A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: MEDIA AND RELIGION IN THE MIDDLE EAST (WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON IRAN)

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Religion and new media are two important factors in contemporary Middle Eastern societies. Media is seen as a relatively newcomer while religion has been and remains an old and core component of the fabric of societies in this region. This article is an attempt to examine the encounter of these two phenomena in the Middle East. It will try to explore the variety of ways by which new media have served religion both positively and negatively, and how religion has taken position for and against media in Middle Eastern countries in general and in the Iranian case in particular. It is also the purpose of this article to look at the different aspects of this relationship between media and religion, analyzing how one affected the other, and how this interaction affected society. It is argued that the outcome of the interaction between religion and media has had a great impact on shaping the social and political culture of the countries in this region including Iran. The dimensions of this impact will determine the outcome of the clash between modernity and tradition in the region.

Keywords: Religion, Media, Middle East, Iran, Internet, Satellite Television

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INTRODUCTION

During the past few decades the Middle East has been the subject of numerous studies and research projects, most of them concentrated on the economic and political aspects of Middle Eastern problems covering a wide range of issues from the political structure of the states in this region to analyzing the roots of conflicts and wars between countries in this part of the world. However, there are still a number of areas to which less attention has been paid. Among these subjects is the role of religion, its position in society, and its relationship with other elements in society including media. The subject of this article will be the relationship between religion and media in the Middle East with a special emphasis on Iran. The Middle East region is known as the birth place and cradle of three great divine religions i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Puniyani 2005, 92). If we have to name one basic feature associated with the Middle East and its people, it ought to be religion. Many Middle East studies experts have recognized this fact and surveyed on its effects on the contemporary Middle East. As John Bunzl rightly mentioned, "the Middle East is not only the cradle of the three great monotheistic world religions, it also seems to be a place where most intensely affected by the present global resurgence in religions" (Bunzl 2004, 2). There are others who give other dimensions to this historical importance of religion in the Middle East and argue that the Middle East is unique also in the importance that religion plays in its ethno-religious conflicts (Fox 2001).

The variety of religions to which the people of this region belong, the passion they have about their religion and their religious beliefs, the way the religion has shaped their societies, and the extent to which their political and historical identity has been affected and even defined by religion, all support this theory that religion is an exceptional phenomenon in the Middle East. Mass media on the other hand is something relatively new here. These two, i.e. religion as an old component deeply rooted in the fabric of Middle Eastern societies, and media as a new factor there, have had a difficult relationship and a complicated interaction which ranged from total confrontation at times to inevitable coexistence at others. This article is an attempt to show how these two encountered and interacted with each other in this region as a whole and in Iran in particular.

EARLY CONFRONTATION

Although religious leaders in the Muslim world have been considerably slower than their counterparts in the West to acknowledge and appreciate the importance of media in their cause, this lack of appreciation seems to be a common problem among religious communities. Horsfield observes this problem and maintains that religious leaders have simply failed to recognize the important position of media in cultural formation and this failure led to their inability to develop what he calls "a sustained theological tradition of strategic reflection and engagement" with it (Horsfield 1997, 167). However, comparatively speaking, religious leaders and the establishment in the Shia school of thought and particularly in Iran seem to have adopted a more flexible and open approach towards media compared to the Sunnis and Arab world.

By raising new questions and questioning the very basic principles of religion and targeting a vast majority of the audience in their homes, media in its first emergence appeared as a brutal enemy confronting religion in Middle Eastern societies. Perhaps it was this kind of perception of media that led most religious leaders in the region to boycott media, fearing it might push their followers to cross the traditionally defined red lines and to corrupt their faith in one way or another. Iran is a good example in this regard, where in the early years of the arrival of media, almost all grand ayatollahs banned their followers from buying, watching and listening to radio and television during the 1950s-70s (Khomeini 1983, 353). They issued fatwas declaring that having and using radio and television was Haraam (forbidden) due to the possible damage they might cause to the faith of the believers. In doing so, their fear was that media, especially the entertainment part of it, as a Western phenomenon, could corrupt religious values and endanger traditional culture and Islamic values and pose a threat to families.

This approach changed dramatically when the Islamic revolution came in and the religious establishment seized the political power and got access to media in 1979. It was then that they recognized the importance of media and realized that they could actually use it in the same way as their adversaries did. This new approach can be seen in a famous phrase by Ayatollah Khomeini right after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in which he said, "Radio and television must be a National (nationwide) University for the whole people" (Khomeini 1980, 203). Elsewhere, he described media in general as the most important tool for either corrupting a nation or educating it, and then characterized radio and television as the most sensitive and crucial kinds of media (Khomeini 1980, 175).

This short quote and the fact that nowadays almost all Shia grand ayatollahs from Qom to Najaf and from Tehran to Beirut have their own websites, and some of them have their own satellite TV stations and even social media networks attempting to reach out to their followers, shows how a big a change has occurred in their approach to media. It also demonstrates clearly how significant has become the new generation of media in the minds of conservative religious leaders who used to see the media as merely a bridge to hell.[1]

Focusing more on interaction between media and religion in Iran, it is interesting to observe a new kind of confrontation between the two in recent years. This new confrontation began a few years ago when a dozen satellite TV channels based in the United States, UK, Turkey, and some other places outside Iran found their way to the Persian speaking audience inside Iran. Although a considerable number of them had and still have political goals and were willing and planning to bring instability and political change to the country, most of them introduced themselves as non-political, purely cultural and entertainment channels. However, in the view of the conserva-tive clergy, their real and prime target was religion and the religious beliefs of their audience.[2] While some of them began showing movies, series and talk shows which were not allowed to be seen in the country for almost three decades due to sexual and immoral content, some others started to broadcast explicitly anti-religious programs questioning the origins of Islam, and openly attacking the relevance of pillars of Islamic faith which are regarded as the fundamental principles and duties incumbent for every Muslim. These include Towhid (oneness of God), Shahadah (profession of faith), Namaz (daily prayer), Zakaat (alms tax), Roozeh (fasting during Ramadan), Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), Nobowat (prophets and messengers), and Ma'aad (Judgment Day) (Momem 1987, 186-187). Although it is not clear how successful has been this

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[1] The following links show us samples of websites where many Shia ayatollahs use the Internet to reach out to their followers:
http://www.makaremshirazi.org/
http://www.sistani.org
http://lankarani.com/
http://www.noorihamedani.com/
http://www.jannaati.com/
http://www.saafi.net/
http://www.bayynat.org/
http://www.saanei.org/

[2] Channel One and Pars TV are among those Farsi satellite TV channels which dedicate part of their broadcastings to anti-religious and anti-Islamic programs.

kind of propaganda against religion due to the lack of any nationwide valid survey, they are regarded as a potential threat to ordinary people and especially the youth. Mohsenzadeh (2016) agrees with this view and regards media as an extraordinary means for religion to achieve a sustainable development in expanding religiosity in society. He argues that in the era of post modernity and in a globalized world, without having a proper understanding of media and the ability to use it in an innovative way, it would be difficult to promote religion and religious lifestyle.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Being challenged by media brought both threats and opportunities for religion and religious authorities. This phenomenon has particularly served religion in three different ways.

First of all, it forced religious scholars, known as Ulamaa, as well as religious institutions to think seriously about this new wave of questions and skepticism targeting the very foundations and roots of religion. It pushed them to engage in a new kind of dialogue with their audience doing their best to find convincing answers to their questions and introducing new ideas to tackle the problem. The more criticism they received from national, regional and global media, the farther they had to go to expand their vision of religion and its role in the modern world. It took a while to realize that the old fashion of boycotting media and ignoring it did not work anymore, and they soon admitted that the time had arrived for changing both methods and mentality in dealing with media. This whole new trend has led to the emergence of a new generation of religious thinkers both within and outside traditional religious schools. The emerging change and developments can potentially be good news for religion, strengthening its position in society, and expanding its capacity to engage actively and positively with other players in the era of globalization provided that those in charge know how to do it.

The second positive achievement this trend has brought for religion is the fact that it has provided religion with an extraordinary tool by which religion and religious leaders can expand the scope, size, and number of their audience across the globe. This new instrument, which used to be seen as a sign of the devil, soon proved to be a source of good and the most effective way ever seen by religious leaders. It somehow revolutionized the magnitude and the style of the message that religion was trying to send out to the people. They used to have mosques and pamphlets as their only means

to talk to their audience and spread the word of God, but are now able to send their messages to almost as many people as they would like. Nowadays, religious authorities are increasingly accepting the fact that media can play a decisive role in shaping culture, and therefore they are becoming more enthusiastic to engage and interact with it in any possible way.[3] Some observers consider that the main attraction of these new tools of communication for religious institutions is their potential to serve the religion, in this case Islam, as a forum for online discourse. Therefore, in their eyes, things like the Internet should be regarded as a "gift to deliver the words of the prophet," and its potential benefit for Islam is immeasurable (Rahimi, 2003). In other words, "the formation of media and religious practices and their cumulative influence on cultural identity" seems to become interlinked and complex (Badaracco 2005, 8).

Third, the new generation of media has provided religious individuals and groups across the Middle East with a golden opportunity to easily connect to each other, to work together, to learn from each other and to establish networks of communication and virtual discussion rooms. Fazeli, an Iranian anthropologist and expert on media and culture, believes that social media such as Telegram have played a very important and positive role in enabling Iranians, especially the youth, to practice and learn collective thinking and group discussion. In his view, even those who criticize religion in this realm are somehow contributing to this cause (Fazeli 2017). Takyeh, a research fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and an expert on the Middle East, supports this argument that the media somehow is playing a crucial role in changing the features of Middle Eastern societies by linking the intellectual circles throughout the region from Tehran to Cairo. He observes that "in today's Middle East, one can easily find the Egyptian Brotherhood's magazine *Al-Dawa* in bookstores in the Persian Gulf countries while the Jordanian Islamist daily *Al-Sabil* enjoys wide circulation throughout the Levant. The advent of the Internet has intensified such cross-pollination, as most Islamist journals, lectures, and conference proceedings are posted on the Web" (Takyeh 2001, 69-70).

It seems that one of the great advantages of social media is the connectivity they have brought among individuals of different nationalities across the Middle East who are not able to travel and meet but thanks to social networks can create and run virtual communities and share their views and thoughts. The Iranian case is again a good ex-

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[3] For a good analysis on emerging trends on religious studies and media studies to construct a theory of religion and media, see White, Robert A. 1997. "Religion Media in the Construction of Culture." In *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, edited by Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, 37-64. London: Sage Publications Inc.

ample where the above-mentioned points have happened and are still happening with an unprecedented speed and in a unique fashion.

Radio and television programs broadcast by local, provisional and national stations aimed at a domestic audience are the most convenient way to reach people and make them listen to religious messages and potentially to accept them. From Indonesia to Morocco, new and rapid forms of communication and coordination for religiously minded people are being developed. This phenomenon, which Eickelman & Anderson (2003) call "the proliferation of television and radio," has led to the emergence of new dimensions and spheres in religious debates, widening and advancing the religious discourse both in nature and in form. They believe that this phenomenon has already occurred in Turkey and has also happened rather more easily and faster in Lebanon where privatized television companies are subject to fewer restrictions by the government (Eickelman & Anderson 2003, 4). However, one can see that even in countries like Iran, this phenomenon is taking place, though to a lesser extent. In fact, the more individuals and groups get involved and participate in producing materials for media, the more scope they need to cover and the newer topics and subjects they need to discuss, and all these can result in attracting a new audience from a variety of ages, classes, and genders. Hence, this cycle and process naturally leads to the growth and development of new religious concepts and debates, particularly those related to social life. This is a good example of how interaction between media and religion can affect society and social life in Muslim societies in the Middle East.

Satellite television channels are new and increasingly popular in the Middle East. In less than a decade, hundreds of satellite TV stations have launched both inside and outside the region competing for a greater audience across the countries in the region and beyond.[4] Many of these newly established channels have been launched to talk about religion, either for or against it.

Printed media in the form of daily newspapers and weekly and monthly magazines, and in some cases quarterly journals which are quite professional, seem to be another means in this regard. In spite of the fact that electronic media are now growing and spreading fast, printed media are still quite popular among both religious associations and their fans. Interestingly, most of the deep, professional and controversial

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[4] For an analysis of the impact of satellite televisions in the Middle East, especially that of Arabic language, see Schleifer, S. Abdallah. 1998. Media Explosion in the Arab World: The Pan Arab Satellite Broadcasters. *Translational Broadcast Studies* 1 (Fall).
http://archived.tbsjournal.arabmediasociety.com/Archives/Fall98/Articles1/Pan-Arab_bcasters/pan-arab_bcasters.html.

debates on religion are still taking place in the print media.

Finally, the Internet and social media are among the most influential, most unconventional and fastest growing ways through which media and religion are interacting. As Anderson observes, the Internet as a new kind of media is going beyond being merely a tool. In his view, media are playing a significant role in expanding the social space between elite and the folk by making public what used to be discussed either behind closed doors or among very few people in places like religious schools (Anderson 2003, 45-46).

The Internet is now being used by both religious and anti-religious individuals and groups. While it has created a unique opportunity for the anti-religion camp to wage a total war against religion, the pro-religion camp is also using it in the several ways to counterattack.

Creating websites for research centers which are dedicated to religious studies is now a familiar and popular way being used by religious individuals and groups. Even most traditional religious schools are working hard in this area to build attractive websites for their institutions.[5]

Developing personal homepages for religious figures and personalities including Muslim scholars and grand ayatollahs (Marja Tqlid) is another new method for spreading their message to the outside world. In this way, the followers of each ayatollah can reach him and ask for his fatwa and verdict about any religious issue. By doing so, Anderson argues that "Islam on the Internet emerges as an intermediate realm of mixed content, mixed intellectual techniques, and mixed persons" forming a sort of virtual community (Anderson 2003, 48). The Internet in the Muslim world is now being used as a tool for discussing, sharing and spreading ideas across the world. Those ideas, thoughts, views and interpretation about Islam which had been previously confined to the small audience of a classroom in a Madrasah, or a small group of worshipers in a local mosque, are now being discussed all over the world through the Internet.

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[5] The following links are among the most popular websites created by religious organizations in Iran which attract a huge number of visitors every day:
https://hawzah.net
http://www.maarefquran.com
http://www.andisheqom.com/
http://iqna.ir/en
http://www.noorsoft.org
http://urd.ac.ir/en
http://www.balagh.ir/

Creating and developing weblogs and social media networks such as Facebook by almost every individual with any level of knowledge who is interested in religion and religious debates is the latest and most popular tool. This phenomenon, which is regarded as a unique movement in using the Internet especially in Iran, includes tens of thousands of personal weblogs and Telegram channels being established and updated regularly (almost hourly) by junior university students and young journalists who have something to say in the realm of religion.[6] This is a huge number which entitles Tehran to be called the capital of weblogs in the Middle East. The importance of creating and writing weblogs came to light mainly during the Iranian presidential election in 2005, when almost all candidates created their own weblog. Later on, it reached its highest point when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced in mid-2006 that he had also created his own personal weblog, the first president in the world to do so.

Hamid Shahriary, the head of the Computer Bureau of the Islamic Research Centre in Tehran, believes that weblogs as a media instrument provide a perfect chance for individuals to express and share their views on religion with others and to ask for recognition. In this sense, weblogs are playing a unique role in developing and expanding a space for religion and faith-related debates from which the religion, as an institution, can take best advantage, he argues. Blogfa, a well-known free webpage provider for weblog fans, announced in 2006 that among the weblogs created by its customers, around 1743 weblogs are related to religion, most of which are dedicated to Islam and Islamic issues (Shahriary 2006).

Finally, creating and moderating newsgroups and chartrooms on the Internet and inviting the people to talk, write, and share their thoughts about religion and its role in society is the last means of interacting for media and religion. Although this use of media, in particular the Internet, by religious institutions is organized for the whole society in general, they have targeted certain age groups and genders, and are dedicated to particular themes. As far as the age group is concerned, the youth are the prime target. As for gender, women are on the top of the list mainly due to their increasing role in the society.

The favorite topics and issues which are the main priority and are of a special attention for religious media vary from case to case. For some, demonstrating the com-

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[6] It is estimated that there are now around 700,000 Iranian weblogs which entitles Iran to stand number 10 in world ranking. For more information about weblogs in Iran, see the following link: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2004/dec/20/iran.blogging

patibility of Islam with human rights and other requirements of modern social life is a priority. For others, highlighting the failure of materialism and Western civilization to bring true happiness, contentment and prosperity to people, and introducing Islam as a suitable alternative is the main goal. There is also a great emphasis on the increasing need in the contemporary world for more attention to spirituality, moral values, and the family, which are regarded as fundamental elements of Islamic teachings.

The above topics constitute the main themes of most programs, discussions, talk shows, and lectures produced and aired by religious TV channels. It is the same when it comes to the Internet and printed media.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Having acknowledged the actual and potential benefits that religion can gain from media, still there are a number of real challenges casting doubt over the future of this interaction between media and religion in the region. These include three different challenges.

First, media and those who are using them against religion in some cases have the upper hand. It is relatively easy to attack, to put a question on a board, and to create an environment of cynicism and skepticism in people's minds and then go away. However, it is far more difficult for religion and its devotees to counterattack for two simple reasons. Firstly, it is hard and usually takes time and effort to find convincing answers for newly raised questions. Therefore, it is next to impossible to fully undo the damage caused by doubts engineered and widely distributed through media. Another problem arises from the fact that in most cases, the audience whose beliefs have been shaken by the questions posed do not have enough motivation, resolve, resources, and even time to dedicate to finding convincing answers to those questions and to repair the damage done. Although theoretically speaking, doubts can be regarded as a positive factor in the realm of knowledge, from the perspective of religious leaders whose main concern is the quantity of their followers rather than the depth and quality of their faith, doubt and bringing doubt to a belief system are devastating and seem to be a lethal poison for a religious society.

Many see a natural hostility between religion and a secular media, "but this may be an oversimplification," according to Michael Rust (1997, 14). Although this observation is mainly about Christianity and media in American society, it can be seen and generalized in regard to other religions such as Islam and other societies including those of the Middle East. However, there are others who argue that media coverage

of religion is not necessarily biased against religious faith; it is rather biased in favor of enlightenment rationality (Wall, 1996). In analyzing the relationship between religion and media in the Middle East, and specifically the threats posed by media towards religion, some scholars choose a different but interesting approach. They see media and its relationship to religion in Middle Eastern societies in the broader context of postmodernism. Akbar Ahmad (1992) is among those scholars who believes media is an integral part of post-modernity with which Muslims and Muslim leaders should find a way to deal and cope. Ahmed describes this phenomenon as "the dawning of the age of media in Muslim society "where they have to face up to the fact that there is no escape now, no retreat, and no hiding place, from the demon," i.e. media (Ahmed, 1992: 260). In this context, the showdown between religion and media is in fact a sub-factor of a greater battle between religion on one side and modernity and post-modernity on another.

The second challenge facing the interaction between religion and media is in a way more complicated, and it stems from the fact that interaction between religion and media depends very much on the relationship between religion and other institutions, including governments and the business sector. In other words, it means that political power and economic factors to a great extent determine the scope of activity of religion, drawing some specific lines of limitation for it. Whoever runs a media company, whether he is a governmental figure, a religious leader, or a business-minded company owner, injects insights into the output of the media he is running. It means that cultural and social interest of media owners cannot be separated from their business concerns. As Shuaib (2005) observes, almost all the global media companies, whether they are acting in Christian Europe or the Islamic Middle East, use their power and influence to protect their political and religious allies.

This reality acts as a great vulnerability for both, especially for religion, by making it a subordinate factor. In other words, it is political power that decides the nature, kind, and level of interaction between religion and media. In cases like Iran, with a religious government, the established religion takes control of media, and religious considerations become the most important criteria for the conduct of media. In cases where secular governments are in power, it is the media that comes first. However, in both cases, it is the interests and considerations of governments that count. To deal with this issue and to stay in control, authorities on both sides resort to a set of technical restrictions and legal obstacles that poses a last challenge to a healthy interaction between media and religion. Banning some specific satellite TV stations and filtering some Internet websites and weblogs are good examples of this practice.

CONCLUSION

It seems that in the contemporary world, media and religion enjoy an inevitable bilateral relationship. Religion has a message and media can either boost it and convey it or distort it and challenge it. In fact, media in this sense can be seen as a double-edged sword. It defends the religion, just as it assaults it. It has the power to support it, publicize it, strengthen it, spread it, promote it, and interpret it, and at the same time, it has the capacity to disturb it, falsify it, weaken it, misinterpret it, corrupt its foundations, and take its followers away from it.

Responding to this reality, religious authorities in general and the Shia school of thought (Fiqhe Shiia) and its leaders in particular have realized the significant role of this new phenomenon of media, and are in the process of planning a new approach to deal with it. This new approach is based on two basic rules, first, how to minimize the harms and threats coming from it, and second, how to maximize the benefits and advantages taken from it. However, to establish a healthy relationship between religion and media, it seems there is a need for a broader strategy according to which either of these two will be able to function properly to play a positive role in society. This strategy must be based on peaceful co-existence between the two in which religion moves towards more tolerance, openness and acceptance, and media exercises more understanding, recognition, appreciation and respect for religion. It appears that this kind of strategy, if adapted accordingly, has the capacity to shape the future of interaction between religion and media in the Middle East and elsewhere. While the ultimate result of this strategy is still not known, the trend seems to be somehow promising.

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