

Organised Shi'ism without organisation

Italian Shi'a online communities under the pandemic

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Abstract

This article investigates the mutation of three aspects of Shi'a online communities before and during the pandemic. These aspects are the Shi'a relationship with their religious authorities, their relations with other faith communities and their gender relations. The article shows that gender relations have undergone relatively smaller changes. For the fulfilment of this enquiry, online ethnography and interviews with members of the online communities were adopted.

Keywords

Shi'ism, online communities, COVID-19, Italy.

1. Shi'a online communities

At the beginning of 2020, when restrictions due to the COVID-19 emergency depopulated Shi'a places of worship, interaction through digital media increased in popularity. Online spaces turned into the locus not only of prayers, votive offerings, and advice on health and religious norms, but also of games and recreational activities. Despite the unprecedented nature of the situation, Italy had in fact witnessed a rise in Shi'a online communities before the outbreak of COVID-19. However, as a sign of resilience against the challenging conditions of

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the pandemic, new media technologies were adopted, transnational bonds were strengthened, and online venues bustled.

This article shows how Shi'a communal life – referred to as “online communities” – has evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before smartphones, religious experience on the Internet was considered a ‘disembodied’ activity (Campbell 2003). Alongside the twilight of the PC era, the Internet has been fully incorporated into our body and hence one can no longer call religious experience through smartphone applications a ‘disembodied’ enterprise. Today, smartphones have become a physical and psychological extension of the self, and even a part of our identity (Park and Kaye 2019). Cell phones and their applications are culturalized by sharing symbols, values, and the rhythm of time. In this manner, life in the offline and online spheres has become similar. Based on this similarity, the present article examines the trends of continuity and change in the religious experience of Shi'as in the online sphere before and during the pandemic.

The expression “online community” has been in use since 2000, when new technologies challenged the necessity of physical proximity for community building, yet existing literature is almost completely limited to the desktop era (e.g. Armstrong and Hagel III 1996; Kim 2000; Wilson and Peterson 2002; Jensen et al. 2002; Preece et al. 2003; Evans 2004; Faraj et al. 2011). The potential of the smartphone has been scrutinised more often in relation to games (Richardson 2012; Ganzert et. al 2017). Other studies have examined the impact of media technologies on community experience (Bernal 2005) and religious practices (Meyer 2006; Schulz 2006; Campbell 2013). Scholars have also researched the influence of religion on technologies (Campbell 2007), the role of media within the religious world (Rinker et al. 2016; Campbell 2014), and the media's benefits for refugees (Kaufmann 2018; Hajj 2021) and immigrants (Kim 2018). Nevertheless, smartphone communities seem to be unexplored topics, and their relations with religions are especially so.

Despite the dearth of literature on the topic, recent smartphone applications are even more eligible in certain aspects for consideration as community venues than offline relationships, because they facilitate a more fluid presence and easier interaction between members. Moreover, they guarantee freedom and fluidity in human relations, which are considered classic hallmarks of community (Hillery 1955). Therefore, here, a combination of “online” and “community” is used to refer to these groups. Far from its grandiose, classic implications, “community” is used only as a discursive instrument and is interchangeable with “group.”

To examine Shi'a online communal life, online ethnography and conversations with members of Shi'a online communities were conducted both before and during the pandemic. From November 2016 to December 2019, I visited Shi'a

places of worship or gathering in 13 Italian cities and interviewed 89 Shi'as of various nationalities. During the fieldwork, the existence of a parallel communal life was notable, unfolding through smartphone applications. The fieldwork provided the opportunity to join Telegram and WhatsApp groups whose administrators, having been apprised of this study, permitted my virtual presence.

I am currently a member of two Pakistani groups on WhatsApp: the Ja'fariyyeh Informatic Group (160 members) and the Al-A'sr Contact Group (150 members), whose participants are based in Europe, Iran, or Pakistan. Moreover, I am part of two groups related to a Roman centre, one is called *Dimore della Sapienza* (53 members), and the other, *Gli innamorati di Sophia* (41 members), which gather Italian Shi'a converts along with their non-Shi'a interlocutors, all based in Italy. On 31 December 2020, I joined a WhatsApp group called *Amici dell'Iran* that brings together Italian converts and a few Italian-based Shi'as from Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq (43 members). On Telegram, I am part of seven stable groups, as well as certain others created on an ad hoc basis to organise the *Ashura World Wide* campaign.² This campaign is created a month before Muharram³ and then abandoned by its members annually. The Telegram groups are almost entirely composed of Italian-based Iranians, since Telegram is the Iranians' favoured application. Three of the Telegram groups are female-only.

In Italy, Shi'a online communities have emerged as a response to certain social needs, such as to readjust the calendar. According to Article 8 of the Italian constitution, non-Catholic organisations should conclude a bilateral agreement with the Italian Interior Ministry to be recognised as religious entities. No Shi'a organisation has ever presented a protocol of agreement to this ministry. One consequence of the lack of this agreement is the extreme difficulty involved in constructing mosques in Italy. As a result, Shi'as do not have access to conventional places of gathering or worship, such as a mosque, *hussainiya*,⁴ or *takiyya*.⁵ Currently, aside from a few groups that possess permanent places of worship, such as the Imam Mahdi Association in Rome (MC) and Imam Ali Centre in Milan (AC), meeting places are often in schools, parishes, bars, sport centres, or warehouses.

In such a situation, online communities have played a crucial role in reminding members of the rhythms of sacred time. It has been said that in the West,

2 Ashura World Wide, formerly also called Who Is Hussain, is a campaign launched in 2014 by an Iranian PhD student at the Polytechnic University of Milan (Mirshahvalad 2019).

3 The first month of the Islamic calendar when the Shi'a mourning rituals are held.

4 Hussainiya is the name of congregational halls in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, where Shi'as hold mourning sessions for the martyrdom of their third imam. The name comes from Hussein ibn Ali, the third imam of Shi'a Muslims.

5 Whenever there are insufficient funds for the construction of hussainiya, basements, warehouses and public passages can become takiyya. Sometimes, benefactors make their homes available for Muharram mourning ceremonies (Asqariyyan Jeddi, 1393/2014).

Islamic communities should adopt “calendrical adjustment” as a strategy of survival (Abusharaf 1998:256). One can imagine that these online communities must ‘readjust’ the sacred time; the Shi’a calendar is saturated with moments that are commemorated by mourning rituals, besides a few joyous occasions, but in Italy, it is impossible to perform these commemorations at their exact times. Within online communities, members are constantly reminded of important dates and their communal life has become omnipresent. The repetitive rhythm of sacred time, which is either taken for granted or even becomes bothersome in Shi’a-majority countries, has been both promoted and appreciated by members of online communities in Italy. These online Shi’a communities keep the commemoration of sacred time alive through their members’ devotion to constantly posting mourning or greeting messages. Smartphone communities have allowed members to experience a sense of synchronicity with the homeland through the touchscreen. They have offered new frontiers of group living, allowing an expansion of homeland values and transnational member engagement.

In addition, online communities help to customise personal religious agendas (Lövheim 2014). Thanks to smartphones, community members can change their mood from one group to another. Members can choose when to join the rituals, when to leave, and how much to contribute comments and messages. They can constantly shift among communities, check their personal messages, or even chat with others during rituals. New technologies allow them to be contemporarily present in rituals both offline and online. For instance, during Muharram 2018 at the MC (which was established and governed by Italian converts, and which sometimes allows the Shi’a-born (people born into Shi’a families) to hold mourning sessions in their local languages), a female convert who could not understand the ritual language listened to an English sermon through her smartphone’s earbuds. On the other hand, Iranian students who could not understand the Italian sermons followed other programs in Persian. These people simultaneously contributed to the life of two communities with their physical and mental presence. Although it may seem that new media technologies distract participants, they can actually amplify human presence and even communal life.

During the pandemic, the concentration of activities on the online sphere modified some dimensions of Shi’a religious activities. Here, three aspects of the Shi’a online communities that have undergone some level of change are discussed.

2. Shi’a religious authorities

Smartphone applications have created new positions of power and easier access to sacred texts, both of which challenge traditional religious authorities. This is why orthodox religious leaders, for instance in Iran and Israel, have tried to limit

or block access to the Internet through censorship and website surveillance. Alternatively, traditional religious authorities exploit the Internet as a new avenue to reassert themselves, but they are careful to 'culturally' shape the media to preserve the hierarchy (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005; Campbell 2012).

Despite these attempts to tame the new digital technology, it has undeniably altered power structures. Older forms of digital media, such as e-forums, email lists, and websites, maintain vertical ties with traditional authorities, whereas smartphone applications offer more opportunities for horizontal bonds between religious authorities and their followers. If websites and emails are authoritarian in message conveyance, smartphone applications can promote interactivity. The former one-way digital system was concentrated on delivery of information and on proselytism (Kalinock 2006), whereas the interactive nature of modern smartphone groups allows a democratic means of message production. Within online Shi'a communities, members send questions on religious matters and receive answers almost immediately without appealing to more formal and indirect channels, such as the websites of the *maraji*.⁶ On a female group called European Followers of Zainab, which is dedicated to Shi'a law, women send their questions with the name of their *marja'* and receive the answers from female experts of law within a few minutes. Many times, when a *marja'* has not answered a religious query or is not consulted at all, the online communities support the faithful much more easily. Through the 'traditional' channels for relations with *maraji*, namely their websites, the faithful may not receive answers when needed or may not receive them at all, for various reasons. The *maraji* do not normally answer questions that are on politics, contain philosophical or complicated arguments, raise sensitive topics, are related to specific people, or are deemed too similar to those already answered in their manuals. Moreover, receiving an answer may require almost two weeks, especially if the *marja* is a well-known one with an international entourage. In addition, according to interviewees, coreligionists who live in the same social context and comprehend its difficulties and needs are deemed better sources of counsel.⁷

Ultimately, the pandemic brought new religious leaders into play. Before the pandemic, the only Italian cleric, Shaykh Abbas, was not present in the online communities. Whenever Shi'as created WhatsApp groups and added him, he immediately left the group. The Ramadan seasons of 2020 and 2021 occurred under periods of restricted social interactions, and on some other occasions, the MC organised Zoom meetings with Shi'as of different nationalities. These meetings were inter-

6 The prominent Shi'a clerical figures who are reference points in religious matters.

7 I have explained elsewhere (Mirshahvalad 2020a, 2020b) why there has been a need for new Shi'a religious leaders in Italy who could satisfy the exigencies of the Italian-based Shi'as.

esting from various viewpoints. Compared to the Zoom meetings of the AC, where all the attendees were Iranian, the Italian language of Shaykh Abbas attracted various nationalities. Even the Persian-speaking Afghans preferred to attend the MC e-meetings rather than those held by the AC, where Persian was adopted as the only language of the session. Attendees viewed the MC's meetings as multimedia forums where they could consult Shaykh Abbas. Even when Shaykh Abbas was supposed to deliver speeches on historical and social issues, such as the status of Muslims in Europe, the meetings ended up becoming venues for questions and answers about religious practice. The presence of converts may help to explain this transmutation of the meetings' objectives, given that thus far, *maraji* have neither published Italian manuals on norms of behaviour nor offered their websites in Italian. However, in the online question-and-answer sessions, surprisingly, even the native Shi'a participants took advantage of the interactive opportunity to ask religious questions as if they had no *marja al-taqlid* or could not or did not want to communicate with him. Curiously, Shaykh Abbas has not yet received an *ijtihad*⁸ licence, let alone been recognised as a *marja*. Therefore, the online communities and Zoom sessions have had a significant influence on the amateurisation⁹ of *ijtihad* in Italy.

Despite the already ubiquitous presence of the Internet, Iranian clerics still resist the de-professionalisation of their expertise. When physical gatherings were completely prohibited, the AC, like the MC, organised some Zoom meetings that hosted Iranian clerics based in Qum or other European countries. These clerics discussed the usual theological and doctrinal arguments that had nothing to do with Shi'a life in Italy or Europe; as such, the content was not very engaging for the audience. The Iranian Zoom initiatives usually lasted around two hours. No more than ten minutes at the end were dedicated to attendee interaction with the clerics, and they were usually spent on giving compliments to the organisers. Other Iranian gatherings were hosted by the Union of Islamic Student Associations. Since most of the people attending these online rituals were students, clerics would choose more innovative themes for their interventions. However, during these initiatives, no interactive session was observed. The Iranian clergies' approach to Zoom (which is banned in Iran) is aligned with their claim to be otherworldly or *ruhani* (spiritual) and to belong to an upper universal order. This is why they adopt an authoritative approach towards both the platform and participants.

Conversely, when the MC organised Zoom gatherings, Shaykh Abbas did not speak for longer than half an hour, and the themes of his debates were completely different. He spoke about the challenges of life in Italy as Muslims and

8 "ijtihad" is the quality that allows a clerical figure to be a reference point in religious matters.

9 This word has been borrowed from Shirky (2008), who introduced the concept "mass amateurisation" to describe how social media amateurises photography and journalism.

the need for dynamic *ijtihad*. To support his arguments, he drew on European philosophers, such as Burkhart, Corbin, Guenon, and Massignon. In a completely different vein, Pakistani activities online were limited to videos of clerics posted on Facebook pages or WhatsApp groups. Hence, no interaction between Pakistani preachers and attendees was observed.

The different relations between clerics and ordinary people in Shi'a communities online mirror clerics' approach towards the issues within Italian-based Shi'a gathering places. As observed by Wilson and Peterson (2002:456), power relations and identity construction in the offline world influence online communities. Iranian and Pakistani clerics are not yet willing to exploit this new potential for developing symmetrical relations with the grassroots online, whereas only one Italian cleric seems to have accepted the increasingly pluralistic atmosphere of the current European religious marketplace, which has been further enriched by the new platforms.

3. Contact with other religions

Physical interaction among coreligionists sometimes entails episodes of discussion, or even fights, that can split communities. However, in the online sphere, there seems to be more tolerance, not only because members are not physically present but because conversations are mediated. Quarrels and disputes online among groups for Iranians, Italian converts, and Pakistanis were observed in this study. For instance, in an Iranian Telegram group composed of students and workers mainly based in Milan, heated debates would emerge among the followers of Ayatollah Khāmeneī and the sole participating follower of Ayatollah Shirazi. Controversies emerged around sensitive topics, such as bloody self-flagellation and whether Sunnis should be considered subject to *tabarri* (disassociation). Interestingly, the follower of Ayatollah Shirazi did not leave the group, despite his vulnerability. In the same vein, advocates of rival political fronts in Iran, who enter into heated debates near presidential elections, remained part of the online communities.

Within the two aforementioned Italian-speaking groups, there are both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Therefore, during sacred times, two contrary senses may be observed within these groups. On the 9th and 10th of Dhul al-Ḥajja (the last month of the Islamic calendar), while Sunnis send greetings for the I'd al-Aḏḥa, Shi'as post videos about Du'a Arafā¹⁰ with messages of condolence for Imam Hus-sain's move from Mecca to Kufa and the martyrdom of Muslim ibn Aqil. The same dual online Islamic atmosphere exists also during Muḥarram. While Sunnis send

10 A prayer presumably recited for the first time by Hussein ibn Ali. Shi'as perform it on the 9th of Dhul al-Hajja.

greeting messages for the New Year, Shi'as commence their principal mourning season. Despite the dualistic atmosphere, tolerance and respect regarding these specifically sectarian issues dominate the religiously mixed groups. Before the pandemic, in two consecutive Muharram periods (2018 and 2019), I was a member of the *Ashura World Wide* campaign and was given the duty of informing the public about the Karbala Tragedy. Some sarcastic comments from Sunnis about Shi'a public chest-beatings for Ashura and Arbain were overheard, with interviewees reporting similar observations. Yet in the online communities where both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims were present, such comments were never witnessed.

Although Shi'a smartphone communities are by no means venues of homogeneous groups of humans functioning in perfect harmony, the temporal distance between messaging and reacting creates more space for reflection. In the online sphere, members tend to relinquish their religious affiliations and decrease their religious exclusivism. They 'tinker' with spiritual options and reject the exclusive claims of any one particular religious tradition (McClure 2017).

In Italy, due to the unfamiliar languages and practices, non-Muslim Italians normally do not attend the religious services of native Shi'a. As a result, Shi'as have not developed ties with the outgroup. The pandemic introduced widespread use of Zoom, which added new dimensions to Shi'a religious activities online. The heterogeneity of participants at this point was not limited only to Sunnis or by the geographical position of participants but encompassed a wider religious panorama. During the pandemic, the Zoom meetings of the MC in Italian provided a welcoming terrain for erudite, irreligious, and Catholic Italians to contribute to debates.

Tolerance of others within online meetings is also driven by digital platforms that allow one's identity to be camouflaged. As an example, on 31 March 2021, Shaykh Abbas (the aforementioned Italian cleric, who converted to Shi'ism many years before this study and who has undertaken periods of training and study in Syria, Iran, and London) was invited to deliver a speech on topics related to inter-religious dialogue. The initiative was organised by the King Hamad Chair for inter-faith dialogue and peaceful coexistence, and in collaboration with the Roma Sapienza Foundation. The encounter started with unexpected verbal violence from an unidentifiable group of attendees who shouted anti-Islamic slogans and insulted the moderator. Although the meeting was temporarily interrupted, the organisers succeeded in blocking all the unfriendly intruders from participating. Such a clash in an offline venue may have provoked violence and required police intervention.

4. Women and their activities

Women are core components of Muslim culture. In non-Islamic countries where Muslims are a minority, women become objects of tension between cultures

(Saint-Blancat 1999). They are held liable for protecting their cultural heritage, especially where this heritage can be jeopardized. It is unacceptable for women, who are central elements of communal order, to become the sources of its disintegration (Saint-Blancat 1995). Due to these concerns, minority groups in diaspora contexts are less prone to make compromises regarding the core of their culture or private sphere than in their public affairs (Navas et al. 2005).

Gender roles and relations online are quite similar to those in offline venues. For instance, within Pakistani online communities, I have been the only woman among hundreds of male members. This pattern echoes the rigid sexual division among Pakistani Muslims and the fact that women hold only secondary importance in their communal life.¹¹ Conversely, among Iranian and international online communities, there are some women as well, even though religious women prefer female-only groups where they can discuss their ideas about 'taboo' matters without concerns about the male presence. Within these e-harams,¹² women feel free to talk about 'embarrassing' topics such as pregnancy, gynaecologists, abortion, children, and family-related matters. In the e-haram of the AC, which is also composed of moderately religious women, even an extremely sensitive topic such as the compulsory veil in Iran was once stealthily discussed.¹³

As a native Iranian woman, I was present in both online and offline communities of religious and irreligious Iranians. Only religious women tended to create women-only Telegram and WhatsApp groups. They rarely exposed their personal photos on their profiles, did not present polemical arguments on the mixed online groups, and did not take any position in political discussions. For instance, in November 2019, the Tehran-based institute, *Hayat-e Husna*, offered a series of workshops motivated by the need to restore polygamy as a solution to the unprecedented rise in divorce rates, extramarital sexual relations (called "white marriage" in Iran), and celibacy. Women were dismayed to hear about this initiative and sent numerous negative comments. They posted pictures of Ayatollah Khāmeneī with attributed phrases about the *kirāha* (detestability) of polygamy, and they even forwarded the decree to fire his potentially polygamous employees. This workshop and the women's distress had no echo in the mixed online groups.

Not all messages of the e-harams are necessarily related to 'taboo' matters, but religious women are more comfortable posting messages in female groups than in mixed ones, even when the messages have no specific tie to femininity. This is

11 In Pakistan, women do not attend mosque services, and even in Italy, the Pakistani and Bangladeshi Sunni gathering places are bereft of any space for women.

12 This apt expression is coined by Bunt (2003:210).

13 The AC is governed by the Iranian consulate, which creates a climate of self-censorship, fear and hypocrisy among AC members.

because expressing ideas even on ordinary topics makes some women uncomfortable when men are present in the groups. Posting new recipes and exploring halal foods are not female topics in any strict sense, but women never share these themes outside of the e-harams.

In March 2018 in Milan, I interviewed a 29-year-old Iranian PhD student who had created the AC's female Telegram group. She had launched the group on 'Īd al-Fitr with women who had attended the AC service during Ramadan. In response to being asked what would have happened had any men been included, she answered:

Perhaps a woman wants to ask about buying rice ... well, men don't have any expertise on this matter. Women cannot ask questions or express their ideas where men are present. ... I mean, it'll become a little bit hard. Women are comfortable where all are women, but if even one man enters, they start to feel embarrassed.

The reason for this embarrassment is that from childhood, women internalise the above-mentioned concerns about their role in preserving cultural values; therefore, they adjust their conduct online to match traditional behavioural codes and taboos.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, and especially during lockdown, Zoom has created the opportunity for more complex interactions through video and audio sharing. In these meetings, women are less numerous than men. I participated in meetings of the AC, the MC, the *Dimore della Sapienza* Association, the European female branch of the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly, and the Union of Islamic Student Associations. During the Zoom meetings, the women remained aloof; they never asked questions or commented on the debates. The Lebanese administrator of the MC's online gatherings would silence all participants until the end of the meetings, and thus Shaykh Abbas could speak without the usual interruptions that occur in offline gatherings. Nevertheless, as soon as the administrator unmuted the participants, the men would rush to speak, whereas the women never turned on their video screens or unmuted their microphones. In a few cases, female converts would raise their virtual hands and Shaykh Abbas, with his usual respect for women, gave them priority to write their questions – the same priority that he would concede to women at the MC's headquarters.

A public Zoom event was eventually organised at which women were supposed to play the central role, as it was the anniversary of the birth of Fatima al-Zahra. On 6 February 2021, the female branch of the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly held the anniversary event. Women and men from various European countries and Qum participated. In this online event, the clerics presented their arguments on Fatima's worldly and otherworldly merits and compared her with

other female protagonists of the Qur'ān. They praised Fatima for both her social activism and her modesty. She was described as a woman who had never been seen in public but had fought for the rights of Ahl al-Bayt. Thus, Fatima was an embodiment of both the political and ethical messages of the Qur'ān. Between cleric interventions and at the end, there were five-minute intervals during which women presented the activities of their organisation in Arabic, Persian, and European languages. The labour was divided between men, who presented the moral values, and women, who briefly described the activities of the association created to safeguard those values.

Despite the undeniable similarities between gender relations in offline and online venues, the latter setting's features facilitated certain innovations. One of the most innovative and impressive uses of Telegram that has modified women's activities comes from a cultural association of Iranian students and workers in Milan, called Acqua. Acqua created a Telegram group known as *Jam'-khani-e Qur'ān* (collective recitation of the Qur'ān) with 23 members, with the only messages posted being the names of *surahs* (chapters) and *ayahs* (verses). Members read these verses at home, and then they respond with the name of the final verse. Afterwards, another person continues the thread. It has become a sort of Qur'ānic relay race, in which members complete parts of the performance and entrust the rest to the next participant. In this way, they somehow carry on as they did in offline gatherings before the pandemic, where they would sit around a circle in a small room, occasionally offered to them by one of Milan's municipalities, and read the Qur'ān in turn. Nevertheless, some important differences exist between the two spheres. In the online readings, the community did not have to pay rent for a facility, members did not have to prepare the dinner normally served at the end of each gathering, and no one checked the correctness of others' *tilawa* (i.e. Qur'ān recitation). Therefore, members were more comfortable reciting as they wished, and more importantly, the women actively participated in the readings of the Qur'ān without their usual timidity.

For instance, despite the absence of restrictions established by Islamic law, women never recited the Qur'ān or *du'a* (supplication) loudly in offline gatherings. During my fieldwork, I never witnessed any online or offline Qur'ānic lesson organised for or by Shi'a women. In Acqua's offline pre-pandemic gatherings, the Qur'ān and supplications were always recited by the men. In this community, the women would contribute to the recitation of the Qur'ān only within the space of the online Qur'ānic group. A middle-aged woman, when asked to clarify why this was the case, stated that the recitation of the Qur'ān, which was the usual weekly program of the Acqua, had originally been performed by both sexes for a certain time. The women, sitting around the small hall in front of the men, used to recite the Qur'ān in turn with *tart-*

eel rhythmic tones. Most *maraji* allow the female *tarteel* recital of the Qur'ān (which is not melodic), provided that it does not provoke *fitna* (chaos). However, after a while, some women began to feel embarrassed at Acqua and chose not to collaborate, and so the others decided to stop reciting the Qur'ān. The interviewee added:

No one has banned it. It is the women's fault, because we talk and laugh with men without any scruple, so why should an Arabic Qur'ān, which is not even recited with a melodic voice, be a problem? So the women themselves gave up. They can restart it whenever they want, but I know that no one other than me would recite it. So the men got used to it and they do not ask the women if they want to participate anymore.

During the pandemic, a female WhatsApp Qur'ānic group formed that unites Persian-speaking European, Iranian, and Afghan Shi'a women. The group is called *Tadabbur dar Qur'ān* (Reflections on the Qur'ān) and is dedicated to Qur'ānic exegesis. The group has a weekly online conference organised in Iran and held in the Skyroom¹⁴. Even in this case, although all the participants are women, only a pre-recorded male recitation of the Qur'ān is released. Therefore, the *Jam'-khani-e Qur'ān* was a special venue where women were allowed to contribute to this collective ritual by posting the names of chapters and verses, as if Telegram had offered them a virtual veil and hence greater self-confidence.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I have examined trends of continuity and change in three aspects of Shi'a online communities. Relative to on-site meetings, online communities have facilitated women's free expression. However, when we compare the three areas discussed above, the approach to women has undergone the least amount of change since the onset of the pandemic. The private nature of gender relations makes these matters less susceptible to change. Compared to women's issues, during the pandemic smartphone applications have widened the horizons of change in rituals and intra-religious relations. These applications have augmented the ability to customise relationships with coreligionists and with the religion itself. For instance, rituals online can become simultaneously individual and collective. Consequently, the new technology has been considered a steppingstone towards making religion more of a private affair. The secularising power of this technology is amplified in a country such as Italy, where the political system separates religion from civic

¹⁴ Various platforms such as Zoom and Skype are inaccessible in Iran. Therefore, Iranians have launched a Persian version of Skyroom, which is platform where online events can be held.

affairs. The privatisation of religion opens the door to the reconfiguration of sectarian categories and religious authority. Shi'as in a non-Islamic country constantly face unprecedented social needs. Given the geographical distance from predominantly Islamic lands, the Shi'a traditional authorities cannot produce suitable and relevant instructions for the faithful or cannot provide them when they are needed (Mirshahvalad 2020a, 2020 b). Even the few Middle Eastern clerical representatives of *maraji* in Italy are not willing to surrender to the de-institutionalising power of the new media. Thus, the relationship tends to be replaced by more dialogic and interactive alternatives, primarily conversations with coreligionists, which have become even more fluid and omnipresent through smartphone applications.

Besides Zoom, the WhatsApp and Telegram applications provide group arrangements that do not require traditional institutions to be present. These applications allow for formulating rituals and regulating interreligious relations without the supervision of traditional authorities and institutes. Similar to what Shirky (2008) observed, things here are organised without organisations. The horizontal bonds, fluidity of relations, and freedom of expression make these platforms more suitable environments for communal life than institutionalised venues such as mosques, especially where mosques can hardly be built as in Italy.

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