

## GOING ON PILGRIMAGE ONLINE

### THE REPRESENTATION OF THE TWELVER-SHIA IN THE INTERNET

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The Twelver-Shia, similar to other religions, is abundantly represented in the World Wide Web.<sup>1</sup> Special search engines, like *www.shiasearch.com*, list hundreds of Web sites, sorted by subject matter, language or country. The topics reach from the study of the Koran over ethics and morality to Islamic toys for children. The geographical distribution spreads from countries like Iraq, Kuwait and Pakistan over Malaysia and India to the Shia Diaspora in Europe und America. Educational institutes like the theological schools in Najaf/Iraq and Qom/Iran together with governmental and private local institutions and individuals compete for the attention of believers and potential converts providing them with information and forums to interact.

The article focuses on Iran.<sup>2</sup> During long-term fieldwork in Teheran I gradually came across the growing importance of the Internet for religious purposes. Preachers used emails to give their religious advice to Iranians living outside the country. Young professional women advised me to refer to the Internet for translations of the Qoran or to get into contact with prominent scholars. An even more important role the Internet played for pious Iranian migrants in Germany, whose meetings at religious centres and mosques I frequented. They used the Internet to stay in contact with their country of origin and to orient themselves in a new surrounding that they often perceived as hostile and endangering their religious identity. The Internet helped them to get practical information like addresses of mosques in the nearer surrounding. Further it allowed them to find people with the same convictions and interests and gave them a feeling of belonging and community.

The paper starts with a short outline of the development and special situation of the Internet in Iran followed by a selective overview of different kinds of Web sites dealing with

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<sup>1</sup> Several studies point out that religiously oriented Web sites make up the majority of all Web sites. Their number steadily increases. See Hadden & Cowan 2000, 7; Helland 2004, 26-27; Helland 2000, 213.

<sup>2</sup> My Ph.D. thesis deals with the religious rituals of Shiite women in today's Iran based on long-term fieldwork, conducted mainly in Teheran, Isfahan and Shiraz.

the propagation of the Shia faith.<sup>3</sup> Some are pure information zones; others include interactive zones as well. As Gary R. Bunt points out, similar to the “real-world” Iranian-centred approaches to Shiism are dominant.<sup>4</sup> Yet Web sites with other local connections representing other perspectives are also online and can be frequented by Iranian users. Special attention is given to the representation of Shia rituals in the Internet and the possibility for online rituals. What differentiates them from “traditional” rituals? Where are similarities? The article argues that the analysis of Web sites has to take into account cultural transformations offline.

*Internet in Iran – between censorship and a means of proselytisation*

The short history of the Internet in Iran dates back to 1993 when the first electronic mail message was sent. A rapid growth followed. Today there are more than 1.000 commercial Internet service providers and a growing demand of the Iranian public for access to the Internet.<sup>5</sup> The number of Internet users in Iran, a country with more than 60 millions inhabitants, is estimated at 5-7 Millions.

In the beginning the Iranian government lacked sufficient knowledge and technical means to control the Internet but the pressure soon increased. Internet Service Providers were requested to remove all sites from their servers that were defined as anti-Islamic or anti-governmental. Next, a list was set up with forbidden sites. The censorship also includes religious Web sites that do not concur with the religious ideology of the Islamic Republic. So for example the Web site of the dissident and most high-ranking Iranian cleric Great Ayatollah Montazeri has several times been blocked. Since 2003 the Iranian authorities banned dozen of Web sites. People have been arrested for publishing their critique of the Iranian establishment online.<sup>6</sup> Web technicians have been detained to give out server passwords. A future plan intends to replace the World Wide Web with an Islamic Web.

Most observers, academics as well as journalists, see the Internet in Iran as an effective means of the people in the fight for freedom of expression, cultural diversity, democracy and civil society. They point out how especially younger people use it to get access to uncensored news, escape the enforced moral and religious rules and talk about taboo issues like love and

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<sup>3</sup> All Web sites have been viewed and stored with Microsoft Internet Explorer in Windows XP Professional.

<sup>4</sup> Bunt 2000, 140.

<sup>5</sup> See Rahimi 2003.

<sup>6</sup> For further information, see <http://stop.censoring.us> which gives regularly updated accounts of Internet censorship in Iran.

sexuality or arrange meetings.<sup>7</sup> What has been less taken into account is the Internet as a means to spread religious beliefs. Although presence in the Internet is much easier to achieve than access to other mass media it requires nevertheless some technical and financial means.<sup>8</sup> Besides members of the Iranian urban middle and upper class mainly members of the governmental establishment and associated clerics dispose of these requirements. Religious institutions connected with the Islamic Republic like many Muslim thinkers of different backgrounds are not hostile to new technology as long as it serves their own purposes. As one cleric put it: “The Internet is like a knife. You can use it to peel fruits or to kill someone. But that does not mean that the knife is bad.”<sup>9</sup> The Internet reaching people all over the world is seen by some persons and institutions associated with the Iranian government as an ideal vehicle to propagate their religious ideology and to export the Islamic Revolution.<sup>10</sup> Islam’s claim for universality is in accordance with the global reach of the Internet. Clerics in the religious centres in Qom and Mashhad have discovered the possibilities of this new public sphere to propagate Shia beliefs inside and outside Iran, get in contact with believers, canvass donations and distribute their books. Some hope that this media will especially appeal to the young whose support they feel they have widely lost. Clerics and religious schools and institutions near to the Islamic Republic have been equipped with the latest hard and soft ware. At a computer centre in one theological college in Qom 2.000 religious writings have been transferred to CD-Rom and eventually to the Internet.<sup>11</sup> Clerics of theological schools in different cities held online seminars on religious topics. Whereas the majority of Iranian families still cannot afford to buy a computer or pay the fee of the Internet Service Providers, even small seminars in the religious centres of learning dispose of computers and access to the Internet. So it is not surprising that they are also extensively represented in the net.

### *The representation of the Shia in the Internet*

The construction and aesthetics of the numerous Web sites that provide the visitor with multifolded information about the Shia faith often resemble each other; many are

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<sup>7</sup> For a critique see Doostdar 2004.

<sup>8</sup> See also Hadden & Cowan 2000, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Personal interview on 10.02.2004. This is a frequent used metaphor see also Web site of cnn.com. Retrieved on 31.01.2005 from <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9705/22/iran.tech>.

<sup>10</sup> The Internet is also been discovered as a means for proselytisation by other religions like Christianity. See Helland 2004, 25 and O’Leary 2004, 37. For the Islamic context see also Bunt 2000, 129-131.

<sup>11</sup> Web site of cnn.com. Retrieved on 31.01.2005 from: <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9705/22/iran.tech>.

interconnected by reciprocal links. Visual elements include Islamic calligraphy and ornaments, pictures of holy buildings like the Kaaba in Mecca and the shrines of the Imams, pictures of leading clerics, or paintings with the scenes of the Martyrdom of Imam Hussein as they are also common as postcards among the pious in Iran or as decorations in Husseyniyahs, buildings where people gather for mourning rituals. Often a separate window opens with greetings for an actual religious occasion or with the “hadith of the day;” sometimes an audio file with religious recitations starts automatically. Beside sections on the Qoran with translations in different languages and its interpretation the visitor can read or download information about the history of the Shia and the life of the Imams, collections of Shiite Hadith, prayers and religious books, an Islamic calendar and the prayer times. Special sections of Islamic instruction are dedicated to children. A number of Web sites focus on one holy figure like the prophet’s daughter Fatima or the Twelfth Imam Mahdi offering details about their life and special prayers addressed to them. All major Imamzadehs, holy shrines, are also present online. They inform about the history of the place, religious celebrations held there and recent miracle stories that, in some instances, have been recorded with modern technology and confirmed by physicians.<sup>12</sup> Whereas a number of Web sites only provide the visitor with information, most also allow the participation of visitors. They can leave comments, sign a guestbook or ask religious questions.<sup>13</sup> The claim to propagate Shia beliefs to the outside world is shown by the fact that nearly all of the Web sites set up in Iran are at least in three languages – Persian, Arabic and English. When entering the homepage the user can choose in which language he wants the site to be shown. On the contrary, Web sites of Arabic countries and scholars are more often monolingual. The Web site *www.al-shia.com* run by the *Aalulbayt Global Information Centre* in Qom, which is under the supervision of Ayatollah Sistani, can be displayed in 27 languages including e.g. Portuguese, Hausa, Hindi and Chinese. Visitors can pose religious questions in their mother tongue. This means a considerable financial and organizational effort. Questions have to be translated and presented to the cleric for response and his answer has to be retranslated. It shows an ambiguous claim to reach believers all over the world without language barrier.

Some sites are examples for Islamic e-Commerce like the “*Karbala OnLine*” *Cyber Hussainiyah & Store* (*www.karbala.com*). They offer a wide range of CDs, video- and audiotapes, Islamic software and books. More directed to the needs of Muslim migrants are

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<sup>12</sup> See for example the Web site of the Jamkaran mosque ([www.jamkaran.info](http://www.jamkaran.info)).

<sup>13</sup> Most Web sites combine religion online and online religion offering information and the possibility of participation. See also Young 204, 94-95 concerning Internet Christianity.

Web sites that give practical assistance: addresses of mosques, shops and restaurant that sell and serve “halal” food, Muslim doctors, lawyers, hairdressers or funeral directors. Several marriage markets like *www.shiamatch.com* allow men as well as women in an equal way to view the profiles of potential candidates all over the world. One of the aims of *www.ardabili.com*, the Web site in English and Persian of the Iranian cleric Ja’far Savalanpour Ardabili, is to “help and introduce single men and women within the guidelines of Islamic and traditional values.” Online, interested women and men can fill in a form in which they can tell their wishes concerning the characteristics of their potential spouse. Although the service primarily addresses young people inside Iran it can at least potentially be availed by people all over the world.<sup>14</sup> At some Web sites, users can download Islamic wallpapers and screensavers and ascribe to mailing lists sending them a Hadith every day, so suiting their computer in an Islamic garment. Charitable organizations are also active online. One Web site (*www.act4kerbala.org*) by asking “Why not buy shares in paradise?” invites people to contribute financially to the building of a Hussayniyah in Kerbela.

#### *Fatwas over the Internet*

All leading clerics dispose of their own Web site. There the visitor can find the cleric’s contact address, his biography, his speeches and publications and religious rulings. In Shia Islam believers have to choose a *Marja at-taqlid*, a high ranking cleric, whose rulings they follow in their religious and everyday life. In Iran people will contact a local mullah to ask him how the Marja at-taqlid of their choice has decided on a certain matter or they will call the local office to speak with his representative. Online, people can fill in a form and send it via email to the cleric. Within some days they will receive an answer via email. This service is available in several languages. Most of these Web sites contain an alphabetic list of questions already answered. Beside legal rulings concerning the religious obligations one finds verdicts about topics as manifold as alcohol, adultery, beauty operations, music and wine-drinking. The quick and easy way of contact via email is especially attractive for migrants. So, for example in one case a Shiite living in Europe asks if he is allowed to contract a temporary marriage with a Christian girl, urging the cleric to answer as soon as

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<sup>14</sup> See also „IRAN: Heiratsmarkt im Internet“. Retrieved on 10.02.2005 from: <http://www.ndrtv.de/weltspiegel/20041128/iran.html>.

possible.<sup>15</sup> Here anonymity makes it easier for people to touch taboo issues as represented in the long list of questions and answers related to sexual practices.<sup>16</sup>

### *Chat groups*

Chat rooms and discussion forums are especially suitable to gain insight in the diversity of religious ideas and behaviour. In different forums a wide range of topics is being discussed reaching from Islamic law over family matters to the political situation in Palestine; some are dedicated to Sunni-Shia and Muslim-Christian Dialogue. In their self-representation the providers of “Shia chat,” one of the biggest Shia discussion forums, declare “that it is a place to gain knowledge and faith in distinct fashion that attracts both youths and adults.” It especially addresses Muslims “across the world who are far from any Islamic centres” and also non-Muslims in the hope that they will convert to Islam.<sup>17</sup> In one forum visitors were asked how Shia chat has affected their faith.<sup>18</sup> Out of 38 people 29 answered that their faith has improved, 8 could not see any affect and one said his or her faith became worse. Several people declared that talking about different ways of getting closer to Allah encouraged them to strengthen their own faith; others also appreciated the possibility to exchange their ideas with Sunni Muslims. Various people mainly use the forums to get in touch with like-minded believers posting for example greetings on religious occasions, special prayers and links to other Web sites. Some give their textual message an individual note by adding a religious saying of their choice, the picture of their favourite cleric or calligraphy. Other people use the forums as an information pool posing questions concerning a religious rule or a personal problem and seeking the advice of other believers. The possibility to exchange ideas with the other sex, which is much more problematic in real life, is an important reason for some people to join a forum. So, for example, a man trying to convince a Christian woman that the veil is not a sign of oppression sought the guidance of Muslim women.<sup>19</sup> Anonymity also allows people to utter ideas that deviate from dominant rules and pose provocative questions. One

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<sup>15</sup> Web site of sistani.org. Retrieved on January 01, 2005, from:

<http://www.sistani.org/html/eng/main/index.php?page=4&lang=eng&part=1>.

<sup>16</sup> Not all questions and answers are published online. The fact that these topics have been chosen to be accessible online shows that they are regarded as being of common interest.

<sup>17</sup> Web site of shiachat.com, Retrieved on February 10, 2005,

from: <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=12119>.

<sup>18</sup> Web site of shiachat.com. Retrieved on October 07, 2004, from:

[www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=41706](http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=41706).

<sup>19</sup> Web site of al-imam.net. Retrieved on October 07, 2004, from:

<http://al-imam.net/forums/index.php?showtopic=1024>.

member started a discussion forum in which he asked why smoking opium is forbidden when no such prohibition can be found in the Koran and Hadith.

By asking the advice of co-believers the participants in the discussion forums bypass the religious hierarchy. In their answers to religious questions some members send the relevant Surahs of the Koran and Hadith downloaded from the Internet. Easy access to the religious sources so allows individual believers to question the authority of the clerics.

Most providers have set up rules for the members of the discussion groups which give the administration team the right to delete messages or ban members that for example offend the prophet and the Imams or an individual cleric. Recently, Shia chat has selected some members as a kind of guardians of public moral who notify offences to the administration team. One member asked for greater freedom and complained that some discussion forums which brought up critical problems within Islam were locked though they did not offend anyone. On the other side one can also find numerous comments questioning or ridiculing Islam in general that have escaped the attention of the administration.

### *Web logs*

A more recent phenomenon are Web logs in Persian language, a kind of online diary.<sup>20</sup> They are often described as representing the day-to-day lives of young rebellious Iranians talking about music, movies, friendship and love. Yet, clerics and pious individuals also make frequent use of them. One example is the Web log in Persian, English and Arabic by the cleric Mohammad Ali Abtahi, until his resignation in 2004 Vice President in the Parliamentary Legal Affairs. On the first page he asks the readers: “Let me be myself, Mohammad Ali Abtahi, regardless to my official and governmental status.”<sup>21</sup> By using this media he especially appeals to younger people trying to draw the picture of an open and reformist Islam. Another example is the Web log *Munkarat* (<http://monkrat.persianblog.com>) which represents the political and religiously conservative fraction in Iran and sees itself as part of the fight for the protection of the values of the Islamic revolution. Alireza M. Doostdar shows how this Web log, which features recordings of religious ceremonies, in many ways reflects the culture of the hey’ats in Iran, religious associations that organize Shia rituals.<sup>22</sup> Like in

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<sup>20</sup> See also Bunt 2004, 132-133.

<sup>21</sup> See <http://www.webneveshteha.com/en/>.

<sup>22</sup> See Doostdar 2004.

chat rooms and discussion forums this Web logs cannot prevent oppositional and insulting comments by visitors.

### *Shia rituals in the Internet*

So far, the Web sites introduced here allowed visitors to inform themselves or discuss about the Shia. Yet, some sites also give access to religious rituals teaching for example the rules for the religious washing, the daily prayers or the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Shiite Islam is especially rich in rituals. The pilgrimage to the graves of the Imams and their descendants (*imamzadeh*) plays a central role. Beside the religious occasions shared with the Sunni majority like Ramadan, the month of fasting, the days of the birth and death of the Imams are commemorated by joyous feasts or mourning rituals, respectively. For each occasion there are special prayers of petition or protection. A number of Web sites contain video clips and audio files with religious recitations, sermons and prayers. The user can choose the recitator and religious text he would like to listen to. When opening one Web site (*moharram.ir*) set up by a religious association (*hey'at*) in Iran, a mourning song starts and the visitor is asked to enter only in a state of ritual purity. On the next page one can choose video and audio tapes with recordings for each of the first ten days of Muharram commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein.

A number of Web sites offer the service of *Istikhara* - believers faced with a problem and unable to feel a decision by use of the intellect can seek the guidance of Allah. Normally they will consult a religious expert to do a presage with the help of the Koran. Internet users are asked to fill in a form and depict their problem and the result of the *Istikhara* will be sent to their email address.<sup>23</sup>

Other Web sites give believers the opportunity to send their wishes by email to the holy shrine of Hazrat-e Masume, the sister of Imam Reza, in Qom and to the Jamkaran mosque, a place near Qom, where the return of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam is expected.<sup>24</sup> This possibility is in accordance with the tradition of pilgrims to throw small papers with personal requests inside holy shrines. A simple email replaces a sometimes strenuous pilgrimage to a holy site far away and often outside the reach of the individual believer. The chat of international members

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<sup>23</sup> In one case (<http://www.geocities.com/shjnaqvi/istikhara.htm>) the problem will be forwarded to a cleric in Qom, in another case (<http://www.dartabligh.org/web/istikhara1.html>) it is not clear to whom it is sent.

<sup>24</sup> See for example [http://www.geocities.com/rohullah\\_najafi/areezah/](http://www.geocities.com/rohullah_najafi/areezah/).



of a Shia discussion group about this possibility shows that this service is absorbed.<sup>25</sup> On several sites one also finds requests from individuals asking visitors to pray for the recovering of a sick or for a deceased relative mentioned by name. A personal problem and local custom is so transferred to members of the transnational Islamic community, the *umma* online.

The official Web site *www.agrazavi.org* of the *Astan Quds Razavi*, the Organisation of the Holy Threshold, which administers the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, the holiest place for Shiites in Iran, and the linked Web site *www.imamreza.net* even propagate the possibility to make a pilgrimage online. When entering the Web site *www.agrazavi.org* the visitor is welcomed:

“Your visit into the Astan Quds Razavi global web site will be honoured, and gladness is expressed on the occasion you have obtained to hold contact with the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza(A.S.) from far places. Being the burial place of an immaculate Imam(A.S.) and a great religious leader, this Sacred location has widely attracted the attention of all Muslims throughout the world as well as the notice of the followers of other religions.”

When pressing the link “Pilgrimage from distance” the user can read in flawed English:

“The Holy ā Shrine of Imam Ridha (A.S.) is in fact the venerable object of the eager hearts of his lovers throughout the world. The enthusiasts for Imām with many troubles go toward holy Shrine, and sometimes when they are broken-hearted longing for pilgrimage causes them to be so impatient that, although impossible, they wished they would reside at the threshold of the Holy Shrine. In order to provide facilities for the lovers of this Ziyārat from distant places, the software of ‘cosmoplayer’ is here suggested for the visitors of the official website of the Holy Shrine of Imām Ridhā (A.S.)”<sup>26</sup>

After downloading the software one can enter a 3D model of the complex in Mashhad. Several Shia scholars whose adjudication I asked approved this way of doing a pilgrimage and regarded it as religious meritorious.<sup>27</sup> Whereas in the holy city itself big signs forbid non-believers to enter the shrine, no such reference is made here. The above mentioned Web site *www.moharram.ir* and the linked Web site *www.ramazān.ir* dedicated to the month of fasting are the only I could find that demands from the user to perform the ritual washing before

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<sup>25</sup> Web site of shiachat.com. Retrieved on October 30, 2004, from:  
<http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=41519>.

<sup>26</sup> See also <http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?id=1280>.

<sup>27</sup> The clerics who answered my question via email have been Ayatollah Al-Qazwini, Ayatollah Khamenei, Ayatollah Lankarani and Ayatollah Makaremshirazi.

entering the site. Questions about ritual purity and the prohibition for non-believers to touch the Koran are not addressed.<sup>28</sup>

### *Shia rituals online and offline – a comparison*

Listening to, watching or performing a religious ritual online is most often done individually. By making use of sounds and visual elements creators may try to recreate real space in virtual space but the temporal and geographical distance to the Internet user cannot be bridged. People can perceive themselves as part of a larger group of Shia believers, as lovers of the ahl-ul bait, the prophet's family, but the unmediated experience appealing to all senses lacks. The course and the atmosphere of rituals offline emerge in the interaction of all participants. Sensual stimulations play an important role in the creation of feelings of community and unison: people sitting pressed tightly together, crying, bowing and singing in unison, the smell of rose water and incense, the lights turned off. Whereas in rituals offline the body plays an essential role the Internet is characterized by disembodiment.<sup>29</sup> This also means that access is much easier. In "real life" access is restricted by factors like gender, a certain outward appearance and shared religious convictions, in online rituals no such control is possible. Besides, the user can withdraw at any time or just lurk, something impossible at rituals offline.

Yet, when compared with other religions like Zoroastrianism, Shia rituals are characterized by the absence of strict prescriptions and a certain openness to innovations and individual creativity. Ritual actions like any other action should be judged by the *niyyat*, the person's intention. This concept of *niyyat* can also be applied to online rituals. In this sense a virtual pilgrimage might be acceptable if it is done with pure and honest intent. During my fieldwork a woman lacking the financial means to travel to Mecca narrated how in a dream she made the Hajj pilgrimage. In her dream she was able to transcend social, spatial and temporal barriers. For her the dream world was the more real world – a feeling that some may also develop for the virtual world.

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<sup>28</sup> According to the above mentioned clerics the ritual washing (wudhu) when reading the Koran online is recommended but not compulsory.

<sup>29</sup> See also Mac Williams 2004, 236 and O'Leary 2004, 47. O'Leary rightly points out that further studies should ask what "ritual *gains* in the virtual environment and what meanings the participants are able to derive from these practices..."

*Conclusions – Cyberspace as a mirror and catalyst of social change*

The paper could only give a first insight into the representation of the Shia in the Internet and the intentions of some of the Web site creators. Questions about the profile of the actual users of online religious materials have only been touched. Further investigations should ask: Who precisely is making use of the opportunities offered on the Web. What are their motivations? How is it related to their religious life offline? How do they for example experience a virtual pilgrimage? Do they ascribe the same value to it as to a “real” pilgrimage? Here I support the view that an immanent analysis of Web sites should be combined with traditional fieldwork: real-time participant observation and face-to-face interviews.<sup>30</sup>

In many ways the Internet reflects changes in the religious culture that have already occurred offline. The acquisition of religious and ritual expertise in Iran is for a long time characterized by diversity. Religious authorities that have gained their knowledge in a traditional way as a disciple of a cleric or student at a religious school compete with others who passed the courses of a university or private school and self-declared specialist that have done private learning. Thus, the Internet is just one more means of acquiring knowledge to be added. Religious practice in Iran is characterized by an increasing individuality and mobility. Instead of just taking part in the rituals in their neighbourhood believers follow the preacher of their choice to other parts of the city. The Koran and Hadith collections can be bought on CD and many preachers distribute tapes with sermons and religious songs. Several young professional women explained to me that they lack the time to take part in rituals regularly but listen to these tapes. Some followed a more individual approach to religion telling me that they feel nearer to God when they are alone reading religious texts. Islamist believers often highlight the educational aspects of Islam. They discourage the communal and performative aspects of rituals and see them primarily as places for religious learning. Often they emphasised religious convictions as main criteria for bonding that even exceeds family relationships. This fits well with the Internet as an educational tool and global virtual communities based on common interests and beliefs. The changes introduced to the religious culture in Iran by the Islamic Republic and the religious forms supported by its Islamist

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<sup>30</sup> See also O’Leary 2004, 48.

supporters can be brought more easily in harmony with the characteristics of the Internet than those of more traditional believers.

Some features attributed to the Internet – easy accessibility, multiplicity, anonymity or pseudo-anonymity and disembodiment– are of special importance in the context of Shia Islam and with reference to the authoritarian claim of the clerical establishment. Whereas inside Iran the Iranian government tries to enforce one belief system, the Internet is characterized by religious pluralism. Individuals can share their personal religious beliefs and ideas with others. The anonymity of the Internet makes it much easier for opponents to express their views without fear of persecution. Even on Web sites near to the Iranian establishment one finds several critical and sometimes hostile comments. Speed and multitude makes any effective censorship impossible. Further, the easy access to the religious sources and ways of communication across boundaries can be used by individuals to challenge the sole authority of clerics and strike them with their own weapons.

On the one hand discussion forums are full of discriminating offences regarding gender and race. On the other hand communication in the Internet differs from face-to-face communication that it allows the participants to hide or disguise their identity. Boundaries like gender, social class, ethnicity and any kind of outward appearance are not visible. Especially in the Islamic context with its strict sex segregation and several restrictions for women in their freedom of movement this plays an important role. Women can come into contact with new people without having to leave their homes.<sup>31</sup> In chat rooms and discussion forums men and women can converse freely. In one forum a man explained that it was through taking part in online discussions that he learned about and accepted different female perspectives on the veil. One woman told me that she always chooses a neutral nickname in the discussion forum because she felt to be taken more seriously when she does not reveal her sex. A man narrated that he once entered a chat room discussing temporary marriage with a female name to see the reactions of the other male participants. No one can prevent men to enter the “Sister Section” of some discussions forums. Brenda Danet points out:

“... masquerading in this fashion promotes consciousness-raising about gender issues and might contribute to the long-term destabilization of the way we currently construct gender.”

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<sup>31</sup> Thereby cyberspace blurs the boundary between the public and private sphere. See also Helland 2000, 221.

The Internet has been embraced by Iranian clerics faster and with lesser doubts than any other new technology before. Yet, it is the one which can challenge their authority, monopoly over religious and ritual knowledge and claim for uniformness much deeper than any previous mass medium or communication tool.

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