

An introduction to protection of and respecting sacred places of religions and their impact on peace and stability in West Asian Countries

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Abstract

It is not exaggeration to say that West Asia is a cradle and hub of religions and denominations in the world. Because a variety of religions and believers and even numerous and diverse religious holy places can be found in this part of the world. Yet, there are many conflicts once in a while in this region, the new ones are much more serious than the previous. Each religion has its own fundamentals such as the Holy Books, the saints and beliefs. The sacred places where these fundamentals are learned, praised and respected have the key role but are unforgettable feature to make peace in this region. At the same time, this diversity is a proof of division and tension when it comes to be misused by satanic bullying powers or even self-righteousness with having no tolerance and having sense of superiority over others, which are manifestation of quarrel on ideas, attacking people each other and destroying the holy places there. In this essay we intend to investigate the sacred places in religions, in west Asia, the importance and origin of their holiness, and the role they have in making peace and tranquility and the way they can build it. To do so, first we have to find the major religions and denominations based on the demographic factors each has and then we will address the above-mentioned dimensions so that a step can be taken to create peace and stability. Descriptive analytic and library research method are utilized in this study.

Key words: West Asia, religions, peace, sacred places, holiness.

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Introduction

Man is a social being who has always organized his behavior and way of life in society and interacting with other people in society. Looking at the customs of the countries and even in the farthest regions of the world, it can be concluded that without social interactions, people will reach their goals later or never attain them. On the other hand, we should not forget the role of religions in bringing people together. A role whose goal is the comfort and peace of human life. It is natural that when religion calls for a gathering, it also considers a place for it to pursue and implement its goals. Among the different regions of the world, West Asia has a special religious and cultural feature.

This region is the cradle of great religions and the origin of ancient cultures. Naturally, the believers in each of these beliefs, religions and denominations in this part of the world have holy places and temples where they perform or follow up their religious affairs. It is in these places that, individually, the characters of religious people are formed and their behavioral manifestations are shaped. In the social aspect, these places show the spirit of social solidarity and religiosity and sometimes bring resistance and unity. Therefore, the sanctity of these places is very important for their followers because these are sacred places for the transmission of sacred things, a result of which is the training pious people and the spirituality expansion in the society.

Now it is important that a part of the world, that is West Asia, which quantitatively has a large amount of these places and the respect of these places is essential for their believers everywhere in the world, how can it spread peace in the social and individual spheres to the four corners of the world.

A problem that appears in our world today, and is inflaming the war and enmity in this part occasionally, people start fighting with each other with belief and hope of reward, and from where their beliefs were formed, they arise and fight and even destroy and desecrate the holy sites of other religions, which inflames the fire of war and makes the conflicts more intense and deeper. Because they consider themselves mentally and spiritually dependent and indebted to that place, and they consider themselves obligated to



support that desecrated place, and willingly or unwillingly, they move towards that area to defend. Admittedly, the enmity of Islam and humanity, on the other hand, deteriorates the situation by media they possess.

The thing that should be investigated is, firstly, what is the origin of the sanctity of these places? And secondly, what role can these places play in making peace

and stability, which we will discuss further? Mostly in East Asia which is not just a region with limited countries. Rather, is the origin of civilization and the great religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

Among the population of about eight billion people in the world, these three major religions have about four billion followers, almost one half (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/12/14/1343427>) and looking at the history of these three major religions, it can be seen that West Asia, this specific area, is the starting point of not only these three religions, but many other religions as well.

It is natural that when it comes to religion, its practices and rituals are considered inevitable parts of it. Because religion is, basically, a kind of preparation to guide behavioral and ideological styles as well as organizing and making some religious and practical rituals. Certainly, in order to perform this last part, which is the facade of each religion, in addition to the necessity of the believers' presence in that religion, we also need a place to perform those practices.

According to what was mentioned before, the origin of many of these religions is West Asia, so naturally, the meaning of these holy places is the places that are located in this region of the world. In the following, we will discuss the historical dimensions and sanctity of some of these places.



Holy sites of religions in West Asia

The holy sites in Islam

Ka bah

It can be said that the holy House of Kaaba, which is located inside the Masjid al-Haram today, is the holiest place for Muslims. Even according to verse 96 of Surah al-Imran, the main building of this holy place dates back before the Prophet Ibrahim, and he raised and restored that building, and for this reason, Masjid al-Haram can be called the first mosque, that is a place of worship, in its general sense. Because before Islam, the areas around the *Ka bah* were called Masjid al-Haram. (Azraqi, 1416 AH, vol 1, p34). In one narration, it is even called the oldest mosque in the history. (ʿbn ya , Tarikh Makkah, 1416, vol 1 , p3, / wikishia, Masjid Al aram).

Mosque means a place of prostration. Sajdah is one of the parts of Muslim prayer, which is the highest symbol of worship and humility before God, and a person puts his forehead on the ground in front of God.

In the history of Islam, the first mosque that was built by the Prophet of Islam is called the Quba Mosque, which is located at a distance of six kilometers from the city of Medina. (Wikishia, Quba mosque). So due to this history, mosques are of great importance in Islam, wherever they could be located.

Church

Christianity, as the largest population of Abrahamic religion, performs the religious practices and worships in a place called “ Church”. It’s said the word church is driven from a Greek word that is *ekkl sia* which means “ the holy Assembly”. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/church-Christianity>). Nowadays this place is holy for Christians around the world, whether they are Catholic, protestant or orthodox. Needless to say that when it is said church here, it means the physical structure and building of this holy place. Probably in some other situations it refers to the Christian communities, yet we do not mean it exclusively. Due to having worships and some practices performed in this holy place, so the main construction of a church can be regarded as a significant location. Surely the community, which sometimes the word refers to, is of great importance.

Iranians made new Churches and even some Creeds for



themselves. William McElwee Miller believes that In Parthia, which was the name of the ancient Iran and Mesopotamia was a part of it, Christianity spread due to presence of some of them in Pentecost. After listening the apostles preach, they returned their home and preached the Gospels to their people. (McElwee Miller, 1931,268). There were many Christian believers in different parts of Iran and they were preached in Pahlavi language. (McElwee Miller, 1931,285).

Of course, there are many other places more than what mentioned. Like Masjid Al

Aqsa in Palestine, the holy sites of Imams of Shi'i Muslims, all the mosques and so on and so forth in Christianity.

The origin of holiness of sacred places in West Asia

It seems the places are getting their holiness from the practices and worships which are performed there. As for Islam, Mosque is where people get purified, that is, training and growing a knowledgeable and spiritual Muslim that can have chain effect in a society begins in the holy place of Mosque. The holy Quran points this purpose in the ninth Surah that : "Therein are men who love to keep pure, and Allah loves those who keep pure." (Surah Al Tawbah, verse 9). When a place is training people in both, spiritual and worldly dimensions, and he has potential of being affected by this high teachings and influence others, then there are individual and social effect of men of God who got the lessons in the mosques and are ready to preach and call people for good deeds and prohibit them from evil deeds which is one of the great goals of Islam in its social aspect. There it could be called the place spirituality and guidance based on what was said in another verse of the holy Quran : " In houses Allah has allowed to be raised and wherein His Name is celebrated; He is glorified therein, morning and evening,"(Surah Al Nour, verse24). Here, al-Zamakhshari (1074 - 1143) points out that the house means " mosque". (al-Zamakhshari, Vol 3, p 242).

Apparently, the things are done in the holy mosques play a key role to make it sacred and respected.



The role of holy sites to make peace and tranquility in West Asia

What comes to mind about the importance of the holy places is the role they can play in both, individual and social life of people. Even the precepts and teaching which a believer learns, are manifested in society. If these places instruct people to strengthen the unity, peace and tranquility, helping others, benevolence, selflessness and all the good deeds among themselves, there is no opportunity for violence and aggression in the world, especially in west Asia, which is of populated with different religions.

For instance, a holy place could be a place to cause harm the others. In this case it couldn't be called holy however. There is where to establish unrest. It is in the holy Quran about those who intended making a Mosque to harm others : “ As for those who took to a mosque for sabotage and for defiance, and to cause division among the faithful” (Surah Al Tawbah, verse 107). It's an example that may happen in the world to demonstrate that a holy place that the plots are planned to harm the believers is a dangerous place not only for the security, but even for the soul of the believers. And the truth is the pivotal role of these places to be played like what Christians do in Iran and Iraq to show their solidarity with Shi'i people in the first ten days of Muharram which is a mourning duration of martyrdom anniversary of the holy Imam Hussain(A.S) in years which the New Year coincides with this event. For example, in the month of Muharram 1431 AH, when Christmas coincided with the days of mourning for Imam Hussain (peace be upon him), Christian groups decided not to celebrate Christmas and the beginning of the Christian New Year in respect of Imam Hussain in order to show their respect to Islam in Iraq. (www.sibtayn.com)

In the other side, some Iranian officials offer their respect to the Christian Martyrs, who participated in eight years defense against Iraqi Ba 1 regime, in December of 2021. (<https://humanrights.eadl.ir/news>)



The importance of holy sites protection

First point here is that this issue either could be considered as an interreligious or, in the other side, as intra- religious one.

As for the first type, naturally, there are many disagreements or misunderstandings in one religion among its denominations and sects. As long as there is no physical harm on the believers, there is no such a big deal. But the problem begins when these disagreements or even misunderstandings move to the quarrel and then lead to disrespecting the holy places and finally to the fights. One example in Islam is destroying the holy cemetery of Shi'i Imams and the some great companions of the holy prophet in Medina in Saudi Arabia, which is named *Baqī*. This place got demolished twice. " first the *Wahabis* destroyed some parts of it in 1221 AH. And then in Month of Rama an in ۱۳۴۴ AH." (Qa' Askar, Al', p118) . By the way, Shi'i people condemn this act and show their anger on this act on 8th of Shawwal each year. Continuation of this type of action (while and there is no tolerance from both sides of this conflict) will certainly lead to great massacre .

The second type is regarded when the followers of religions not only don't they tolerate each other's beliefs and don't respect peaceful co-existence, but they take steps toward hurting others who believe in another religion or faith. And it's just the starting point. It means they, sometimes, exaggerate and they go to destroy the places which their opponents do worships inside them or respect. The point is that, as someone might not believe another one's faith, but it couldn't be a reason to fight with. True or not, people are not the same in theory, but if someone take some risky aggressive steps, like destroying the holy places, against the one who is not in the same faith, then it comes to the fight, unrest, war and the worst thing that is genocide. Like what happened in Rohingya, Myanmar. This happened in two rounds. First ,In October 2016 and ended in January 2017. Second, in August 2017 and is ongoing. (www.tasnimnews.com چشم‌هایی که در میانمار نسل‌کشی (مسلمانان را نمی‌بینند).

Based on reports, the extremist groups of Budhists destroy about 16 mosques out of 17 mosques which were built there.(

<http://www.shabestan.ir/detail/News>). And in another extremist act in New Zealand in march 2019, an armed man entered two mosques and opened fire on people who were performing prayer and killed as many as 51 Muslims.(<https://parsi.euronews.com>) .

These two types of disrespecting are disgusting, whether inter or intra-religious fanatic act mixed with aggression and violence surely lead to a chain measures done by sides of religions companions. Needless to say that these issues are not only due to inter or intra-religious issues, but rather political sometimes like the influence of the media and the intelligence services of bullying powers in the world.

It may come to mind that what the role of protection of such places, which the practices are performed and many worships are done there, could be. The first point is that these areas are holy and when you call a place in this way, many people who support them are sensitive to even a minor happening in these places.

And the second is that, in any way we look at it whether it's inter or intra-religious act, it breaks the rule of humanitarian duties among people. It is the first point we don't know where the end is.

The cause of holy places destruction

One of the major causes of the holy sites destruction is **Desacralization**, and the origin could be satanic politics, and they misuse unawareness, prejudice and lack of tolerance. In these two cases, the followers of one religion or denomination just judge a book just by its cover.

That is, they interpret the beliefs of others superficially and they don't ponder on them. There are many reports on violent acts which happened and the doers got regretted from it and they admitted of having misunderstanding of the opposite faith. In what has occurred in west Asia these recent years, the ISIS, the extremist groups- in fact, these are political groups not religious ones and their leaders do not believe in any religion. Their leaders are slaves and puppets of the hegemonic powers- which they started a brutal and aggressive manner in which they made mass destruction of the holy places, regardless they are of Muslims or Christians or any other sect in religions beside the killing innocent people in immoral ways. Words are inadequate to express the quantity and the way of killing people and destruction they made. Their inhumane deeds are

more than such things, they destroyed all factories, they plundered oil as well.

As for the prejudice, when a person's mind is filled with just do's and don'ts and he doesn't make a place for analyzing the situation and softening the act he is doing it contributes to a violent that has no result except regretfulness.

Tolerance is the vital behavior of a believer, especially when you are living in a place like west Asia where is origins of many religions. When people find another one of these two types that is mentioned by Imam Ali in Nahj al Balaghah that : “

Remember that the citizens of the state are of two categories. They are either your brethren in religion or your brethren in kind.” (Imam Ali, Nahj Al Balaghah, letter53). When people look at others this way, many problem will be solved within a society and the blessing of God may be sent down. Likewise, there is such a thing in the Bible about living with others and having tolerance and mutual understanding to have a calm and peaceful life. It says : “do unto others as you like it would be done unto you” (Matthew,7:12- Luke, 6:31). In this way, as people are praying in a Mosque or a Church, they can live in peace if these above mentioned elements are followed, provided that they do it in practice and theory, both.



Conclusion

The human being is of different interests. Surprisingly, when it comes to religions reaching to his goals is made holy. If the interests, which are, intrinsically, an inner and essential part of each human, aren't guided and controlled in a peaceful way, it may go wrong, it may disrespect the holy things of others and transgress others' rights. In this case, which is the role of protection of holy places in stability of the west Asia, respecting the holy areas and sites is of great significance in way if it's not observed it may lead to many destructive conflicts and wars. This is not only for the west Asia, in any place of the world, if people do not respect the others holy things, it may cause to a conflict. Undoubtedly, there is an opportunity of talking, dialogue and intellectual discussion but it doesn't mean disrespectfulness. As it is mentioned in the holy Quran: " Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance" (surah al An'am, verse 108). Surely, there are many disagreements among people on faith, but the best solution for that is respecting each other.



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بررسی حفاظت و احترام به اماکن مقدس ادیان و تأثیر آنها بر صلح و ثبات در کشورهای غرب آسیا

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چکیده

اغراق نیست اگر بگوییم غرب آسیا مهد و قطب ادیان و مذاهب در جهان است. زیرا انواع ادیان و معتقدان به ادیان و حتی اماکن مقدس مذهبی متعدد و متنوعی را می‌توان در این نقطه از جهان یافت. با این حال، هر از چند گاهی در این منطقه درگیری‌های زیادی رخ می‌دهد که درگیری‌های جدید بسیار جدی‌تر از گذشته است. هر دین مبانی خاص خود را دارد، مانند کتب مقدس، مقدسات و اعتقادات. مکان‌های مقدسی که این اصول در آنها آموخته، ستایش و احترام می‌شود، نقش کلیدی اما فراموش‌نشدنی برای ایجاد صلح در این منطقه دارند. در عین حال این تنوع خود دلیلی بر تفرقه و تنش است که تجلی نزاع بر سر عقاید، حمله به مردم و تخریب اماکن مقدسه است.

در این مقاله قصد داریم به بررسی مکان‌های مقدس در ادیان، در غرب آسیا، اهمیت و منشأ قداست آنها و نقشی که در ایجاد صلح و آرامش دارند و نحوه ساختن آن پردازیم. برای این کار ابتدا باید ادیان و مذاهب اصلی را بر اساس عوامل جمعیتی هر کدام بیابیم و سپس به ابعاد فوق می‌پردازیم تا گامی در جهت ایجاد صلح و ثبات برداشته شود.

واژگان کلیدی

تقدس، اماکن مقدس، صلح، ادیان، غرب آسیا.

