilgrimage prayers (Source: razavivt.aqr.ir accessed January 2017)

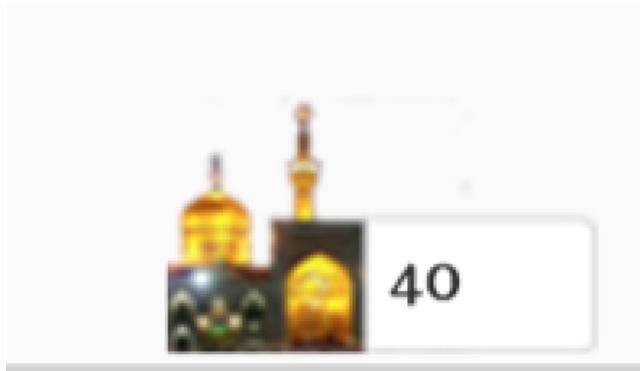


Figure 6.12 Icon of the shrine (Source: [http://razavivt.aqr.ir/index/delneveshte\\_module/show\\_all/20/40](http://razavivt.aqr.ir/index/delneveshte_module/show_all/20/40) accessed January 2017)

Kosar, the girl who had written this prayer is saying:

Greetings dear Sir, I was reading some of other's prayers, some would want to get married, dear Sir I am married but my husband is away from me, we see each other

once a month, dear Sir this is really hard please pray for us so that everyone gets what they desire [...] I will be operated on in the next two weeks, dear Sir please heal all the sick, including me [...].

As you see in the screen shot 40 people have read Kosar's prayer and prayed for her. If you hover on the button which is in the form of a little photo of Imam Reza's shrine, a message will appear which reads, 'I have prayed for this prayer', which lets the pilgrim know not only that her prayer was read but also that it instigated others to pray for her and her situation. Not only the act of typing your prayer into a public space and sharing it with others, but also the small act of clicking a button, contributes to the formation of an online community of Shiite pilgrims through social media. Emotions that are shared online are no longer, in Ahmed's words, a 'private matter,' nor do they 'come from within and move outward'. Rather, as emotions circulate, and move, they are 'doing things' (2004, p. 117).

## ***Conclusion***

Taking inspiration from Sara Ahmed (2004), this chapter considered theoretical foundations with regards to understanding emotions. Emotions do things and align individuals with communities, or bodily spaces with social spaces. To Ahmed emotions circulate between both social beings and material artifacts. They work by sticking bodies together, and it is this sticking that generates the effect of a collective. Emotions are not located within but among bodies and objects, and the non-residence of emotions is what makes them binding, sticky and circulatory. Material objects create and are inherent to 'affective fields' that are webs of emotionally evocative connections amongst objects, things and places (cited in Kuruoğlu & Ger, 2015, p. 215). In this chapter, the

concept of an affective field was related to the sociotechnical configurations that circulate or mediate emotions. Practices that are mediated through sociotechnical configurations draw individuals into the affective fields that are generated by those configurations; the subjects that are drawn to this affective field become connected to others who have been similarly affected across time and space. In other words, these configurations, by circulating emotions across space and time, also play a part in shaping an emotional habitus. Objects of emotionality here are not merely material objects such as the VR glasses, as online tools, 3D images and even memories can act as objects of emotions which have the ability to circulate among and align pilgrims. Objects such as the telephone or the VR glasses have capabilities and affordances that allow certain emotional expressions; for example, the VR glasses offer a wider range of emotional expression in terms of moving the hands and kneeling down, while the phone's expression of emotionality is centered in the voice of the pilgrim. On the telephone the pilgrim becomes her voice and her voice becomes her audio portrait.

The affective field created by the configuration of the VR glasses and the recorded phone call is not limited to the physical surroundings that the pilgrim inhabits. When the video of the Iraqi pilgrimage was shared on Facebook, many who viewed it were drawn into this affective field, and they posted greetings to the Imam in the form of comments. The emotionality of the pilgrimage here stretches outside the surface of the Iraqi pilgrim's body and into the bodies of other Shiites who view the video on Facebook, displayed in the form of liking the video post or greeting the Imam by leaving a comment for him. These emotions hold and bind Shiite's bodies as a unified community. Emotions open up the space to comprehend how connections are made and unmade, or how boundaries are delineated and negotiated. Pilgrimage emotionality brings

families and friends closer to each other, it contributes to the strengthening and maintaining of the emotional culture of pilgrimage among members of the Shiite community. Pilgrimage emotionality not only objectifies intimate and familial relationships, but also alters the pilgrimage experience of those who are inside the shrine. Furthermore, the emotional orientations of Shiite pilgrims express the contemporary conditions and struggles of this community of Muslims in Iran and outside, such as unemployment, and loneliness among diasporic Iranians. The inscriptive power of digital technologies also makes it possible to track some emotions that are not shared publicly inside the shrine but are now recorded and made public online.

## ***Chapter Seven: Objects of (im)mobility in pilgrimage practice***

The mobilities turn, for over a decade, has brought new insights and perspectives on the ways social lives are being experienced and lived while on the move. Lin (2016) asserts, however, that current empirical work on mobilities requires attention to other mobilities such as countries, cultures, and religions, which have been less explored and analyzed. Following Lin's argument, this thesis contributes to the field of mobility studies in the context of pilgrimage (im)mobilities among Shiite Iranians. This chapter includes an exploration of 'constellations of mobility'<sup>81</sup>, certain 'patterns of movement, representations of movement, and ways of practicing movement that make sense together' (Cresswell, 2010, p.18) with regards to pilgrimage, particularly pilgrimage practice in relation to technology and material artifacts and mediated through various sociotechnical configurations. As Cresswell notes 'mobility is central to what it means to be modern' (2006, p. 6). Furthermore, mobility is a way of making sense of our engagement with others, and of 'how we address the world' (Cresswell, 2006, p. 19). Mobilities are experienced and practiced through various affective registers, such as waiting (Bissell, 2007) and the sensed vibrations of movement (Bissell, 2010), of being stranded and immobile (Birtchnell & Büscher, 2011), feeling uncertain (Barton, 2011), and of pleasure (Hagman, 2010). With this in mind, mobilities require an understanding of the spatiality of our worlded interactions, despite the ways space and time are 'tamed', to reuse Massey's terminology (Hagman, 2010; Massey, 2005, p.7), by some methods of measuring movement. The spatiality is configured through a multiplicity of arrangements and configurations of material and immaterial objects: animate and inanimate, mobile and immobile (Wilson, 2011). Taking (im)mobilities as enacted as part

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<sup>81</sup> About the use of singular and plurals, see Kellerman, 2012, pp. 70–74.

of the sociotechnical configurations that mediate pilgrimage draws our attention to the entanglement of physical, virtual and communicative (im)mobilities. Pilgrims as social beings are not just configured in their embodied shape, but distributed or multiple in time and space, where physical movement is braided with virtual, communicative and imaginative movement. This approach enables us to understand complex entanglements and extensions of pilgrims in relation to space, time and (im)material artifacts.

I start off this chapter by briefly exploring key theoretical concepts in understanding the mobilities turn, relevant to understanding pilgrimage as mediated through multiple mobilities and movements. I then move on to a discussion of pilgrimage in the context of movement, travel and corporeal mobility among Shiite Iranian pilgrims more specifically, fleshing out the lived and physical dimension of pilgrimage mobility and emplacement among Shiites. Walking is one way to experience pilgrimage, and traditional and conventional Shiism believes that the more physical effort and bodily engagement is spent during pilgrimage, the more the pilgrim will gain piety and feel closer to the Imam. Pilgrims in this sense are enacted and configured through feeling pain and fatigue while walking towards the shrine. I will explore this mode of religious practice while delving into the necessary spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure, mediate and enable these walking pilgrimage trips. Viewed in this way, pilgrimage mobility is an experience that both reflects and reinforces religious power, bringing pilgrims closer to the Imam, creating a community of walking Shiite pilgrims on the road in which the road becomes not a space of passing but a space where pilgrimage is lived, enacted and practiced.

Next, I describe the role of material artifacts as central to an understanding of contemporary mobility and pilgrimage mobility. Material artifacts such as beads or souvenirs that are bought from Mashad act as 'spiritual capital' (Morris, 2016, p. 389).<sup>82</sup> These are referred to as objects of mobility (Wilson, 2011). In the current moment these objects are not only material, but can also be virtual, such as photos that are shared on social media. In the same vein the mobility involved in pilgrimage is understood here not only as walking towards the shrine, but also as encompassing the micro movement of fingers on a mouse device and keyboard or clicking on pictures of the shrine. Pilgrimage also involves imaginative mobility, when pilgrims connect to the Imam through their hearts and minds, as discussed in Chapter Four and Five. This kind of pilgrimage mobility not only points to the attachment of Iranians to Imam Reza, but also the incapability of many to physically travel to the shrine. As expressed in Alireza's pilgrimage prayer in a previous chapter: 'Imam Reza thanks for proving to me that 5 thousand kilometers will not disconnect us from each other, [...]'. (2009 May source Imamrezat). Alireza's prayer illustrates his attachment and loyalty to Imam Reza, as it also depicts him as a pilgrim who is immobile in terms of his inability to travel to the shrine.

This prayer points to the fact that any analysis of mobility should also include an awareness and inclusion of immobility. Anything mobile and on the move also requires

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<sup>82</sup> The idea of spiritual capital or religious capital is derived from (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991; Morris, 2016; Putnam, 2001), spiritual capital here is viewed as means through which pilgrims generate connections across religious boundaries of belonging with other Shiite Iranians through exchanging gifts and souvenirs (see Morris, 2016, O'Sullivan and Flanagan, 2012) in this section spiritual capital is used Beyond social actor's alongside network capital however spiritual capital is used when emphasis is on objects of mobility and network capital is used when emphasis is on building bonding and closeness among pilgrims family and friends or the Iranian Shiite community in general.

elements of fixity and immobility: this relationship is dialectical, making movement and immobility dependent upon each other (Urry, 2003). After exploring objects of mobility, I move on to a discussion of stillness and immobilities. I then explore how movement and mobility becomes a way to strengthen Shiite identity, and a precondition to gain social and religious status. The use of social network websites and applications such as Instagram also contributes to this process, as pilgrims share their pilgrimage journey by posting photos that they took from inside the shrine.

Digital media are not only used for sharing photos, they also shape pilgrimage experiences (at times glamorizing the practice), configure pilgrimage spatiality and connect pilgrims to others. Instagram, in particular, mediates pilgrims' locations. These digital-physical 'comobilities' (Southern, 2012, p. 75) or co-existences, I argue, become a mechanism that enacts social connectedness between pilgrims and their online followers. The use of Instagram, and other modes of rhetorical expression online, illuminate how both self and space are presented, and how pilgrims inhabit spaces, shedding light on the nexus of pilgrim, public space, locative technology and social networks. Finally, by using diverse portrayals of pilgrims' experience of place and everyday pilgrimage mobility, I examine the spatial dimensions of this religious practice. I briefly trace the recent development of 'location-based services,' and describe the conspicuousness of contemporary technologies of mobility as they configure the religious space of pilgrimage.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, it seeks to expand the mobilities perspective by investigating how (im)material objects, and particularly digital devices, are incorporated into the practice of Shiite pilgrimage (im)mobility, and how they reshape the practice. These objects discussed in this chapter include objects of mobility, spiritual capital,

network capital and mobility capital, all of which are interconnected. Mobility is an approach which aligns with the central aim of this thesis, illustrating how (im)material artifacts are made and remade and how pilgrimage is mediated through the (im)mobility of sociotechnical configurations. Secondly, having mobility as an analytical key expands our understanding of pilgrimage practice within the context of Iranian Shiite Muslims. This includes how pilgrimage is practiced in relation to (im)mobility, how pilgrims are socially constructed on the move or while being still, and how their pilgrimage experience is extended to the spaces outside of the shrine via technologies such as Instagram. These are areas of research which have not been explored extensively within the mobilities field in the context of Islam.

### ***Approaches to understanding mobilities***

Mobilities is by no means a new concept, however the ways in which social actors, ideas and materials move have increasingly undergone exploration in recent years, because 'all the world seems to move' (Eidse, Turner, & Oswin, 2016, p. 341). Scholars in the mobilities approach have paid extensive attention to the ways in which social actors are being constructed on the move. They attempt to train our analytical focus on the character and quality of movements and flows (Eidse, Turner, & Oswin, 2016). Furthermore, the approach unravels the entanglement of movement with power and meaning and explores its social, cultural and political production: in this sense, this approach facilitates critical discussions of the politics, including religious and cultural power dynamics, that animate processes of movement. It raises questions about who is capable or incapable of moving, and how the same movement can take on drastically different meaning and forms depending on the positionality of social subjects and the

motive force behind their movement (or stillness) (Cresswell 2006, 2010; Tanzarn, 2012; Uteng 2009).

Cresswell (2006) explains mobilities as a conceptual triad based on movement, presentation and practice. What is new about his approach is that not only does he take movement seriously, but he also involves the entanglement of physical movement, representation of movement (or immobility), and the experience and embodied practice of (im)mobility (Cresswell, 2010). He asserts that these three elements of mobility are bound up together, and the disentangling of these elements is entirely analytical (Cresswell, 2010). He advocates an understanding of mobility in a holistic way, meaning that we should pay attention to all three of these aspects. Similar to the multitude of efforts to measure and model mobilities, there has been a plethora of representations of mobility (Cresswell, 2010). For example, mobility has been figured as tedium, burden, adventure, freedom, identity, etc. The act of walking has been imbued with an array of meanings, from conformity to rebellion in literature, film and the arts (see Solnit, 2001; Vergunst & Ingold, 2016).

By practice, Cresswell means both the everyday sense of particular practices such as walking or taking the bus, but also the more theoretical sense of the social as it is embodied and habitualised (Bourdieu, 1990). Human mobility, he asserts is practiced mobility that is enacted and experienced through the body (Cresswell, 2010). Inspired by Cresswell's theory of mobility, Eidse, Turner and Oswin (2016) explored Hanoi's street vendors, highlighting vendors' daily experience of mobility and the politics affecting itinerant vendors compared to their stationary counterparts. In Hanoi vendor movement refers to their everyday motions in the streets, in turn encoded and

represented by the State as a barrier to modernity and development. This barrier leads to an experience, or practice, imbued with everyday politics.

The mobilities approach challenges a long-held view on the stability and 'place-ness' of societies, treating nations and places as bounded and self-sufficient units (Urry, 2000 cited in Lin, 2016, p. 49). This approach also sharpens our perception of the emergent, contingent, 'performed' nature of social orders (such as nations, states, communities, etc.). Within this view the challenge to territorial stasis draws inspiration not only from the intensifying flows of people transgressing all kinds of borders, but is also informed, at a more minute scale, by the ordinary motion that permeates everyday social life, such as walking, cycling, commuting and other routine circulations and banal movements that saturate everyday life (Adey, 2010, 2009; Cresswell, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Eugene McCann advances the notion that the movement of people is not empty but filled with liveliness (McCann, 2010). Castell's outline of a network society encapsulates this idea that a 'space of places' is being superimposed by and, in some senses, surpassed by, a 'space of flows' (cited in Cresswell, 2010, p. 551). Urry advocates for a 'sociology beyond societies' that focuses on how sociality and identity are shaped and produced through networks of people, ideas and things moving, as well as on blocked movement, and on moorings instead of the habitation of a shared space such as a region or nation state. He proposes a structural typology for this approach, which includes five mobility types: mobility of objects, corporeal mobility, imaginative mobility, virtual mobility and communicative mobility (Urry, 2000, 2007). By mobility of objects he refers to the exchange of commodities between people/consumers, producers and retailers. Corporeal mobility refers to the travelling of people and commodities. Imaginative mobility includes the representation of mobility as elaborated and broadcast by media.

Virtual mobility is experienced online by Internet users, and communicative mobility includes all of the person-to-person communication modalities that are connected to movement. In this thesis I am using virtual and imaginative mobility interchangeably to refer to the connections that pilgrims make through their hearts and minds to Imam Reza and his shrine with their use of ICTs.

Beyond social actors' movements, which include physical displacements of people such as long-distance travels, residential mobilities, walks and commuting mobility, mobilities have also come to include the travels of a myriad of things, such as internationally shipped goods, information and even planning policies (Cowen, 2014; Graham, 2005; McCann, 2011). Some refer to minute scale mobilities as 'micro-mobilities', or small-scale mobilities including bodily movements and emotions, 'which are the impalpable movements of the soul' (Fortunati and Taipale, 2017, p.561 cited in Fortunati & Vincent, 2014). Some scholars refer to this approach as the 'new mobilities paradigm' or the 'mobilities turn (Cresswell, 2010, p.553),' which they argue has made a number of conceptual and theoretical advances by focusing on the centrality of mobilities. They posit that without these flows and movements social life would cease to function, let alone be sustained in any coherent and orderly way (Lin, 2016).

In the next section I offer a brief discussion on the intersection of pilgrimage and mobilities. Pilgrimage in this sense is viewed as a movement, a journey of people, material and immaterial objects and ideas, which keeps the sacred value of religious space and place alive.

### ***Pilgrimage mobilities***

Edith Turner, in an *Encyclopedia of Religion* article on pilgrimage, observes that 'a religious believer in any culture may sometimes look beyond the local temple, church, or shrine, feel the call of some distant holy place renowned for miracles and the revivification of faith, and resolve to journey there' (Turner, 2005, p. 714). Haviva Pedaya (2011) explores Jewish mystical pilgrimages – voluntary practices of wandering without destination – as rituals of exile. Pilgrimage in this sense may be a technique of divesting oneself of servitude to place, or a way to disorient or re-orient oneself by going not somewhere but elsewhere (Feldman, 2017). Pilgrimage involves massive movements of people, ideas, and objects. It is embedded in wider religious, sociopolitical and economic contexts, thus emphasizing the 'ambivalent connections [...] frequently established between mobile persons, places and traces of the past that can be invoked and experienced in the present' (Coleman, 2001, p. 23). Pilgrimage is a movement, a journey of people and ideas, which keeps the sacred value of religious space and place alive, configuring spatial relationships (Coleman & Eade, 2004; Rivas, 1997; Stoddard & Alan Morinis, 1997; Secall, 2002).

Pilgrimage has been a popular topic within the field of mobilities, partly to do with its oxymoronic character as a localized and yet transnational practice (Dubisch, 1995, p. 39). Many scholars have explored the role of movement in the constitution of pilgrimage practice (Hermkens, Jansen, & Notermans, 2009, pp. 6–7 see Taylor, 2012, pp. 218–219). Mesaritou, Coleman and Eade (2016) explored how pilgrims are guided to and within pilgrimage sites. Observing that guiding is and has been an integral dimension of pilgrimage (see also Treharne, Walker, & Green, 2010), they consider the various media that guide pilgrims in their pilgrimage practice, including personal guides, books

or online material, and how pilgrimage knowledge is produced, disseminated and received through guiding. Banica's work in Romania (2016 cited in Mesaritou et al., 2016) examines hybrid pilgrimages, being both religious and touristic. He also refers to this type of pilgrimage as 'coach pilgrimage' (as it is organized using minibuses), which points to the new forms of blending of tourism and pilgrimage travels, changing notions of pilgrimage, movement, religious practice and piety (Banica, 2016, p.74 cited in Mesaritou et al., 2016).<sup>83</sup>

### ***Walking towards the shrine***

Many pilgrimage rituals are performed as a journey, and in particular a walking journey. The road then becomes as important as the destination (Feldman, 2017). For example, with regards to the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, only pilgrims who have taken a journey of at least 100 kilometers by foot or bicycle are acknowledged by the shrine authorities as authentic pilgrims and can receive a certificate (the Compostela) to confirm their pilgrimage practice (Frey, 1998, pp.159–61; Slavin, 2003). This practice is also referred to as foot-pilgrimage (see Blacker, 1984; González & Medina, 2003; Hayes & Macleod, 2008; Kim, & King, 2016; Mujtaba Husein & Husein, 2018; Murray & Graham, 1997; Santos, 2002; Reader, 2007). In other pilgrimages there is no single path to the destination, or that path is considered insignificant. Ian Reader (2006) explored Japanese pilgrimage to Shikoku – a network of 88 sites around the island that can be visited, several at a time. This is a pilgrimage that has been practiced for hundreds of years, which can be done in any order, and in segments over the course of several years: what links the sites into a single pilgrimage is the road between them. In a somewhat

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<sup>83</sup> The relation of pilgrimage and tourism have been briefly explored in Chapter Three. For more discussions of pilgrimage and tourism see Reader (Reader, 2006).

similar sense, traveling to the shrine of Imam Reza and walking<sup>84</sup> through the courtyards of the shrine has been an integral part of pilgrimage experience inside the shrine.

As mentioned earlier, traditional and conventional Shiism believes that the more physical effort and bodily engagement spent during pilgrimage, the more the pilgrim will gain piety and feel closer to the Imam. Tapper (1990) argues that a willingness to endure physical pain and fatigue contributes to the religious construction of moral piety. Within this view many Iranian Shiite pilgrims endure physical hardship in their movement towards the shrine. The road here mediates pilgrimage practice. Another way to look at the road with a mobility lens is to view the road as a 'mobility capital'. This concept points out that the experience of walking pilgrimage requires resources, access to infrastructure that allows mobility (Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2008). The second aspect of mobility capital highlights the fact that walking pilgrims acquire new resources, abilities, and opportunities due to their mobility (see Brooks & Waters, 2010; Findlay, King, Stam, & Ruiz-Gelices, 2006; Scott, 2006). Below is a photo (Figure 7.1) of pilgrims walking on the road towards the shrine of Imam Reza from cities around Mashad:

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<sup>84</sup> For a full sociological analysis of walking see (Ingold, 2004; Tapper, 1990).



Figure 7.1 Walking pilgrims (Source: [goo.gl/aFVYgR](http://goo.gl/aFVYgR) accessed March 2017)

It has been reported by a shrine representative in 2016 that by the end of November of that year it was estimated that around 300,000 pilgrims would be walking towards the shrine from across the country (dana.ir news agency).<sup>85</sup> The end of November is the time related to the last 10 days of Safar month (the second month in the Islamic calendar), and many Islamic Imams have died or been martyred during this time, including the prophet Muhammad. The last day of the month of November is marked with Imam Reza's martyrdom. During this time Astan Quds Razavi (a governmental organization affiliated with the shrine), and many non-governmental sectors start to prepare for this journey; for example, by providing food, and setting up stations on the way to Mashad so pilgrims can rest, sleep or take a break from their walking journey. In an online news page dedicated to Islamic pilgrimage, it was reported that in 2016 260 stations had

<sup>85</sup> Source: [goo.gl/qxg4id](http://goo.gl/qxg4id) (accessed Feb 2017).

been set up on the way to Mashad, and a total number of 15,000 people were involved in the process (news.hajj.ir, 2016). The involvement and investment of the Iranian government plays a significant part in pilgrimage mobility, in terms of providing aid to facilitate the journey and consequently rendering pilgrimage practice more visible. The involvement of people and objects in spaces that are along the way of walking pilgrims also enable and support their journey. Naming this the 'spatial fix,' Harvey refers to the necessity of immobile objects in spaces to enable the movement and mobility of social actors, labor, goods and capital (Harvey, [1982] 2007, p.23). Hannam, Sheller, and Urry (2006) similarly argue that 'Mobilities cannot be described without attention to the necessary spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities' (p. 3).

When asked why they go through the hardship of walking to the shrine, pilgrims all point to the fact that they will gain more blessings from this pilgrimage journey because of the fatigue that they go through. For example, a pilgrim named Mohammad was on the way to the shrine for five days in 2011 when a blog writer named Emirim interviewed him. Mohammed is part of a caravan that for decades has been taking pilgrims on walking pilgrimage towards the shrine of Imam Reza, and the start of the journey is usually a few days before the annual martyrdom of Imam Reza. When he was asked about the reasons for his journey Mohammed said:

I heard from the Islamic clergy that the more pain you go through the more blessings you will gain: that is why I walk towards Mashad<sup>86</sup> (Emirim, 2011).

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<sup>86</sup> Source: <http://asteya.blogfa.com/post-93.aspx> (Emirim February 2011) (accessed February 2017).

When the blogger asked another pilgrim named Abdollah why in this cold weather he left Tehran on a 6-day walking trip to Imam Reza, Abdollah responded that it was because he had a sick relative and needed Imam Reza to heal him. Another young man was asked the same question and he replied with tearful eyes: 'I feel like Imam Reza watches me along this way' (Emirim, 2011)

These quotes highlight the importance of religious authorities in the practice of pilgrimage. As seen in Mohammad's comment with regards to walking to the shrine, his walking journey was informed and initiated because of what some Islamic clergy advocate in relation to walking to the shrine in order to gain more blessings. This way of experiencing pilgrimage mobility both reflects and reinforces religious power. It also illustrates how the pilgrimage is experienced and practiced through walking towards the shrine, and how a sense of closeness to the Imam is accomplished through an embodied practice of walking while on the road. It is by becoming mobile within and between places (Anderson & Erskine, 2012) that pilgrims such as Mohammad and Abdollah experience pilgrimage. And pilgrims like Abdollah bear the hardship of the walking journey, knowing that the Imam is watching and accompanying him.

Emirim (2011) observes many women among the group as well, walking side by side with men. She talks to a woman who is taking this journey with her husband, Marzieh, who has been doing this religious walk every year for five years now to reach the shrine. When asked why she decided to walk towards the shrine, Marzieh replies:

When you're walking, along the way you get to know many people, each becomes your companion, and each pilgrim takes this journey to get something from Imam Reza. It feels great to be in a group that all have the same goal, to practice pilgrimage for Imam Reza (Emirim, 2011).

The path of pilgrimage to Imam Reza creates a community-on-the-road. As illustrated in what Marzieh described in her pilgrimage journey, this community entails Shiite pilgrims who all share the love of Imam Reza and seek some sort of transformation and getting to know other pilgrims becomes part of the practice of pilgrimage. This insight, which was introduced within anthropology by Turner (Anderson & Erskine, 2012; Turner, 1973; Turner and Turner 1978), views pilgrimage as performance, rather than merely as a reflection of religious discourse or something that is based merely on religious dogma. In this vein, pilgrimage is mediated not only through the road which enables pilgrims to walk in it, but also through the presence of other pilgrims and the communication that occurs between pilgrims.

A report published in *alef.ir*, a popular online non-governmental news website, discusses the reasons why some pilgrims tend to go through the hardship of walking towards the shrine. These include a sense of proximity to Imam Reza; that is, sensing the Imam's presence and feeling close to him, love for the Imam, and asking the Imam to attend to their prayers and requests. Moreover, while walking towards the shrine these pilgrims pass small towns and villages, and the inhabitants who are informed of their walking journey, if they have a sick family member, will bring an item of clothing and place it under pilgrims' feet, so that they can walk over it, believing that the clothing item would then bring healing for the sick person.<sup>87</sup> It seems that the road in this sense does not merely act as a means to an end or a path which reaches the shrine. It is a place in which not only the body of the pilgrim, but also others who are in contact with him/her, may experience transformations; the road is an agent in the production of pilgrimage moving (Cresswell & Merriman, 2011, p. 7). The road becomes not a space of passing but a

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<sup>87</sup> Source: <http://alef.ir/vdcdnz0foyt0oj6.2a2y.html?140894> (accessed March 2017).

space where pilgrimage is lived and experienced, and a space where walking pilgrims cross paths with non-pilgrims. Hence the path of pilgrimage generates a community-on-the-road (see Turner, 1973; Turner and Turner, 1978).

At the same time, there have been discussions on the Internet in relation to pilgrims walking to the shrine that include some skeptical comments from Iranians who do not support the act of walking:

If [those who walk to the shrine] spend this much time to walk all the way from their cities to Mashad, instead of that, they should [spend that time to] serve humankind, and when they have a responsibility somewhere like in an office or anywhere else they should perform it correctly [...] isn't this better?' (Reza 2000 posted in alef.ir).

The practice of walking to the shrine is not accepted and welcomed by all Iranian Muslims, and many views it as an unnecessary act. But while walking may not be welcomed and practiced by all Iranian Muslims, the sharing of this experience on the Internet becomes a tool which unites followers of Imam Reza together, whether they have the same view over this practice or a conflicting one.

Walking in this sense is not a passive act, it is a deliberate and socially performative practice: through walking pilgrims rediscover a way to 'pray through their feet' (Ingold, 2004, p. 332). As they walk along the road, its path and meaning is incorporated into their own embodied capacities of movement, awareness and response. Different dimensions of pilgrimage mobility become visible here, including religious, social, community and authenticity aspects of this experience.

The way pilgrimage is performed varies among Shiite Iranian Muslims and many believe that Imam Reza is present everywhere, so that pilgrimage at a distance from the shrine

is as acceptable as one that is done inside the shrine. Even when the journey involves travel, the way that pilgrims reach the shrine varies: some will walk, some will use the bus or train, some will fly to Mashad. Hence the physical mobility of pilgrimage in the form of a journey towards the shrine is in no sense uniform (see Cresswell 2010; Merriman, 2012) but rather involves 'diverse mobilities' (Urry, 2000, 2007, 2010) or 'multiple and intersecting mobilities' (Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006, p. 2). However, I focus more on the walking journey towards the shrine because walking holds a special place among Shiite Iranians, in that the hardship is believed to bring them closer to the Imam and giving them more blessings.

### ***Material and immaterial objects of pilgrimage (im)mobility***

Scholars in the field of mobilities are increasingly treating material artifacts as central to an understanding of contemporary mobilities, for example, the use of mobile phones while traveling (Berry & Hamilton, 2010; Merriman, 2012), or mobile music devices (Beer, 2010). This attention to materiality expands the work of geographies of mobility which are 'dense, flowing, particular, sensate, and radically actual', as Dewsbury (2000, p. 491) puts it. The incorporation of material and digital artifacts within the study of mobilities has deep implications for understanding the spatiality of pilgrimage 'drawing out the tensions in social-cultural theorizations of space as potentiality and space as inert fixity' (Wilson, 2011, p. 1267). In his study of pilgrimage to Mecca, Kenny (2007) explored the role of gifts, as an investment in transferable spiritual capital. Spiritual capital is an attribution of enhanced piety that marks individuals as more religious: on the part of the pilgrim, the gift acts as a reminder of the spiritual 'center', such as when pilgrims buy religious objects from pilgrimage sites and bring them home. Spiritual capital also works as a strategic gift: for example, many pilgrims buy souvenirs from religious sites for their

family and friends, and these gifts validate a myriad of culturally appropriate, power laden social relationships that mutually implicate both the giver and the receiver of the gift with the shrine. Kenny argues that identities are shaped and changed when spiritual capital is mobilized by returning pilgrims through the strategic use of pilgrimage gifts (Kenny, 2007). The pilgrim alters the community's understanding of himself or herself by sharing in the accrual of spiritual capital with the recipient, who is often a friend or a family member. Gifts are objects that are bought as souvenirs from centers of spirituality like Mecca, and access to these objects represent pilgrimage experiences. Alternatively, gifts might not be an object but the actual experience of pilgrimage, and the embodied movement from the periphery to the center (Mecca). In the previous section I noted that some villagers would place a clothing item from a sick person under the pilgrim's feet and ask them to step on it while walking towards the shrine. The garment is not exchanged but is intersected with pilgrimage practice, and is imbued with blessings from the Imam Reza, in order to bring back health to the sick person.

In my interview with Maryam (introduced in Chapter Six), she told me that every evening, after she finished her pilgrimage practice, she would go to the bazars next to the shrine in search of gifts for her friends and family. These gifts usually have a religious significance, such as beads, or Chador, a piece of long garment that is worn by women during prayer. It seemed these gifts acted as a reminder that the pilgrim was remembering her friends and family and had recited their names during her prayers in the shrine. When I asked her why she bought a Chador for her mother, she told me 'I bought it so that I can tell my mother that I had remembered her on every step of my pilgrimage and prayer' (interview March 2014). An object of pilgrimage, such as the Chador that Maryam bought for her mother, not only acts as spiritual capital,

strengthening the bond between Maryam and her mother, but also becomes a part of Maryam's pilgrimage experience. These objects, in other words, are part of the sociomaterial configurations that mediate pilgrimage.

Gifts aren't the only objects that are exchanged between pilgrims and their loved ones. Many times, I heard stories of pilgrims in the shrine who performed prayers on behalf of their friends and family or a loved one. In fact, before pilgrims leave for their pilgrim journey they are often asked to perform prayers on behalf of their friends and family. The mediation that takes place here does not include an artifact or a technology but the body of another pilgrim, who is performing pilgrimage on behalf of someone else. Ali, a pilgrim who I talked to inside the shrine, told me that when he said goodbye to one of his closest friends, he told Ali 'I don't want anything from Mashad, just do a prayer on my behalf so that I can pass my exam.' Ali felt that by his prayer he was helping his friend to pass the exam, and it appeared that his friend felt more assured and confident knowing that Imam Reza will help him in passing the exam (interview September 2014).

There is movement, bodily motions and circulation for each of the objects involved in pilgrimage practice. Objects of mobilities enable us to see who is capable or incapable of moving and how each movement in relation to pilgrimage can take on different meanings and forms, depending on the sociomaterial configurations that are involved.

### ***Pilgrimage and immobility, or limitations to mobility***

One important aspect of the mobility approach is how mobile technologies and digital devices feed into corporeal acts both of moving and of staying put (Berry & Hamilton, 2010; Larsen et al., 2008). This points to the fact that mobility is not only considered in relation to movement, but also should be understood in relation to forms of

emplacement, stopping, waiting, stillness, and immobility (Adey, 2006; Bissell & Fuller, 2011; Hannam et al., 2006). Stillness as informed by the mobilities turn is not suggesting a return to an approach based on boundedness and rootedness, but rather an alertness to how stillness is thoroughly incorporated into the practice of moving and mobility (Cresswell, 2012). As Pellegrino observes, mobility and immobility are 'neither a dualism nor an opposition rather a relational continuum' (Pellegrino, 2011, cited in Motte-Baumvol, et al., 2016, p. 2958). Bissell and Fuller (2011) narrate a story of a house in China, presented as one that is in the way of the rapid hyper-development that is sweeping the country. The government planned to construct a six-storey shopping mall over what had been a street selling snacks, and the house had become a 'nail house' – a term used in China to depict such obstacles to development. Stillness here, or staying put, has consequently become a barrier to the swirling flow of the new China (Bissell & Fuller, 2011). Stillness at times is viewed as a wasted moment or inactivity, however Bissell and Fuller argue that any amount of mobility should also include awareness and inclusion of stillness as part of the inquiry (Bissell & Fuller, 2011). Stillness is everywhere: 'a queuer in line at the bank; a moment of focus; a passenger in the departure lounge; a suspension before a sneeze; a stability of material forms that assemble; a passport photo' (Bissell & Fuller, 2011, p. 3) or the stillness that entails in moments of religious retreats (Conradson, 2011).

Immobility or the absence of physical movement reveals inequalities among several categories of people: the elderly versus younger people (Pellegrino, 2011; Pochet, 2003), women versus men (Uteng & Cresswell, 2008), poor households versus well-to-do households (Orfeuill, 2004). We saw in the examples presented above that some who took part in the practice of pilgrimage were immobile in relation to travel to the shrine,

such as Maryam's family who were incapable of making the journey to join her in her pilgrimage to Imam Reza. In the case of Maryam's family, her mobility and ability to travel to the shrine sits side by side by the immobility of her family, who are incapable of making the same trip.

As Urry has noted, anything mobile and on the move also requires elements of fixity and immobility: this relationship is dialectical, making movement and immobility dependent upon each other (Urry, 2003). For pilgrims to walk towards the shrine it is necessary to have spaces of resting: their journey would not be possible without these immobile stations. Tim Cresswell and Peter Merriman note that these spaces 'produce structural or infrastructural contexts for the practicing of mobility' and are 'agents in the production of moving' (Cresswell & Merriman 2011, p. 7). Most recently, the Internet and the discourses that pilgrims share on the Internet help to overcome immobility and isolation, or even enable new forms of mobilities such as virtual and imagined mobilities. The internet, as seen in the stories outlined in Chapter Five, makes evident that some Iranians are not capable of making the trip to Imam Reza. At the same time, it presents a platform to share their experiences of remediated online pilgrimage through the use of the shrine's website.

### ***Corporeal mobility as a way of glamorizing pilgrimage and configuring pilgrimage Identity***

As the practice of pilgrimage is enacted in relation to various (re)mediations, pilgrimage experience takes place in various spaces: in the shrine of Imam Reza, in mobile phone conversations with the Imam, through clicks and navigations of 3D photos of the shrine, in posting prayer comments, sharing photos of previous pilgrimage experience, etc. All

of these practices of pilgrimage assume some sort of (im)mobility. The pilgrims who took the trip to Mashad, and physically traveled to the shrine of Imam Reza, share photos and write about their religious experience, reinforcing their religious Shiite identity. Building religious and network capital online,<sup>88</sup> they share photos where they are standing in front of the golden dome, emphasizing the journey they took, and sharing the ground they once stood on and the space they occupied in the shrine. Movement and mobility inside the shrine, along with the ability to travel to Mashad, is one way to strengthen Shiite Muslims' identity.

Some scholars see mobility as one of the most significant forces ordering emotional and social lives (Urry, 2007), to the extent that the individual is no longer '[...] necessarily a sovereign, autonomous agent but rather the carrier and in some ways even the product of the [mobility] practices in which s/he is involved' (Banister, Schwanen, & Anable, 2012, p. 22). Mobilities make and define social identities through corporeal travel, physical movement of artifacts, and imaginative, virtual and communicative travel (Urry, 2007). In contemporary society mobilities represent power, inequality and exclusion (Cass, Shove, & Urry, 2005). Research on traveling and mobility indicates that voluntary traveling is emblematic of status and success (Urry, 2011), and corporeal mobility is glamorized through a wide range of mechanisms (Cohen and Gössling, 2015), to the extent that crossing borders becomes a precondition for high social status and the accumulation of network capital (Faist, 2013). Network capital is understood as interrelationships between social relations and social support (Carrasco & Cid-Aguayo,

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<sup>88</sup> This concept is closely connected to spiritual capital that was discussed earlier. Network capital here emphasizes the relation between pilgrims and their family and friends while spiritual capital expands our understanding of these relations in relation to objects and material artifacts of religion.

2012); a form of capital that makes 'resources available through interpersonal ties' (Wellman & Frank, 2001, p. 273).

When I interviewed Maryam (introduced in Chapter Six), one of the pilgrims at the shrine, she told me that before she left Ahvaz (her city) for Mashad, she made several phone calls to inform everyone that she was going to make a pilgrimage trip to Mashad. She even went to some of her close family and friends' homes to personally say goodbye to them, and it seemed that implicitly her act was also to inform them that she was going on a pilgrimage to Imam Reza. This act of meeting/talking with friends and family both strengthened her friendship and familial ties, and at the same time built a social and religious status for her as someone who is privileged enough and rich enough to make the trip to Mashad. Furthermore, even when she was inside the shrine she made sure to make calls with each of them so that they could say their prayers. She accumulated network capital prior to and during her pilgrimage. She also told me that she will have to buy souvenirs for each of them, indicating that at one point after her return home she will meet them again to share her pilgrimage story and strengthen more social and familial ties, while offering a piece of Mashad and her pilgrimage journey to them.

Access to communication technologies and affordable and well-connected transport, along with objects such as souvenirs from Mashad, become elements comprising network capital (see Gössling & Stavrinidi, 2015; Larsen, Axhausen, & Urry, 2006; Rettie, 2008). The increase in Internet and social network websites such as Instagram<sup>89</sup> is also

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<sup>89</sup> Instagram is a mobile photo-sharing social network that offers its users the ability to take photos directly from their mobile phone and instantly share them with friends as well as the general public. The application was first launched in October 2010 and has a reported user base of more than 150 million international subscribers (Instagram, 2013).

an important element in identity construction (see Hibbert, Dickinson, Gössling, & Curtin, 2013). These platforms are not limited in space and time, so they support a vast and continuous accumulation of religious identity and new forms of network capital (Molz, 2012). Humphreys (2012) notes that practices of cataloging and archiving personal mobility and presence within a certain place encourage intimate bonding with friends, are deployed in the service of bragging or 'showing off,' self-promotion, recording places as a memory aid, or receiving points or rewards for particular habits or actions (p. 349). This also applies to pilgrimage as a religious practice, as social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are playing a significant role in shaping Shiite identity, accumulating network capital or even glamorizing the act of pilgrimage practice.

These platforms allow for multiple media, such as texts, photographs, videos and location-based services. Below is an Instagram photo (Figure 7.2), which is shared by a pilgrim called Fatemeh on Instagram:



Figure 7.2 A pilgrim (Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BPDjyV9Byt5/> accessed March 2017)

The photo depicts a girl who is wearing a white chador and is looking at the golden gate and the golden entrance of the tomb chamber. She wrote a caption next to her photo, 'Sir this time I am your pilgrim [...] greetings [...] I cannot believe that after thirteen years I am in Mashad I will perform pilgrimage on behalf of all of you [followers of my Instagram profile] [...] I wish you could all do the same one day'. Many of her Instagram followers reacted to this photo: she received a large number of likes (101 to this date), and many responded to her photo in the form of a comment like 'I am so happy for you', 'you are so lucky', or 'please pray for me'. Evident in many of the comments is an admiration of her pilgrimage practice. She responded to all of these comments assuring

those who posted them that she would pray for them and wishing each that they could one day be present in the shrine.

Instagram not only provided a platform for Fatemeh to share a piece of her pilgrimage practice, it also allowed her to inform her friends and family (or Instagram followers) that she went to Mashad, which led to expanding her social and religious status among her peers. Furthermore, this sharing of her pilgrimage photo was an acknowledgement of her Shiite belief and identity, and the conversation initiated with regards to this photo accumulated more network capital for her, as she not only received those comments below her photo, but also was engaged in the conversation. As Van House (2009) notes regarding social media, by taking and posing for photographs we enact identities and manage impressions of ourselves both in an individual level and collective level. As these examples suggest, mobility is a practice that is social, and relational: it doesn't merely include the movement and traveling of pilgrims, but an engagement with friends and family. Mobility facilitates social networks and conversely social networks influence mobility patterns (Cass et al., 2005; Hodgson, 2012; Macdonald and Grieco, 2007; Urry, 2002, 2012a). Objects of mobilities, like the photo taken by Fatemeh, that are shared on Instagram point to the fact that pilgrimage spatialities extend beyond the boundaries of the shrine inside Mashad, and into the realm of social media.

### ***Taking selfies: Pilgrimage bodies in place***

As pilgrims share and glamorize their pilgrimage practice through social media, objects of mobility such as Instagram photos configure the spatiality of pilgrims. Some social media platforms (notably Instagram and Facebook) offer a feature where users can share the location of their photo (geotagged photos) through Location-Based Services (LBS).

On Instagram this is a feature that is shared along with other material such as a photo, a video or a caption, which explains the shared material (see previous photo). Wang and Stefanone (2013, p. 440) argue that 'presentation of place' would demonstrate one's desire to be connected to other people online. Schwartz and Halegoua (2015, p.1644) argue that the display of physical activities and experiences on social network websites are seen as particular expressions of the 'spatial self'. By spatial self they refer to a variety of instances where online users document, archive and perform aspects of their identity to others, or share their experience and/or mobility within space and place online or offline. They observe that the ways that we present ourselves in the online world are not only by textual and visual cues such as messages or photos, but also through geocoded digital traces, geographical data visualization, and maps that illustrate individuals' patterns of mobility.

Below is a photo (Figure 7.3) shared by a male pilgrim on Instagram: you can see on the top right corner of this photo that it reads 'Holy Shrine of Imam Reza'. By clicking on this location another page will open that shows a map, which in this case is a map of the city of Mashad with the location of the shrine highlighted and pinned.



Figure 7.3 selfie inside the shrine (Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BSWfPg-Aglt/?tagged=imamreza> accessed March 2017)

Instagram 'check in' is an extension of a pilgrim's pilgrimage experience online. This part of pilgrimage encodes the unique meaning of location, beyond the pilgrim's expressed personal sentiments. Not only LBS but also using hashtags (#) on Instagram will help the owner of the photo to gain more visibility and popularity; the photos, the geotagged locations, the comments underneath the photos and the hashtags are all sources of mobility capital that are interwoven with the pilgrimage experience. The pilgrim in Figure 7.3, whose name is Mohammad Reza, uses these hashtags for this particular photo:

#Imam #Reza#Holy #Shrine #Schrine #ImamReza#HolyShrine #ImamRezaHolyShrine#Paradise #Night #Nacht #Sky #Himmel#Smile #Lächeln #Khorasan #Xorasan#Razavi #Mashhad #Selfie #2017.

Clicking on each of these hashtags will lead to a separate page, which will show all of the other photos shared by Instagram users that use this same hashtag for their photos. Many pilgrims make considerable efforts to belong to social network websites to sustain their religious identities, and corporeal travel in the form of traveling to Mashhad for the purpose of performing pilgrimage, along with documenting their experience and the location of the pilgrimage site through these digital-physical traces, are seen as a mechanism enabling social connectedness, maintaining social networks, and providing social status. It should be noted that not all photos shared on Mohammad Reza's Instagram profile are geotagged (tagging your photos with location is completely voluntary and self-initiated). Hence locating one's spatial self is an act that is an intentional and sociocultural practice of self-presentation that results in dynamic, curated and at times personal narratives about individual representations of pilgrimage mobility on Instagram. In the examples above both of the photos shared emphasize Imam Reza's shrine, revealing traces of pilgrimage mobility. Frith (2012) observes that these curated performances often take place through location-based social media and categorizes some of these practices as 'presenting an idealized self to others' (Frith, 2012 cited in Schwartz and Halegoua, 2015, p.11). The parts that pilgrims share from their trips to Mashhad are filtered, choreographed displays of pilgrimage mobility and their experience of the shrine, which play a significant role in identity performance, as well as in sociability and bonding with their peers.

Couldry and McCarthy (2004, p. 8) write of applications like Instagram: 'The emerging picture is not the collapse of place [...] but instead the more subtle integration of our interaction with other places and agents into the flow of our everyday practice and experience.' It follows from this view, and the photos shared from pilgrims, that the character of places such as the shrine of Imam Reza ceases to be coherent, bounded and fixed, and instead is open, fluid, dynamic and socially configured. As Massey notes, rather than thinking of places as areas with boundaries around them, places:

Can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings. [...] And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extraverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local (Massey, 1993, p. 66).

Mobile phones and their advanced capabilities allow pilgrims to take photos of themselves and the shrine and share them in social media, combining digital spaces with physical ones – what De Souza e Silva (de Souza e Silva, 2011, p.118) refer to as 'hybrid space'. It appears that mobile media and mobile applications such as Instagram are altering the way pilgrims relate to religious sites such as the shrine and transforming their experience of place. As seen in the above photos these spaces are embodied, and pilgrims are part of the space, as they actively take part in the way that they want both the space and themselves to be visible. In the case of Fatemeh, it seemed that she wanted to keep her privacy since she did not show her face and is only sharing her back, but at the same time she is displaying her white chador and emphasizing her direction towards the shrine in the way that she is standing. On the other hand, Mohammad Reza is not concerned with privacy, as the photo not only shows him facing the camera, sitting comfortably on the courtyard behind the shrine, it also depicts other pilgrims sitting

next to him. Such practices generate subjectivities: actions that simultaneously shape and inscribe the landscape with social identities and create a sense of belonging (Benson & Jackson, 2012, p. 794).

Aaron (2015) notes that mobility, understood as both physical and digital, opens up novel considerations of the link between our digital devices and the physical spaces through which we travel. Furthermore, Farman (2013) argues that, 'since the two realms are so intertwined, the embodied practice of space on mobile networks strongly reinforces our sense of embodiment in the material sphere' (p. 23). This consideration extends to selfies, which seek to represent the self as embodied in certain spaces. Both Fatemeh and Mohammad Reza are 'digital wayfarers', whose trajectories entangle 'online and offline as they move through the weather, and the air, with the ground underfoot and surrounded by people and things, while also traversing digital maps, social networking sites, and other elements' (Hjorth & Pink, 2014, p. 45). The relationship between a locative technology i.e. Instagram, and rhetorical expression illuminates how both self and space are presented, and how spaces are inhabited by pilgrims, shedding light on the nexus of pilgrim, public space, locative technology and social networks. Slack (2012, p. 154) contends that selfies act as 'enunciations' of these elements. Taking a selfie can be seen as a form of not only self-presentation but also as place expression: in other words, 'selfies visualize the user as emplaced within the physical surroundings and as digitally embedded into social networks. To take a selfie is to mark the temporal and spatial existence of the networked user' (Aaron, 2015, p. 163). Below is another selfie taken inside the shrine (Figure 7.4), while showing another pilgrim in the background taking a selfie of himself:



Figure 7.4 Selfie inside the shrine (Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BS33etKly6X/> accessed April 2017)

When it comes to sharing photos on Instagram within the space of pilgrimage, many pilgrims do not include themselves as the center of the photo as was the case in the previous examples. Some pilgrims are engaged in identity construction and place-making in a different way. For example, below (Figure 7.5) is a geotagged photo that Kowsar, a pilgrim, took in the courtyard of the shrine. The photo shows the golden dome and minaret in the background, she is holding a small photograph of her deceased father between her fingers. The next figure (7.6) shows another geotagged photo shared by Mohsen, a father who has a sick daughter. He made the trip to Mashad to seek healing for his daughter who is in the hospital, and the selfie that he took shows his hand holding his phone with a photo of his daughter lying in the hospital bed. The caption of the photo reads: 'Imam Reza, just a glance of you [at my daughter] is enough

to make a miracle and separate Farideh [the daughter] from the hospital bed after eight months' (Instagram, 2017). The photos that are shared on Instagram shows part of the pilgrims' body (hand) and a photo of their beloved ones. The photos they carry are objects of mobility that mediate the pilgrims' experience of pilgrimage.



Figure 7.5 Taking a photo of a deceased father (Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BS8i79EFF0j/> accessed April 2017)



Figure 7.6 taking a sick daughter photo to the shrine (Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/BSy\\_hs9gb3Y/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BSy_hs9gb3Y/) accessed April 2017)

Both photos above (Figure 7.5 and 7.6) depict not only the spatial relationship that pilgrims have with the shrine but with other members of their family, and with their mobile devices.

## Conclusion

This chapter began with approaches to understanding (im)mobilities that challenge the long-standing view on the stability and place-ness of societies. On this view, pilgrimage includes the re-orientation and travelling of both the mind and body, and the movement of people, ideas and objects. In many pilgrimages, this experience is performed and mediated through the infrastructure of the road and walking, hence the road becomes as important as the destination, not just a place of passing but a space where pilgrimage

is enacted. Pilgrims gain a feeling of closeness to Imam Reza through the embodied act of walking towards the shrine. Walking towards the shrine both reflects and reinforces Islamic religious power. The path to Imam Reza's shrine creates a community-on-the-road in which pilgrims become closer not only to other pilgrims but also non-pilgrims that they cross path with. Objects play an integral role in pilgrimage to Imam Reza as well; as gifts, souvenirs, online pilgrimage requests, or even a pilgrim who performs pilgrimage on behalf of someone else (whether online or inside the shrine) act as objects of pilgrimage mobility. Pilgrimage mobility is practiced mobility which is diverse and multiple; it includes corporeal bodily movement, infrastructures, and imaginative and discursive practices.

Stillness and immobility are thoroughly incorporated in pilgrimage as well. Immobility highlights inequalities between members of the Iranian Shiite community, as some are able to travel to the shrine and some are incapable of doing so. In the contemporary moment ICTs such as the internet help some Shiites to overcome their immobility and enable them to practice pilgrimage in the form of a virtual or imagined mobility. These new modes of pilgrimage mobility reinforce religious Shiite identity and build network capital, such as when pilgrims share the photos of their pilgrimage journey or communicate with their friends and family with regards to their pilgrimage experience. This act of sharing entails a kind of bragging or 'showing off' which further indicates the inequalities that are at play between people who are capable of traveling to Mashad and those who are not. Furthermore, the sharing of photos on Instagram are accompanied by a particular expression of the spatial self and an expansion of the pilgrimage experience through the medium of the Internet. These photos are accompanied by comments from friends and family, and hashtags that enable the

pilgrim to get more visibility for his/her photos online. These are all elements that can be viewed as mobility capital, aspects of sociotechnical configurations that mediate pilgrimage and pilgrimage spatialities.

Selfies and photos shared on Instagram alter the way pilgrims relate to the shrine of Imam Reza and transform their experience of place, as their pilgrimage experience and spatiality is extended to the Internet. In this respect, the shrine of Imam Reza is continually reproduced and reconfigured, and always in the process of becoming something other. This configuration of space is done by pilgrims imprinting the space with patterns of their own lived experience of pilgrimage, while at the same time these place-making practices create a sense of belonging and identity. The cases that were explored in this chapter illuminated how both the pilgrims and the spaces that they inhabit are shaped, shedding light on the nexus of pilgrim, public space, locative technology and social network websites.

## ***Chapter Eight: Conclusion***

This thesis contributes to the growing literature within STS that takes human/technology relations as a focal point in order to understand certain practices. I have taken the concept of remediation to examine not only how humans and technologies are mutually shaped and deeply implicated in one another's existence, but also how a certain religious practice is performed. The result is an ethnography of remediated pilgrimage with a specific focus on ICT use among Shiite Iranians. During my research, I found the concept of remediation very useful to describe the variety of ways that pilgrimage is practiced. Mediation is an analytical tool which places relationality at the center of the investigation, because asking how pilgrimage is mediated sheds light on the relation between the social and the technological and how they are configured in interaction. Mediation is not a new phenomenon in religious pilgrimage; in the case of Imam Reza, for example, pilgrimage has always been mediated through the built artifact of the shrine, religious texts, cultural rituals and discourses. However, as I have shown, today the practice is being remediated through a series of ICTs. When ICTs enter the scene, they reinforce certain configurations and relations while loosening up others, or even rendering some contexts of pilgrimage practices completely obsolete. My analysis is founded on the argument that sociotechnical configurations are inseparable from the practice of pilgrimage; in other words, this practice is mediated and remediated through the tightly folded/interwoven relationship between the social beings involved and the technologies; in this case particularly, ICTs.

I conducted this research to enable a deeper and richer understanding of the continuities and changes in contemporary engagement with ICT in religious pilgrimage practices, including the embodied, situated interactions and relations of those

immediately implicated in the configurations that remediate pilgrimage, and the material practices and cultural/religious imaginaries that create and articulate those arrangements. In Chapter Two I set out the theoretical foundations on which my research is based, starting with the centrality of material agency in our understanding of people's interactions with technology. Inspired by STS and ANT, agency is understood to be multiple and distributed. This was evident through the analysis of my empirical materials; for example, when pilgrims call the shrine to talk to Imam Reza, it is the phone and the operator that work together to remediate the shrine and connect the pilgrims to the Imam. The phone and the operator are multiple agencies, and together with the caller and the shrine they form the sociotechnical configuration that enacts pilgrimage. I argue that when remediated pilgrimage practices are continually in transformation, remediations become less coherent, less stable. They can be thought of as 'distributed and transitory ontologies' (Lepawsky & Mather, 2011, p. 247). The question of what happens to an established and traditional pilgrimage practice that no longer holds its form and status is particular to the situation in which it is embedded today; it involves the adherence of historical technologies and incorporation of new ones into the practice by the social beings who engage with the practice. In Iran when most people have access to the Internet and mobile phones, and when travel costs to Mashad are high, it makes sense to rely on ICTs and what they can offer to practice pilgrimage. ICTs demonstrate how remediation is not solely a semiotic process, but one that is sociotechnical.

Remediation represents various transformative moments, where ICTs open up in a range of interesting ways. For example, handsets of landline phones are normally held close to someone's ears in order for them to communicate with another person; in Imam

Reza's shrine they become transformed into devices that are held towards the golden dome. Telephones become visible when the phone calls are initiated, but then become an invisible or absent part of a sociotechnical configuration that remediates the shrine and a connection to Imam Reza. Certain agencies in the configuration are required to go invisible to materialize the sacred. These material agencies are reproduced in the process of remediation and take on new meanings and forms.

In Chapter Three, I outline the context for the thesis with an emphasis on pilgrimage, and more specifically pilgrimage to Imam Reza. Pilgrimage is expected to be performed by all Muslims; in Iran, Shiites believe that practicing pilgrimage will bring *brakat* or blessings in to their lives. What may make *ziyarat* different from other pilgrimages is that, for Shiites, *ziyarat* (although still very important) is not limited to being physically present inside a shrine; a journey of the heart and mind is counted as an authentic pilgrimage practice. This belief, along with Astan Quds' development of various digital pilgrimage platforms, paved the way for Iranians to embrace novel ways of experiencing remediated pilgrimage. In Chapter Four I investigated remediated pilgrimage in relation to the use of telephones as means of connecting to the shrine. Three modes of connection were considered; landline phones, mobile phones, and an automated phone system. Sound plays an integral part in these modes of pilgrimage; the sounds from inside the shrine that are heard on the phone enable pilgrims to escape their current spatial constraints and transport themselves imaginatively to the shrine. At times this sound is 'engineered' with a specific quality and pitch in order to reproduce the spaces inside the shrine for the pilgrim. The chapter also discusses Muslims who are caught up in clashing narratives with regards to calling the shrine. Although there is censorship

involved, what the Internet offers, and what the online discussions depict, is a democratization of religious views and a new group of Muslim interpreters.

In Chapter Five I follow pilgrimage practices on the Internet, tracing the creation and transformation of two online platforms, as well as one which failed to mediate pilgrimage. Pilgrims are co-designers of these platforms, as they actively take part and convey their desires to the website managers. As a result, their pilgrimage experience may include communication with both Imam Reza and the website managers, making this form of remediated pilgrimage very different from that experienced inside the shrine or even over the phone. In their use of ICTs pilgrims do not simply copy institutional religious dogma and scripts, but rather they have an active and reflexive role in shaping, negotiating and configuring their own practices. Shiite pilgrims are in this sense actively and continually being made and remade in their engagement with technology.

Absence is continually performed in online pilgrimage platforms. For example, pilgrims notice the absence of audio or videos, or acknowledge their own absence from the shrine. These expressions of absence illustrate how virtual proximity is perceived, and how physical propinquity and co-presence are still important factors in pilgrimage practice. In Chapter Six, drawing on Sara Ahmed (2004), I investigated what emotions do in pilgrimage, and how they circulate between and connect pilgrims' bodies. In remediated pilgrimage 'affective fields' are enacted; they are generated in the relation between subjects and objects, such as in the relation between an Iraqi pilgrim and VR glasses, both of which have affective potentialities. Other bodies who are drawn into this affective field are also impacted as emotions do not reside in individual pilgrims' bodies but continually stick to, circulate among, orient and reorient pilgrims. Affective

fields continue through time and space, connecting more bodies and leading to greater emotionality, as when the Iraqi pilgrim's video was shared in social media, other bodies were drawn into its affective field, and many experienced their own emotional pilgrimage practice by leaving prayer comments under the video. This points to not only the performativity of remediated pilgrimage but also to its longevity, as even after a pilgrim has completed their own practice, it may continue to live and emotionally impact others. This persistence is made possible by ICTs and their capacity to document pilgrimage practice online.

Affective fields enacted in remediated pilgrimage thicken the threads that weave together a collectivity; they bring solidarity among Shiite Muslims reinforcing their religious identity. In Chapter Seven, I discuss remediated pilgrimage with a focus on (im)mobilities and moorings. Diverse mobilities are examined, including imaginative mobility and corporeal/physical mobility. Physical pain and fatigue during pilgrimage is correlated with a heightened connection to Imam Reza; this was the case for pilgrims walking to Mashad. Walking on the road towards the shrine is a way for pilgrims to 'pray through their feet' (Ingold, 2004, p. 332), as in walking pilgrims feel the presence of Imam Reza and the road then becomes not a space of passing, but a space where pilgrimage is lived. Pilgrimage movements necessitate 'spatial fixes' (Harvey [1982] 2007), however, or objects of mobility that become part of the pilgrimage journey, such as the road, a prayer on behalf of someone else, or a pilgrimage photo that is shared in social media. Objects of mobility delineate who is capable of taking the physical journey to the shrine and who is not, who is richer and who is poorer. They illustrate that mobility and immobility exist not as a dualism nor as an opposition but instead a relational continuum (Pellegrino, 2011). Objects of mobility such as photos shared on Instagram

glamorize the corporeal journey to the shrine. Some pilgrims add their location with their photos, and these digital-physical traces indicate the spatial self, acting as self-presentation but also as an expression of place. Following these connections provides further evidence that remediated pilgrimage is an experience that is not stable but rather always in the making.

Today pilgrimage has become a participatory practice in which pilgrims inside the shrine let their friends and family join in their practice by calling them on their phones and offering to mediate their prayers to Imam Reza. Letting others into your practice is also done by taking photos of yourself (a selfie) or your surroundings and sharing them on social media. I discussed in Chapter Seven how sharing photos on Instagram glamorizes one's experience, expands the pilgrim's social and religious status among friends and family, and further extends pilgrimage spatiality beyond the boundaries of the shrine. Sharing photos is at times accompanied by 'checking in' on Instagram or using hashtags (#), which for pilgrims indicates an expression of a 'spatial self', as well as a means to gain more visibility and popularity. Inside the shrine prayer is no longer a purely private religious activity that entails connection to Imam Reza. Rather, the emergent sociotechnical configurations that are enacted bring about a curated pilgrimage practice that includes presenting an idealized pilgrim self to others and sharing the experience with friends and family.

Several continuities and discontinuities of the practice of pilgrimage were captured by analyzing different modes of pilgrimage remediation. Inside the shrine, pilgrimage is enacted mostly through touching and kissing the walls and doors of the shrine. When the remediating technology is the phone, once prayers are spoken the pilgrimage is done, and the end of the phone call marks its end. This is not the same with remediated

pilgrimage that is experienced online, as when prayers are written the experience of pilgrimage does not end when the pilgrim is done typing and he/she submits his/her prayers. Rather, there is waiting involved and an anticipation for the prayers to be made publicly available online. Until the prayer appears publicly, pilgrimage is not considered as complete. The delay for prayers to appear on the platform often causes frustration for pilgrims, as it is interpreted to mean that Imam Reza will not see the prayers and hence prayers may not get answered. Pilgrimage enacted through ICTs, in sum, involves both new continuities and new discontinuities.

Chapters Four to Six revealed that sound in particular plays an integral role in remediating pilgrimage; when the agency of sound is present, pilgrims who are calling the shrine or watching videos broadcast from the shrine feel a deeper connection to the Imam. At the same time, the voice of the pilgrim who is not present in the shrine becomes their vehicle to connect themselves to the Imam. As the voice becomes filled with emotions the pilgrim becomes his/her voice, and the voice becomes an audio portrait. This story is different when pilgrimage is enacted online, when pilgrims write and share their prayers. In this mode of connection, pilgrimage is enacted as written words, emotions are expressed in writing, and the prayers are shared and made public. At the same time, because pilgrims can post prayers anonymously the content of prayers become more personal. When voice becomes the means to experience pilgrimage, pilgrims are concerned and at times become uncomfortable with the presence of others (such as the shrine operators) who can eavesdrop on their prayers. When typing becomes the means to experience pilgrimage, pilgrims share their deepest and most private matters in life; not only they do not appear to care about others reading them, they also have the option to engage in others' prayers by 'liking' their prayers. In both

cases prayers can be spoken or written anonymously, but the ways in which pilgrims experience their prayers differs depending on which technology is involved. ICT use brings about a diverse enactment of pilgrimage prayers, as remediated pilgrimage can be practiced either as a fully private and individualized practice, or as a communicative and social endeavor.

In each of the cases discussed there is a reconfiguration of social actors and technologies that both reproduces and transforms pilgrimage practice. The findings in this thesis developed as a critique of the limitations posed by analyses of religion which foreground institutions and organizations rather than the actual lived experience of pilgrims. The approach taken here is similar to STS scholars and their view on science, as knowledge configured through an arrangement of human and material artifacts. Similarly, remediated pilgrimage illustrates that the practice of pilgrimage is not a fixed, coherent set of prescriptions about belief and practices that are formulated and imposed by religious institutions and reproduced by pilgrims, but instead is a complex practice continuously transformed in its specific enactments. These stories of pilgrimage's remediation attest to the agencies of specific sociotechnical configurations and how pilgrims make sense of them, as well as how pilgrims themselves are refigured.

### ***A new perspective on sound, absence, emotion and (im)mobility***

This thesis makes its theoretical contribution in relation to the four analytic themes of sound, absence, emotion, and (im)mobility. I have argued that these elements are central to the practice of remediated pilgrimage and are interwoven into pilgrims' experience of connecting to Imam Reza through the use of ICTs. This research offers an expanded understanding of these aspects of pilgrimage experience that can be useful for the analysis of other remediated practices.

The deployment of sound reproducing technology establishes links to the shrine as a physical space that is remediated through ICTs. Sound media can be mixed with visual aids or other sensory features. But a connection to a particular remediated space can also be established without any visual aids, simply through hearing sounds. When sonic spaces are remediated, listening becomes the tool which places pilgrims imaginatively into that space. The vibrations of sound have the capacity to immediately change pilgrims' bodies, reconfiguring them in a way that influences their remediated practices and experiences. As a result, these vibrations afford some form of sonic presence, one that enables an apparently rich experience.

Sound in itself is made by the material (sonic objects) and social configurations that are entangled in a particular space. A servant who is sweeping the floor is contributing in shaping the sonic quality of that space. At the same time the technologies that remediate sound produce the acoustics of a space in a way that differs from sound that is configured more directly in a physical space. Microphones might be placed at a certain location within a space, which brings sound with a particular loudness and pitch to the ears of listeners. Hearing the sounds within a space through mobile phones configures that space in ways that are different from how that place is perceived from someone who is physically present in that space. Sound comes to play a key role in configuring spaces, and in particular religious and spiritual ones; its transmission and deployment through ICTs is performative. Furthermore, these remediated sonic spaces bridge the diasporic gap that separates pilgrims from centers and spaces that are important to them, making them feel that they are present inside those spaces. Sound is a deeply sociotechnical configuration, interwoven with human agencies including the engineers that make its transmission possible and those who listen. It is also linked with sonic

objects such as technological devices that configure sound within a space or take part in the transmission of sound. The study of sound in relation to sonic spaces/objects and social beings who listen, opens up new avenues to a deeper understanding of not only the elements that configure sound but also the remediated practices that are performed in sonic spatialities.

Remediation was a concept that brought to the fore as well the performative role of absence. Absence has agency and comes to presence in a sociotechnical configuration that gives absence existence. Absences are then embodied, performed, texturized, enacted, emotional, spatial, shared, negotiated and remembered. Absence is about what is missing; this can be lack of mobility, or lack of certain material objects such as sound or videos, or of other social actors. The expressions of absence illustrate how virtual proximity is perceived, and how physical co-presence remains a significant factor when certain places are remediated through ICTs. An exploration of absences/presences along with (im)mobility thus confirms that the 'compulsion of proximity' (Boden and Molotch, 1994) is still central to human practices, but also how remediated practices offer some features of co-presence in relation to ICTs that are generated through virtual proximities.

When there is attachment to certain places, or material objects, emotions circulate and stick. My analysis in this thesis was based on Sara Ahmed's theory of emotion; she argues that emotions do things, they align individuals and communities (2000, 2004, 2010). As emotions are enacted in relations between social bodies and material/technological objects, emotions do not reside either in individuals or material/technological artefacts, but rather move between them. In a remediated practice enacted by ICTs, emotions intensify and stretch through time and space. This

may lead to (dis)orienting bodies away from or towards other bodies and objects and into a shared way of being and performing. The affordances of certain forms of ICTs such as online comments generate an emotional repertoire. This analysis goes against some scholars who have argued for the loss of emotionality and the 'waning effect of affect' (Jameson, 1990; Featherstone, 2010). With the emergence of new electronic media, it has become evident that the digital world is infused with emotions. The findings of this thesis, particularly my analysis of affective fields, point us to the study of how an 'emotional habitus' takes shape among a group of people, and how emotions circulate within and among bodies as they interact with different technologies in time and space.

My analysis of (im)mobility took inspiration from several scholars in the mobility paradigm. This analytical tool focuses on movement and mobility but at the same time stillness and the state of being immobile. In this thesis I expanded this concept by examining a variety of movement, such as imaginative movement or, in the case of remediated pilgrimage, a journey of the heart, along with micro movements that takes place in relation to the use of ICTs. Adopting a broad sense of mobility enabled me to attend to how religious practitioners engage in documenting, curating and sharing their experience and the place that they inhabit during pilgrimage, while also managing their spatial self and promoting their self-image.

I paid equal attention to immobility, which included not only immobile bodies but also objects and infrastructure that are stable and fixed but are part of movement and mobility. I argue that any exploration of (im)mobility should consider macro and micro movements of individuals and objects and equally pay attention to fixity and moorings, such as objects and infrastructure. Paying attention to objects of (im)mobility sheds

further light on our understanding of what it means to be on the move, or unable to move. Objects of mobility, as an intrinsic part of any form of mobility, are shown in this research to include bodies who perform a certain practice (such as pilgrimage prayers) on behalf of someone else. Objects of mobilities also illustrate who is capable or incapable of moving, and how each movement in relation to a particular remediated practice can take on different meanings and forms depending on the objects and sociotechnical configurations involved.

Within this paradigm places, and in particular remediated places, are seen as places of movement; they are places that are not fixed and stable but enacted, diverse, multiple, fluid and dynamic. As a result, places become not a space of passing but a space where certain practices are lived, enacted and performed. ICT use not only shapes remediated practices (and at times acts as a way of glamorizing the practice, or a way of showing off or self-promotion) but also configures individual's spatiality and connects them to their friends and family. Online tools such as social media remediate individuals' locations; these digital-physical 'comobilities' (Southern, 2012) or co-existences become a mechanism that enacts social connectedness between online users and their online followers. Taking (im)mobilities as enacted as part of a sociotechnical configuration that remediates a certain practice draws our focus to the entanglement of physical, virtual and communicative (im)mobilities. As a result of the sharing of mobility spaces in social media, spatialities extend beyond the boundaries of the physical and into the realm of digital and social media.

### ***Iran as a country that is open to diverse and multiple ways of practicing pilgrimage***

Iran is a country which is home to the majority of Shiites in the world, and religion is central to many Iranian lives. Since the Islamic revolution, the country has further embraced Islamic religiosity, encouraging its citizens to practice religion including visitations to Imams' shrines. Remediation is intrinsically entangled with globalization, modernity, mobility, and the nation's economic state and migration. This thesis is meant to be a contribution to addressing these issues, which have only rarely been the object of systematic empirical or theoretical investigation in the study of religious practice and its linkages with media studies as part of migration, transnational ties and global networks.

One might think that the 'lived religion' experienced by Shiite Iranians would be tightly linked to their religious teachings and traditional ways of performing pilgrimage, but in practice this becomes more complex. This thesis then acts as a counter to approaches that foreground religious institutions rather than the actual experience of religious practitioners, along with perspectives which argue that ICT use will decrease religiosity among religious practitioners. The Shiites who are described in this study do not simply copy established, traditional and institutional religious dogma or script, but rather they have an active and reflexive role in shaping, negotiating, and reconfiguring their own pilgrimage practice. For them one particular platform design may connect them to Imam Reza, while another does not; they actively take part in the shaping of this connection. The word pilgrimage in itself does not capture the reconfigurations and transformation of the practice, however remediated pilgrimage points to the practice's various ontological enactments. I have used remediation as an analytical tool to map and trace

different versions and reproductions of pilgrimage practice. Each remediation mobilizes a different kind of materials and technologies, as well as different social actors who operate in various ways. Pilgrimage practice in this sense is not a single and stable reality, it is multiple, emergent, historically contingent, continuously transformative and varied. I argue that in exploring remediated pilgrimage we need to trace it through these contingencies and complexities. By exploring these different enactments and their histories, we can also learn something about today's Iranian Shiite thought. The stories explored in this research point to the creativity and openness of Iranians to accommodate and reshape technologies for their religious needs.

### ***Areas for future research***

The data for this research was gathered from 2014 to 2016. It is evident from the work done in this thesis that remediated pilgrimage is an area of continuing change. With this in mind, future research would need to consider tracking new configurations and emergent modes of remediation. With the rapid changes and growth in media, and in particular ICTs, today Shiite Muslims in Iran and elsewhere may already have adopted new ways of experiencing pilgrimage. Moreover, the research conducted in this thesis did not take into consideration factors such as gender, age and education; considering these factors alongside the transformations of the practice would expand our understanding of remediated pilgrimage.

This thesis explored briefly opened up a discussion on the role of religious authorities in remediated pilgrimage. A thorough analysis of this topic, one which delves deeper into the implications of ICTs and the challenges that remediation poses to religious authority and dogma, would expand our understanding of how pilgrimage is

experienced today, and highlight where different religious denominations stand with regards to embracing technology, or alternatively discouraging practitioners from deploying ICTs in their religious practice.

Finally, this research was conducted in the context of Iran and Shiite Muslims, which opens the question of how remediated pilgrimage is experienced in other contexts and religious sites. For example, in Hinduism do pilgrims adopt any technologies when performing pilgrimage to Kumbh Mela, and if they do how do sound, absence, emotions, and (im)mobility impact religious bodies, their sense of presence and closeness to the shrine?

On a final note, any ethnographic enquiry which places performativity at its center, and attempts to understand how practices are done and in particular how religion is lived and experienced, benefits by using mediation as an analytical tool, since this concept forces the researcher to place relationality at the center of his/her work. Asking how a certain practice is remediated through ICTs sheds light not only on the visible relations and interactions between the human and the technological, but also on aspects of those relations that may have previously been overlooked or invisible. Furthermore, this method of enquiry is rooted in the argument that sociotechnical configurations are an inseparable part of modern everyday religious practices. Within the context of religion, this becomes more interesting as remediated practices will involve the adherence of historical and traditional technologies and artifacts as well as the incorporation of new digital technologies. A focus on remediation consequently encourages the researcher to trace the continuous transformations of religious practices across changing technologies and over time.

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فصلنامه سیاست های راهبردی و کلان ،گردشگری مذهبی و عوامل موثر بر آن ، آقاجانی معصومه، فراهانی فرد سعید

- (، : دوره ۳، شماره ۹؛ از صفحه ۴۳ تا صفحه ۶۶. ۱۳۹۴ (مطالعه موردی ایران)، )
- تحلیل کارکردی گردشگری مذهبی در ایران (۱۳۹۳)، فیروزجاییان علی اصغر، یوسفی ندا، میرمحمدتبار سیداحمد  
۸. (فرا تحلیلی از تحقیقات موجود)، برنامه ریزی و توسعه گردشگری : دوره ۳، شماره  
تدوین راهکارهای عملیاتی برای تحقق گردشگری مجازی با تأکید بر محورهای شهر ایرانی اسلامی (نمونه موردی: شهر  
مشهد  
عاطفه صداقتی، مهسا، (۱۳۹۳) ششمین کنفرانس ملی برنامه ریزی و مدیریت شهری با تأکید بر مؤلفه‌های شهر اسلامی،  
عسگری قوامی
- متن فضایی زیارت امام رضا (۱۳۹۱) مهدی سقایی؛ فرامرز نودهی؛ زهره جوانبخت قهفرخی؛ سید محمدباقر طباطبای، )  
(ع)، مطالعات اجتماعی ایران، مقاله ۵، دوره ۶۶ [377]، صفحه ۱۰۸-۸۷.
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## Appendix

This section includes all the websites that appear in the thesis with a short description on each. The list is alphabetical.

1. Ajammc.com: Ajam Media Collective was launched in 2011 by a group of graduate students. It is an online space devoted to analyzing society and culture across the lands spanning from Turkey in the East across Iraq, the Caucasus, and Iran and into Central Asia, Afghanistan, and South Asia.
2. Alef.ir: It is a non-governmental popular news website. Started in 2006. Users are allowed to leave comments under each article, however many comments get censored and deleted.
3. Arsannews.ir: An online news website which belongs to the city of Arsanjan, Iran. The website is no longer available.
4. Article.tebyan.net: Tebyan is a cultural and information institution established on September 11, 2001 to disseminate information on religious affairs, introduce rich Islamic culture and promote Islamic viewpoints through information technology. The center officially started Web work in 2002.
5. Asteya.blogfa.com: An Iranian blog written by Maryam about a range of topics including religion and her daily experiences.
6. Bafghkhabar.ir: An Iranian news website with a focus on the promotion of Islam and Shiism.
7. Britannica.com: An online encyclopedia, also known as a global digital media company with products that promote knowledge and learning.
8. Cloob.com: An Iranian social network website. Established in January 2005.
9. Damadam.ir: An Iranian news website that is discontinued.

10. Dana.ir: An Iranian news website. The website is currently not loadable.
11. En.mashhad.ir: Information Technology and Communication Organization of Mashhad Municipality. Started in 2011. This website that is run by Mashad's municipality gives a thorough information about the city including places to visit in Mashad.
12. Facebook.com: An American online social media, launched in 2004.
13. Factsanddetails.com: A project started in 1990s by a teacher/writer who writes about different countries.
14. Forum.roq.ir: An Islamic Iranian Forum, in which users can discuss various Islamic topics, write and share about different aspects of Islam.
15. Hammihan.com: An Iranians social network website, established in 2005, the website claims it gets 3 million visitors each month
16. Hoseynienet.ir: It was launched in 2011, one of the main goals of the website is to promote Islam, with a specific focus on Imam Hossein (prophet Muhammad's grandson).
17. Imamreza.tv: The first website to offer remediated pilgrimage experience this website is decommissioned and is no longer in use.
18. Independent.co.uk: A British online newspaper established in 1986.
19. Instagram.com: A photo and video sharing social network site owned by Facebook Inc. It was launched in 2010.
20. Islamireligion.com: An online platform. It is a Islamic Blog. Which began in 2017 as a concept to establish a common ground for Muslim Ummah. In order to bring attention to issues faced by Muslims in the Globe.
21. Khbartar.blog.ir: A weblog about family, marriage and social issues. Questions are raised by uses and other users and members of the website will discuss and offer answers. The website includes many religious topics and discussions.

22. Khouznews.ir: News website that belongs to the state of Khouzestan, Iran. Topics of coverage include: Photo, Iran and the world, sport, culture, etc.
23. Morahem.com: An Iranian news website which covers a wide range of topics ranging from political news and technology to cooking and poetry.
24. Nasrtv.com: Nasr web tv channel. Started in 2011. It is a high quality video-based news website that covers a wide range of topics, and supports multiple languages.
25. News.aqr.ir: This website belongs to Astan Quds Razavi's General Office of Public Relations. It contains a photo section of the shrine, a video section which covers stories with regards to the shrine and Imam Reza, a news section to cover news on the shrine. This website has links to razavivt.aqr.ir.
26. News.hajj.ir: Hajj news website is a Supreme Leader's (Khamenei) Representative Office in Hajj and Pilgrimage Affairs. It supports multiple languages and the main topics are Hajj and pilgrimage.
27. Orujtravel.com: An Iranian travel agency website which includes information of different areas to visit in Iran, the website is currently down.
28. Pewforum.org: Pew Research Center. It is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world. they conduct public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research. We do not take policy positions.
29. Pinterest.com: Is a web and mobile application company that operates a software system designed to discover information on the World Wide Web, mainly using images and on a shorter scale, GIFs and videos.
30. Razavi.aqr.ir: One of the main websites of Imam Reza which offers remediated pilgrimage. Own and managed by Astan Quds Razavi.

31. Rjbastian.wordpress.com: Ros and John's blog, they write about their trips and share photos of those trips.
32. Sacredsites.com: Places of peace and power. This website is managed by Martin Gray who is a photographer of sacred architecture and pilgrimage. The website contains photos and information on pilgrimage sites across the globe.
33. Sehrane.mihanblog.com: Saeed Ezati's weblog, his blog posts are mostly religious about Islam and Shiism. He is a supporter of the Iranians revolution and the current leader of Iran, Khamenei.
34. Tasnimnews.com: An online news agency, covering a wide variety of political, social, economic and international subjects. Defending the Islamic Revolution against negative media propaganda campaign and providing readers with realities on the ground about Iran and Islam, especially current wave of the Islamic Awakening in the region are top on their agenda in Tasnim News Agency.
35. Tripadvisor.com: A travel website. The website services are free to users, who provide most of the content, and the website is supported by a hotel booking facility and an advertising business model.
36. Urbanduniya.com: The website of Tim Blight, a traveller, author, photographer and blogger. His blog, features travel, photography, food, coffee, entertainment, opinions and more. It was established in 2013.
37. Wjs.com: Wall Street Journal. A US-based English language daily newspaper and website.
38. Youtube.com: A video sharing website. Created in February 2005.