

Living Shi'ism: Instances of Ritualisation Among Islamist Men in Contemporary Iran.
By David Thurfjell. Leiden: Brill, 2006. Pp. viii+276, references, index. ISBN: 978-90-04-15345-5.

Reviewed by Zahra Naghshband, University of Erfurt

In societies undergoing religious change and reform, anti-reform groups are often at risk of being misanalysed, homogenised, simplified, and perceived as less interesting to research. This is what distinguishes David Thurfjell's book from other works on the same subject. Contrary to the prevailing trend, he traces the thread of change among anti-reform Shī'ī conservatives in contemporary Iran from 1999 to 2003. To understand this resistance to change, he wisely employs the lens of "ritualisation" which can paradoxically function both as a tool for continuity and a sphere for creativity.

The book primarily tells the story of five devout Shī'ī *basijis*, who all attend the same mosque in Isfahan, exploring their ritualistic lives with all their fluctuations and changes over four years. The author conducts this sensitive ethnography with a depth and nuance that sets the book apart from many similar works. Although published in 2006, it remains relevant for readers interested in the religious changes and dynamic interaction between secular and Shī'ī currents in Iran. One reason for this enduring relevance is the author's approach in selecting the hardcore, zealous supporters of the regime—an anti-change group that was labelled by him as "exceptions" in 1999, during the rise of reformist discourse and their electoral victory. By closely studying five of these individuals, and linking their personal, ritualistic, and communal religious lives, Thurfjell demonstrates that even within the hard-line supporters of the Iranian Supreme Leader and conservative Shī'ism, personal rituals are individualised and operate beyond the top-down authorisation process.

In the first chapter, Thurfjell clarifies that he aims to explore the meaning of sorrow rituals and the purpose and significance of ritualisation in the lived experiences of his five informants, chosen from a substantial group of regular attendees at a mosque in Isfahan. He introduces his informants in this chapter as *basiji*, anti-reform, and zealous supporters of Islamic regulations. In the second chapter, Thurfjell presents a macro-level view of Iranian society during a period of rising demand for reform, which intensified after Khatami's victory in the 1997 presidential election, amidst a tense religious landscape (22-25). This broader perspective allows his empirical description to oscillate between the closed community in the mosque, its participants and authorities, and the larger societal tensions.

In chapter three, Thurfjell introduces the theme of “embodying virtue” and asks, “How is the message of virtue—which the informants aim to base their lives on—conveyed by mosques and constructed and used by informants?” (90) He clarifies his theoretical position by rejecting the traditional mind-body dichotomy and explaining his belief that “virtue” is embodied. He argues that the embodiment of virtue is largely reflected in the informants' attitudes towards sexuality, women, and gender, leading to stringent control through ritual practices (70). Thurfjell makes a significant argument at the end of this chapter by stating, “Being Muslim embodies the Islamic ideal of virtue, which occurs through a process of cross-fertilisation of culture and body” (92).

In chapter four, Thurfjell shifts to discussing the embodiment of emotions through the employment of ritualisation to keep informants on their chosen path. This chapter can be considered the most important in his book as he explores in it the centrality of dysphoria and the invaluable position of suffering in Iranian culture (95). He beautifully explains the ambiguity of joy and sorrow in Shi'ī rituals through the words of the informants, revealing the complexity of the blissfulness of grief in their ritualised lives. Theoretically, when Thurfjell discusses the emotional aspects of Shi'ī rituals—their spontaneity or manipulation—he employs Saba Mahmood's perspective that the border of “what one feels and what one is expected to feel is vague” (105). To

Thurfjell's informants, crying for the tragedy of the *Ahl al-Bayt* is like "flying," however, he argues that this crying is also attached to the informants' personal anguish. He identifies a certain level of agency in the informants which manifests in their deliberate striving to reach the desired and conscious state of sorrow.

From chapter five onward, Thurfjell fluctuates between the "canonical" meaning of rituals and their "authorisation," along with the informants' positions. He observes that the informants' strong indictments are rooted in reason and force as part of socialisation (138). Thurfjell defines "authorisation" as the social process of creating the power of superiority without argument and force (135). To understand this, he analyses the content of lectures and lamentations in the chosen mosque. According to him, these mediums are tools of authorisation because of the framework in which they are presented (142). Thurfjell aims to show that lectures, lamentations, and ritualisation activities contribute to the construction of a community. His key points include the general call for obedience (from '*ulamā*'), identification with the *Ahl al-Bayt*, and the continuity of identity in a ritualised context.

Thurfjell titles the seventh chapter of his book "Crumbling Authority," inspired by the case of Jamie, the most important and impressive figure of this chapter, who exemplifies the process of change and distance from the community. By reflecting on Jamie as an example of the failure of authorisation, Thurfjell sees the informant's ideas about the Shī'ī authorities ('*ulamā*') in various degrees of acceptance and denunciation.

In the final chapter, Thurfjell offers a sharp, analytical understanding of the significance of "ritualisation" throughout his study. He employs Catherine Bell's notion of ritualisation to view rituals as ongoing processes rather than fixed entities. However, he specifically defines the term in his work as the construction of "otherness" in human activity (229). This definition allows him to include activities not traditionally labelled as rituals as long as they exhibit the otherness aspect of ritual. To highlight the creative aspect of ritual, Thurfjell avoids strictly defining what he means by the word. Consequently, the book

does not delve deeply into analysing ritual structure and sequences or their detached presence in the lives of informants. Instead, he broadens the concept to encompass living Shi'ism, which aligns with the informants' lifestyles. Nonetheless, to address the more rigid aspects in his analysis, he incorporates the "canonical" meaning of ritual (235).

His nuanced conclusion emphasises the creative aspects of the ritual life of his informants, despite their zealous and conservative beliefs. This is an important argument, as academic trends usually attribute such agency only to those who defy and reject conservative Islam. He strengthens this idea by showing how the informants' ritual activities correspond to their personal lives and connect to their anxieties, depression, poverty, and other issues. Although social class is not directly addressed as the main analytical framework, its presence is subtle and influential. It remains unclear whether the fact that all the participants belong to the lower class and struggle with poverty is coincidental or another significant analytical element. Regardless, by breaking the stereotype of a group that is most dependent on and benefits from state resources, the cost of Jamie's change of belief and his subsequent social decline provides a balanced view, preventing the homogenisation of this group.

It is worth mentioning that the main shortcoming of the book, of which the author is well aware, is its male-centric perspective and the absence of female encounters and experiences in the context of ritualisation. In chapter three, the author describes the participants' views on gender and sexuality, but this description fails to provide a dynamic, deep, and personalised image of their perceptions and emotions, offering instead a depiction similar to media rhetoric and sermon content. The trace of a "pro-revolutionary" woman is only notable in Jamie's story; Jamie lost his wife and the author attributes his severe ideological shift to repressed anger towards her as she had influenced his beliefs (176).

To sum up, Thurfjell's book can be read on one level as an attempt to generate a balanced and precise ethnographic work. While maintaining a critical distance, it never conveys to the reader a sense of bias,

homogenisation, or an exotic view of lived Shīʿism. This balance is primarily achieved through his minimal use of ideological terms, the natural integration of emic vocabulary without making the text difficult, and his continuous reflexive stance regarding his field position. His book exemplifies how discussions about positionality in the field—which are seamlessly intertwined with the description of the community, the mosque, and his interactions—can make ethnographic writing, especially about religion, credible and foster a new descriptive language.

On another level, revisiting this book has paved the way for future ethnographies of contemporary Shīʿism. This is not only because of the powerful and interwoven depiction of rituals, the political context, and the agency of participants but also because, despite the rapid pace of change, the reader can still trace contemporary society and ask whether, after 18 years, new or different instances of ritualisation can be discussed in Iran. What dynamics of change and rigidity characterise living Shīʿism in Iranian society today, and how far is it from the depiction in this book?