

## Perception of Religious “Other” and the Quality of Its Narration in the Cultural Context of Iran\*

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### Article Info

### ABSTRACT

#### Article type:

Research Article

#### Article history:

Received 29 May 2022

Received in revised 21 July  
2022

Accepted 29 August 2022

Published online 1 January  
2023

#### Keywords:

religious other, cultural  
diversity, exclusivism,  
pluralism.

Human cultural vision in religious rituals and ceremonies of different religions, denominations and sects is of such a difference that this difference sometimes puts them in complete contradiction with each other. Apparently, every religion speaks of the eternal principles that must be followed by that religion's followers and seeks to raise reasons of the veracity of its own claims as well as the refutation of the claims of other religions in order to prove its own supremacy in the face of the inferiority of the other religions. Today, man needs to have an interpretation and perspective of these diversities and to offer a judgement of their veracity, rightness or deviance may it make the best choice in rational terms. Referring to the ideas of thinkers is one of the methods that can help the humans to identify or mitigate these challenges. Thus, this study aims at assaying the perception of religious other from the point of view of the human scientists. The approach of this research is based on the qualitative method focusing on thematic analysis, data collection through semi-structured interviews as well as the analysis of the findings based on the stages of the thematic analysis. The research field is constituted by the professors of the universities of Tehran city. Sampling process continued in a purposeful manner among the professors of philosophy and sociology up to 8 cases until the theoretical saturation. The results of the research show that religious other within Iranian cultural context includes eight sub themes: Sunni, Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews, Mandaeans, Yarsans, Derwishes and Baha'is.

**Cite this article:** Alizadeh, S.; Sadeghi, A.; Adib, Y.; Ghaderi, M. (2023). Perception of Religious “Other” and the Quality of Its Narration in the Cultural Context of Iran. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 16(41), 285-301. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22034/JPIUT.2022.51854.3230>



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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22034/JPIUT.2022.51854.3230>

Publisher: University of Tabriz.

\* The present article was extracted from the PhD thesis written by Sahar Alizadeh Niri at Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University.

## Introduction

The existence of different ethnicities, religions and creeds as the current cultural diversities in a country and land and their clash and interaction has been one of the long-lasting issues for the rulers in the political and social arena. This issue after the WWII, particularly following the mass onrush of the immigrants to European countries and the US and later the globalization, was more dealt with in the domain of political and social thought in the form of the management of cultural diversity or multiculturalism; for cultural diversities, as a minority versus the ruling group have been struggling to get their cultural identity to be recognized and noted in the cultural policy making (Mohammadi and Homayoun, 2016: 106). When one speaks of identity, discussion is mostly focused on the national identity. I do not intend to see national identity as the core identity; of course this does not imply that I underestimate the national identity as compared to other identities, rather my reason for this lies in the fact that in most cases we use national identity as a means to exert discrimination against the other who is different from us (Moe, 2018: 262).

In many countries, religion plays a key role in the formation of national identity. Different religions form different ideas of truth, including moral and cognitive, and socialize their followers through the preservation of these truths. In this way, an exclusive social group takes form that turns into the basis of a nation. This nation morally and cognitively becomes an exception as compared to other irreligious peoples, because they think that others have different truths and one cannot trust them as a loyal and true man (Dingley, 2009: 367). Thus, humans are classified into the *insider* and the *outsider* not based on sharing the truth of humanity, rather according to their belonging to a particular religious tradition. One of the dangerous consequences of such a perspective is the use of any means for invitation of the other to one's own religion. The bitter experience of the past centuries of revealed and unrevealed religions as well as the expansion of the religious and sectarian wars is one of the chief consequences of the domination of such an approach in the religious traditions of Islam and Christianity in the course of the history. Generally speaking, this perspective leads to closing our eyes to the truths and goods of others, negligence of their values, turning a deaf ear to their messages, omission of the shared values among us and them around such themes as humanity and moral principles, increase of religious bigotry and selfishness and underestimation of their properties (Qorbani, 2019: 285). Moreover, in present age, the majority of the societies and states are heterogeneous and diverse from ethnic, racial, cultural and religious points of view. One dares to say that there is no homogenous and pure society anywhere. But in most Muslim countries, the action of the political and educational officials in higher level is majorly exclusivistic. Precisely speaking, their religious approach to Islamic doctrines is exclusivistic. Unfortunately, each one of the Muslim countries is influenced by a particular perspective and as a result, has a specific reading of Islamic religion and it is even more unfortunate that they consider their own reading to be the orthodox reading of Islam while the other readings are christened as incorrect and baseless. Today in Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia or Salafism of Egypt and Jordan, or the ideas of some Arab Sunnis and even among the Shia Pakistanis, one can find a clear example

of this mode of thought. Most of the great Muftis in the aforementioned countries have excommunicated the ideas of other jurisprudential Islamic schools and issued appalling fatwas against them. Some similar cases can be seen in our country which is a token of the theorization of the exclusivist ideas. Then, logic requires one to consider necessary the knowledge of the cultures, sects, and religious creeds of other societies for the development of himself and his own society in such an age (Aliabadi, 2018: 2-6). Bagheri (2001: 58) radically rebukes exclusivism in Islam and states: neither has Islam suggested that Truth is found only by it nor does it consider the early religions' distortion as a reason for hollowing them from truth. According to Islam, not only exclusivism is not compatible with the truth of the religions, rather it is educationally damaging. The claim of exclusiveness brings about negative dogmatism in those who believe in the religion at issue and gives rise to resistance and opposition in those who do not believe in that religion. Qorbani (2020: 337) in a study titled “Religions diversity and the problem of the religious Other” claims that the acceptance of the diversity of religions in practice reveals the objective necessity of peaceful coexistence, reliance on global ethics and the resort to the logic of dialogue. The theoretical and practical outcome of paying attention to the problem of religions diversity is the existential recognition of the religious other and the observation of its practical and real requirements, i.e. the pursuit of peace, tolerance, reciprocal cooperation, and the commitment to its theoretic requirements, viz. avoidance of exclusivist view of one's own religion and the acceptance of the truth and the possibility of salvation for the religious other in different analogically-graded degrees. The theoretical, logical and theological outcome related to one's own religion can be finding new horizons for the recognition of the valuable points of one's personal religious outlook and the reclamation of the spirit of reform in those beliefs in one's religious tradition which require to be reconstructed. Zakeri et al. (2019: 67) in his study entitled “Concepts of Other, Other acceptance, and Other antipathy in Mawlānā's Masnavi-Manavi” have studied types of others and Rumi's definition of them. To reach a more precise exposition, they have classified it under the pattern of the other in juristic and mystical world. In the juristic world, the non-Muslim and religious minorities are seen negatively and contemptuously. In the mystic world not only the minorities do not have the marginal countenance rather all humans enjoy an equal share of the Divine Compassion. It is indeed whatever stopping man from reaching the perfection that is introduced as the other. Jafarian, Bashir & Miree (2018: 9) have conducted a study entitled “Cultural readings of inter-religion dialogue in Iran”. The authors in this essay have given authenticity to the religious other in dialogue adopting an anthropological perspective and considered paying attention to human dignity, equality of rights and common values as the most important factors that will contribute to the identification of self and the other around human submissiveness. Amini & Razavi (2016: 5) in a study entitled “Religions self and other in historiography of Aalam Araye Naderi” have discussed this issue. Since the process of the completion of this book has been influenced by a number of internal and external events, several

words such as infidelity and belief, truth and falsity, the headquarter of infidelity and the headquarter of Islam and the army of infidels are found that express the intellectual opposition and the distinction between the Shia insiders and the Sunni outsiders. As a matter of fact, the majority of the research projects in Iran in general have dealt with the question of the other from a mostly philosophical or literary point of view and paid lesser attention to the religious dimensions and identity issues. Particularly, no independent study has ever been devoted to the discussion of the perception of the religious other within the cultural framework of contemporary Iran. Accordingly, the main question of the current study will be as follows: what are the religious “others” within the cultural context of Iran from the perspective of the thinkers of Humanities? More importantly, upon which theological basis can we appreciate religious diversity?

John Hick, the contemporary philosophy is known with religious pluralism more than any other character in the world. He divides his own views of the problem of religious opposition into three classes of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism (Soleimani, 2014: 21-22). Exclusivism suggests that there is only one true or authentic religion. The true religion is one and the rest are false. The followers of this perspective view only their own religion or religious episteme as true and trustworthy and at the same time deny the other religions and sects as irrelevant and outdated and consider the followers of other religions as deluded and the people of hell (Sajjadi, 2012: 93). The most important feature of religious exclusivism is the unwillingness to seeing the “other”, lack of interest in hearing the voice of the “other”, sense of needlessness of learning from the “other”, denial of the possibility of the existence of some truths in the “other” and regarding the “insider” as the man of salvation and the “outsider” as the man of evil and hell (Qorbani, 2019: 282). Generally speaking, exclusivist theology does not open sufficient space for opening towards the “religious other”. Insistence on the central rift in this paradigm extremely weakens the hermeneutic opening that is necessary for a correct understanding of the otherness of the other. Exclusivist theology appears to be inefficient even in opening in the stage of evaluation and judgement. The other religions do not have any positive value by exclusivism. Given the fact that the major goal of the dialogue of religions is reaching a mutual understanding through interfaith dialogue, synthesis of exclusivism and the dialogue of religions is useless and very hard at least if not to say impossible (Moghri, Sadeghnia & Salehi, 2015: 97-98). Criticism and challenging of the religion of the “other” is often undertaken by the exclusivists to prove the truth of their own religion. The followers of exclusivism can be identified among several religions including Islam, Christianity and Judaism all of whom are just interested in their own creeds and defending their own religions (Rosca, 2018: 142; Sajjadi, 2012: 94). Hick and Nasr are unanimous on the issue that the followers of religions should not see their own religion as the absolute truth and the only path of salvation and excommunicate the followers of other religions based on an exclusivist view as the infidels (Mohammadrezaei & Karimzadeh, 2010: 28). Inclusivism suggests that one specific religion is the Absolute Truth and its followers will reach salvation. But contrary to exclusivism, the latter

perspective believes that salvation is not limited to *the Absolutely True Religion*. Rather the followers of the other religions can also reach the eternal bliss and salvation (Jahanmehr, 2011: 2). According to pluralism, truth is not embedded just in one specific religion or tradition, rather there are several truths and different religions are eligible to have the claim of truth (Ostadi, 2016: 3). This approach endorses the positive value of the majority of the religions. Generally speaking, peaceful coexistence with various religions is possible based on this approach. Moreover, pluralism and the belief in the diversity of religions support egalitarianism and openness towards other religions based on the assumption that every religion is as good as other religions (Rosca, 2018: 144). Hick traces the cause of the existence of diversity in religions back to different reactions that various cultures have in their encounter with themselves. According to Hick, each single one of the different cultures in its encounter with the Absolute Truth shows a different reaction from itself. Thus, since every active and thriving human group spontaneously sees its own culture, rites and way of life as the best one in the world and the representation of the principled and normal way of being a human without any further reflection. By the same token, in every religious group in which we are a member of this latter perspective rules and secures the solidarity of this religious community and sanctification of the doctrines of this specific religious tradition. According to Hick, every individual's character has formed in his childhood by a particular religious tradition and this tradition has become part of his existence as much as his nationality, language and culture (Mohammadrezaii and Karimzadeh, 2010: 31-37). The reality is that people usually accept the religion of their fathers and grandfather without any reason and argument and this is not just that someone reaches salvation just because of being born into a family in a specific region by chance while the other person is deprived of eternal bliss just because of his/her being born into a family in another environment (Soleimani, 2014: 36). In fact, it is the religious environment that injects certain beliefs and creeds into the individual in a way that it holds them to be true. Hick calls this phenomenon “Hermeneutic of Suspicion” (Soleimani, 2014: 26). The analysis of the ideas of Hick shows that the religions have come to existence in human culture in order to present beliefs and ways that provide an answer for human search after meaning and transcendence. The tool that is offered by religions in terms of belief and ritual answers human questions concerning the meaning of life and overcoming the limitations and pains (Villegas, 2018: 8). Hick's views in this regard are in line with those of Allameh Tabatabai. According to Allameh's theory of credit perceptions, cultures and their contingents are the outcome of their special effort for satisfaction of their needs. These efforts and their result are under the influence of the environmental conditions, history and experience of every nation. This proves the existence of a relation between the culture and the conditions in which that culture emerges (Mosleh, 2018: 450). The methods by which we define religion in practice influence the bylaws and public policy of our country. Different and comparatively imperceptible definitions of religion, though not less important, impact the groups in a different way; particularly when these definitions have an ethnic form, i.e. when these

definitions of the religious are based on the local standards. For example, when the definition of religion describes the ruling religious tradition of a country as a norm, other forms of religion appear as the external and different phenomena that need to be explained and perhaps even controlled. It seems to be logical that the extensive acceptance of the validity of different religious perspectives and more concentration on the commonalities of the religious can lead to peaceful and mutually beneficial interaction among the followers of different religions (Furseth & Repstad, 2018: 31).

### **1. Methodology**

This study has been conducted using a qualitative method and focusing on thematic analysis as pursued by Braun & Clake (2006). The use of the thematic analysis method turns necessary when there is few data of the phenomenon under the study or there is a visible lack of a theoretical framework in previous studies pertaining to the subject that could explain it in a comprehensive manner (Kamali, 2018: 207). The scope of this research was limited to the professors of the universities of Tehran City. Sampling was done in a purposeful manner among the professors of philosophy and sociology of Tehran University, ATU, Shahid Beheshti University, Kharazmi University, and the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies. This sampling was handled with the people who had authored a book, article or research related to the subject. To collect the data, we made use of the semi-structured interviews which were done with 8 professors up to the theoretical saturation. The time spent for every interview was 30 to 40 minutes and the interviews were recorded by the cellphone recording app. After the end of interviews, the audio files were all written down as texts. In the stage of preparation of texts, some codes were used for identification of the participators in order to observe the moral principles and confidentiality. The interviews have been analyzed using the thematic analysis method according to the following stages: generating initial codes, grouping similar codes, reviewing and refining the main themes, identification of the sub-themes and Revision and refine of sub-themes (Khanifar & Moslemi, 2018: 67).

To evaluate and validate the research quality, the feedback of respondents was assessed through a particular process. The results were given to the respondents and they were asked to comment on the compatibility and relevance between the interpretations offered by the researcher and their own experiences. Moreover, to avoid the incorrect interpretations, an observing judge was asked to evaluate the codes allocated to the data. Given the volume of the samples, the following example of coding is presented as delineated in the table 1.

**Table 1: A Sample of Coding: Secondary Codes and Themes of the Religious Other**

Meaning Units	Codes	Sub-Themes	Main Theme
IRI has always considered the Sunni Muslims in Iran as a stranger in one sense and seen them as an outsider; because their different reading of Islam creates a type of ideological distrust and pessimism in Shia establishment. Heavy surveillance of the religious characters, absence of the Sunni elites in higher governmental positions like the governor, the sheriff, the heads of the security of the governmental offices; or even the restrictions set for the religious rituals of Sunni Muslims in Shia regions. These all are examples of religious discrimination and mutual trust. For many of the Shia clerics, Sunni is more a rival and threat...	Taking the Sunni Iranian as an outsider; distrust and pessimism in/of the Sunni; surveillance of the religious characters; refusal of the appointment of the Sunnis in official executive positions; restrictions in performance of the religious rituals for the Sunnis in Shia regions; seeing the Sunni as a rival and threat (4)	Sunnis	Religious Other
For the Islamic establishment, the Shia identity is the supreme identity and the other identities are defined under the shadow of the Shia identity. In the high politics of the country the Sunnism is an outsider. For example, a Sunni Iranian cannot be a president, because it is thought that he cannot help the country to be united.	Preference of the Shia identity; taking the Sunni as an outsider in the high politics of the country (6)		
Sunnis are always witness to the sacrilegious insults to their beliefs in the national media. Whenever a Sunni cleric reacts to such insults, he is accused of threatening the national security and mutiny.	Insulting the beliefs and sacred rituals of the Sunnis; labeling the mutiny as a person who announces war against the national security (8)		

## **2. Findings**

The final output of the analysis of the interviews has been arranged in the form of 8 sub- themes as follows. These themes express and describe the religious “other”.

### **2\_1. Sunnis**

The participator (4) says: “IRI has always considered the Sunni Muslims in Iran as a stranger in one sense and seen them as an outsider; because their different reading of Islam creates a type of ideological distrust and pessimism in Shia establishment. Heavy surveillance of the religious characters, absence of the Sunni elites in higher governmental positions like the governor, the sheriff, the heads of the security of the governmental offices; or even the restrictions set for the religious rituals of Sunni Muslims in Shia regions. These all are examples of religious discrimination and mutual trust. For many of the Shia clerics, Sunni is more a rival and threat.”

Participator (6): “For the Islamic establishment, the Shia identity is the supreme identity and the other identities are defined under the shadow of the Shia identity. In the high politics of the country the Sunnism is an outsider. For example, a Sunni Iranian cannot be a president, because it is thought that he cannot help the country to be united.”

Participator (8): "Sunnis are always witness to the sacrilegious insults to their beliefs in the national media. Whenever a Sunni cleric reacts to such insults, he is accused of threatening the national security and mutiny. "

### **2\_2. Zoroastrians**

Participator (3): “Our Iran is historically and traditionally the land of Mani, Mazdak and Zoroaster. Unfortunately, Zoroastrians of Persia were attacked and bullied by the Arabs and the subsequent Arab governments in Iran continued to oppress them. It is said that in Sassanid era the Zoroastrian priests did the same. Of course, this is an issue that can be discussed. I am speaking of today. Zoroastrians are not able to observe their religious rituals freely just the defenders of the Shia establishments are doing it.”

Participator (7): “Nothing wrong in the society is seen from Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrians who have lived for centuries across Persia. But often times I see the compatriots who are speaking of them in a bad way that does not deserve to be used. For example, Zoroastrians are referred to as pagans. Unfortunately, there is widespread misinformation of them”.

### **2\_3. Christians**

Participant (3): “In Iran, Christianity has been recognized as the religion of a religious minority who can legally observe their religious rituals and rites. Of course, the Christians are just free to pray in their churches and not in the public. No Christian is allowed to speak of his Christian faith with the Muslim neighbors or outside the church. If they act otherwise, they would be identified as a threat against Islam and are accused of apostasy”.



Participant (5): “We know that repairing and even building new official praying houses unless a specific permission is issued in each case by the government or not. Sometimes the inmates of the churches are checked to prevent from the entrance of the Muslims”.

Participant (8): “Armenians and Assyrians have relative freedoms but they are also exposed to discrimination. Let me to say an example of the vocational impediments that cause the appointment of the non-Muslim citizens including the Christians as the principal of the school or institutes”.

#### **2\_4. Jews**

Participant (6): “Anyway, Jews are part of the Iranian nation who has had the oldest relations with the other parts of the Persians. Different slanders are raised against the Jews! They are generally taken as the people who are working for Israel and etc.”

#### **2\_5. Mandaean**

Participant (2): “The question is that if all these people to whom is referred using the Quranic term “People of Book” have a representative in the parliament or not. In Quran, Madaeans have been mentioned three times but their rights are not recognized here. For example, take a look at the verse 62 of Baqarah”.

#### **2\_6. Mandaean**

Participant (2): “Yarsan compatriots who we know also as the Worshipers of Ali and the People of Truth are sometimes referred to as the Satanists just because of enmity! Yarsans are forced to hide their identity during their life. For example, when you want to enter the school or find a job, you have to fill the application form. In these forms, if you write that I am a Yarsan, this is not recognized as a religion. As a result, you have to introduce yourself as a Shia Muslim. A Yarsan child is forced to attend the classes of Islamic Teachings and observe Islamic rituals while she knows that her parents do not have any affiliation to Islamic religion. This gives rise to confusion and bipolarity in the family”.

Participant (5): “Yarsans were also part of the revolution that led to the establishment of Islamic Republic in Iran. But Yarsan is introduced as a deviated sect and this violation of the rights is totally visible in the courts. The Books of Yarsan are not allowed to be published.”

#### **2\_7. Mandaean**

Participant (1): “Dervishes are a number of religious dissidents who are of an Islamic background and they have been part of our literature for many years and the key figures in this school are such literati as Rumi and Hafez and the whole themes discussed are mystical. Unfortunately, the establishment does not see Dervishes as the religious minority and take them to be a deviation of Islam whom should be stopped. Dervishes are part of the contemporary Shiism. I do not consider them as the outsider”.

Participant (8): “Dervishes live across Iran and there are numerous Dervishes among the Kurds and Baluches and the Dervish school is intertwined with the culture that existed in Iran before the emergence of Islam. This is why the crackdown of the Dervishes is indeed the suppression of the cultural roots”.

## **2\_8. Mandaean**

Participant (1): “The only social group that is faced with the most social impediments before itself is Baha’i. Bahaiism should be accepted as a minority in our mind once forever and a dialogue takes form. If this dialogue takes form the other historical impediments will be spontaneously lifted. For in Bahaiism, there is a fundamental doctrine according to which no form of difference should be denied. In the eyes of the sociologists, the creator of the concepts is not the individuals rather the society. In fact, we need this doctrine as one of the fruits of the thinking and knowing of Iranian society. We should not ask who has said that rather we must listen to the text, reason and argument”.

Participant (2): “Though Bahaiism is recognized as an “outsider” based on a religious premise, this premise is not referred to by the government. On the one hand, the ruling regime defines itself as a political, religious and national system and on the other hand, Bahai’s see themselves as an Iranian and part of the Iranian nation. Religiously speaking, they recognize themselves as one of the world religions and equal to the religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Due to Bahai’s conception of their identity, Islamic Republic sees them as a fundamental threat. Therefore, we are witness to the excommunication of the Bahaiism as a devious and heterodox sect. The emphasis that Bahaiism puts on the persistence on belief causes its followers to face restrictions in the domain of the rights to education, job, death and even property. The followers of Bahaiism have made great sacrifices in this spirit to contribute to the freedom of expression and thought and preserve cultural diversity in Iran which has the religious diversity as its part”.

Participant (3): “This antagonization of Bahai’s is indeed one of the saddening indices of Islamic Republic. They see the Bahai’s as the enemies of Islam, impure and even spies. Hostility and hatred against Bahai’s damages the social texture of Iran”.

Participant (4): “Bahaiism just like all religions has certain days which are holy. As Muslims, we also do have our own holydays. Bahai’s do not work in their own holidays and close their shops in those occasions and the government fines the shops that are closed in those days. I think it is every citizen’s right to close his own business in days that holy for him. Anyway, these people are the citizens of this country”.

Participant (5): “In answering the questions asked from the students at school or university, if the Bahai’s decide to be honest and say their beliefs, they will be criminalized. Any confession of the Bahai faith will result in the students’ being deprived from education while the foreign minister in international institutions announces that being a Bahai is not a crime”.

Participant (7): “Since in the law no official blood money has been determined for an unofficial religious minority, many judges argue that no blood money is due to be paid to these people. This

is also unjust and at the same time, in contradiction with the international commitments of Islamic Republic”.

### Conclusion

In a general evaluation, one can say that since the Revolution, the dominant discourse has continuously struggled to eliminate the non-Islamic parts of the historical and cultural heritage of Iran and to marginalize non-Shia senses of religiosity (Majin, 2017: 67). Islam is a monotheist religion but it is not a uniform religion. Different groups and voices, from ideological dimensions to theology and politics, specify the Muslim community. The major theological and political divisions remain among the Sunni and the Shia since the seventh century up to this day. They have considered each other as the oppressors, puritanist, intolerable and infidel. Behind such hostile narratives, they have continuously struggled for power and the access to the sources (Nuruzzaman, 2017: 285).

Despite the fact that Quran has referred to Jews, Mandaeans and Christians as the People of Book, a precise assessment shows that traditional Islam not only has not accepted Mandaeans as the People of Book rather even the People of Book including the Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians have not received a full citizenship in the Islamic community (Ahmari-Moghaddam, 2012: 45). According to Amirteimour's research (Amirteimour, 2017: 47-48), elimination of Mandaean religion from Iran's constitution has had a negative influence on all aspects of their social life. Due to the failure of many of Iranian Mandaeans in having access to higher education and desirable vocational positions, they decide to leave their fatherland in Khuzestan. According to the research done by Arabestani (2019: 36), Mandaeans are not even free to choose a Mandaean name for their children. Moreover, many of them are not happy with the imposing of the Islamic courses to Mandaean students. The results of the study by Abdalmulah(1995) show that the lack of knowledge of Mandaean writing system and language has caused many of the researchers and writers to have a wrong conception of them. Although lately Ayatollah Khamenei has included Mandaeans among the People of Book, there are still certain restrictions in this field. Zoroastrians are a religious minority whom seemingly might be said that have become part of the Muslim society, but the cultural, social and even the economic restrictions have conveyed the sense of being a minority to this group and due to this type of discriminations, they have been marginalized and isolated (Momeni & Shariati, 2017: 80). Though the constitution has assured the freedom of religious action for the Christians, these policies are only applied as regards those religious minorities whose religion is part of their ethnicity, e.g. Armenians and Assyrians (Razavimaleki, 2014: 8). The results of the study by Iskandaryan (2019: 129-139) show that the constitution gives the rights of the cultural and religious freedom to the Armenians. Meanwhile, it determines certain restrictions for them in the field of equal vocational opportunities, court and justice system. The greatest challenge for Iranian Armenians is immigration which has increased in recent years. Unfortunately, neither the society, nor the establishment or the government has come up with a mechanism for

prevention of this immigration to Armenia. As a result, the Armenians in Iran have decreased a lot and Armenian schools are closing one after another. Although the Jews are also part of the official religious minority in Iran, the anti-Israel positions of the government and the public view of the Jewish citizens as the supporters of Zionism have brought about an insecure space for them. However, Jews have had continuous presence in the social, economic and even political life of Iranian society not only in Pahlavi era rather in Islamic Republic too. When Ayatollah Khomeini came back to Iran, five thousand Jews under the leadership of Rabbi Yedidia Shofet hailed him. Some of them carried the pictures of Imam Khomeini on which it was written that the Jews and Muslims are brothers. But despite this effort for the creation of a united national identity, there are certain rifts emerged in the course of the Revolution and the post-Revolution years and led to the recognition of the Jew as an “Other”. Iranian Jews deny any type of relation with Israel, because Zionism and relation with Israel in Islamic Republic are known as serious crimes against every Iranian citizen regardless of the religion (Rahimiyan, 2009: 67-70).

Yarsans are one of the other religious others in Persia. The results of the research conducted by Fatahpour(2016: 75-76) show that the People of Truth experience the institutional pressure including not being recognized in the constitution, not being accepted to the governmental offices and institutions, suffering problems due to the behavior and rituals, the conflict between the family religious socialization and the socialization process pursued in the educational institutes and the mass media, social deprivation due to the dogmas, and being systematically *stigmatized* due to growing a mustache.

To preserve their own rituals and beliefs, the People of Truth take advantage of the mechanisms of strengthening the solidarity using such occasions as the ancient holidays of Nowruz, certain sectarian occasions like Khawandkar Eid, ceremonies like murmuring the divine words, also collectively playing Tanbur, or praying. These actions are for the sake of authenticity, rooting and preservation of their identity. Moreover, they have raised the commitment to nonviolence and humanity and ethics that includes the absolute denial of violence in words, humanity as the measure of everything, righteousness as the basis of the religious principles, and the respect to all religions and beliefs. As a result, the People of Truth have some of the features of the sects but they also have certain characteristics of the religion and the religious association. Therefore, using the title of sect for the People of Truth is suspicious and is not completely compatible with the notion of sect. According to the findings of Emamjomezadeh & Veysi (2015: 103), despite a huge difference of opinion regarding the identity and nature of the religion of the People of Truth, one can identify the Shia foundations in their principles and beliefs.

Although the Dervishes are one of the religious others in Persia, Gonabadi Dervishes believe that a Dervish is required to be a true Shia Muslim first in order to have the opportunity to join the circle of Dervishes later by wayfaring and certain spiritual initiation. This sect has special etiquettes for its own Khaneqah and Hosseinyieh the major part of which is concerned with the observation

of hygiene, codes of ethics, avoidance of backbiting and speaking with each other during a ceremony, receiving the newcomers with open arms and the morals used in social relations. Poverty Gathering is one of the most important ceremonies that are held in Khaneqah (Keshavarz Farhadi, 2015: 218-219). In Poverty Gathering, Dervishes are not allowed to engage in any material affair or debate rather they are required to devote themselves to the concentration on God, involvement with the continuous remembering and thinking of Divinity and listening to the words and poems. They have to keep with spiritual contemplation and remain silent in the gathering (Salehi Brujeni, 2012: 240-241).

According to the study conducted by Korkmaz (2013: 47), Bahai's represent the largest religious minority in Iran. Nevertheless, they have been classified as the unguarded pagans and heretics. Social marginalization and the legal deprivation of the Bahaists in Iran is in complete contradiction with the religious toleration that showed itself at the pinnacle of the Islamic civilization. According to the study by Bagherian (2010: 2), Bahaiism is a sect with religious and political attitudes influenced by Sheikhism and it emerged at the heart of the Shia society and it attracted numerous followers due to the conditions of Iranian society in Qajar era and later in Pahlavi era with coining specific beliefs. Totalitarian social and political condition and the status quo of the social classes and the oppression and dictatorship of the Qajar governments and the suppression of the miserable farmers by the land owners put such an economic pressure on these illiterate people that they would expect the emergence of the Savior and Occulted Imam who was supposed to deliver them. It was in such times that Seyed Ali Mohammad Bab publicized his claims and those suppressed people without seeing him by their eyes or rightly evaluating his plans and thoughts in a correct way, considered him as the Savior and in most of the cities and villages of Iran they revolted against the state and its mercenaries. They arranged their religion around four global and general categories and goals: advocacy of the unity of religions, advocacy of the unity of language, advocacy of the realization of human unity, declaration of the establishment of the Supreme Justice Court as a global general assembly. The announcement of these goals bespeak of the influence that they had received from the western civilization (Khorzani, 2015: 9-10). Their social doctrines including the equality of woman and man, eradication of all bigotries and uprooting extreme poverty and wealth show this influence (Yazdani, 2015: 2). Amanat (2008) Yale historian neglecting the class conflict theories for explanation of the anti-Bahaiism violence, interprets their harassment as a socio-cultural phenomenon. He believes that “Bahai's were the painful point of incompatibility in a society that struggled after a unity against the extensive threats inside and outside its borders. This society was afraid of losing an exclusive part of it as a delivered Shia sect. In Amanat's analysis, the anti-Bahaist sentiments are mostly seen as part of acceptable dogmatic rituals for the creation of a sense of collective self before the ethnic other in a time when the foreign other was more dreadful and inaccessible instead of an enemy” (Yazdani, 2015: 4). These discrimination methods in Islamic traditional society as a way of encounter with the institutionalized other and many aspects of the

current Sharia laws are in conflict with the global norms of human rights. Of course, this does not imply that Islam itself is inconsistent with the global standards. Rather as An-Na'im claims: "Islam not only endorses the achievement of current global standards rather it conducts the ultimate human rights, i.e. realization of authenticity and individuality in all humans" (Ahmari-Moghaddam, 2012: 149). The best example for this argument is the constitution of Medina which represents the first ever codified constitution in Islamic society in the course of history aiming at the regulation of a multi-cultural and multi-religious society where the Jews and the followers of other beliefs live alongside the Muslims with equal rights and responsibilities. Unfortunately, Islam has now changed and Islamic civilizations have lost their past greatness. Now it is the time for the Muslims to criticize themselves and reevaluate and revive the original Islamic principles. This burden is on the shoulders of the Muslims not to accept religious bigotry and support an authentic Islam. Moreover, to create a positive and well-arranged relation between the Islamic laws and international norms and codes of human rights, we need an international cooperation particularly in UN for recognition of the Islamic culture and beliefs. We also need to educate, inform, orient and empower the people towards the promotion of a local understanding of human rights and international norms and principles and the need for a nonviolent, noncompulsory and nonaggressive dialogue (Ahmari-Moghaddam, 2012: 45-141). To put it otherwise, provision of the interests of collective life is hinged upon the acceptance of citizens who have different beliefs as well as building patterns for the relations of the state and citizens in which pluralism serves as the main foundation that helps all citizens to enter the public sphere with their own specific religious identity. Under the shadow of the government's support of individual identities, these people will be able to redefine themselves as a responsible member of a society based on a deep relation with their national identity (Shoaei, 2019: 134). It is in this spirit that today in India the past traditions and also the current conditions all contribute to the growth of a new type of nationality that promotes the common national culture, and at the same time, the freedom of different communities for preservation and development of their own cultural and religious traditions is ensured, of course, as long as they do not encroach the national unity and people's welfare. The specific characteristic of such a society is the growing tolerance of groups that are different from the dominant community and as a result lesser bigotry and discrimination is created against the minorities (Habib, 2017: 89-90). It seems that the best possibility for realization of this goal is the institution of education and educational system and the most trusted tool for the achievement of this goal is curriculum. Therefore, to encounter the challenge of religious diversity in a multicultural society like Iran, it is suggested that the current pattern of religious education to be changed from the exclusivist form to the multicultural form. This approach seeks to use a philosophy and method that allows all different cultures to be considered valuable as a whole and have a peaceful coexistence and present themselves to each other and identify their own points of weakness and seek to promote them (Sadeghi, 2011: 15). Shortly speaking, every individual who

lives in a multi-religious society should accept the religious diversity and understand it. Understanding other faiths and the doctrines of other religious groups persuades the individual to accept and respect the other religious creeds. Freedom of having a religion and doing its respective rituals is a basic human right, regardless of the individual's being a Muslim or non-Muslim, and this right should not be neglected in any society or country (Mehfooz, 2021: 16).

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