A Recent Revival of Shii Studies in Germany: Three Panels on the Field

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No less than three panels were dedicated to the field of Shii studies in the year 2017 in Germany. While the first, “Beyond Karbala: Theorising Shii Materiality”, took place at the 32. Conference of the German Association for the Study of Religion (Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft) in Marburg, September 15, comprising five papers, two were held at the 33. Congress of the German Oriental Society (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft), at the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität in Jena, September 18-22. Both situated within the disciplinary section “Islamic Studies”, fifteen papers in total were presented under the panel titles “Shii Studies: New Themes and Approaches,” organized by Verena Klemm (Leipzig) and Olly Akkerman (Berlin), and “(Trans-)Regionalizing Shia Islam,” organised by Christian Funke (Bayreuth) and Robert Langer (Istanbul/Heidelberg).

While Funke and Langer’s panels in Marburg and Jena revolved around questions of materiality, trans-regionalism and locality in contemporary Shii contexts, Klemm and Akkerman’s panel served as a platform to discuss upcoming themes, trends and debates in the larger field, including papers on both modern and pre-modern periods and topics.
What the three panels had in common was the question of interdisciplinary research, bringing in new perspectives and theoretical frameworks. For example, materiality and the idea of the social lives of objects, such as banknotes (Funke) and secret manuscripts (Akkerman), came to the table. Another important theme, the question of the social role of the *khums*, was both addressed in historical perspective (Hayes) and in the context of modern *arba‘īn* commemorations (Szanto). The lively question and answer sessions contributed to exploring these new themes and approaches.

The realisation of three full-day, well-attended Shi‘i panels not only indicates a revival of Shi‘i Studies in Germany; it also suggests a new direction in which the field is heading: research of a more interdisciplinary nature, incorporating social sciences and cultural studies perspectives to study conceptions of community, authority, fragmentation, and knowledge transmission.

“Beyond Karbala: Theorising Shi‘i Materiality,” Panel at the German Association for the Study of Religion’s 32. Bi-Annual Conference, Philipps-Universität Marburg, 15 September 2017, Chair: Christian Funke (Bayreuth) and Robert Langer (Istanbul/Heidelberg)

This year’s conference of the German Association for the Study of Religion with its overall agenda to explore “Medien, Materialität, Methoden” provided the fitting backdrop to discuss Shi‘i materiality in a study-of-religion framework. The panel “Beyond Karbala” was informed by the observation that in recent years there has been a great deal of scholarship produced that is concerned with Shi‘i materiality. Before the Iranian Revolution Shi‘i rituals, especially the *ta‘ziya* and other Muḥarram practices, were understood within folkloristic paradigms and likened to Christian passion plays or folk drama. Since the dawn of “revolutionary Shi‘ism,” and especially after the Revolution, most scholars have subscribed to the new view of the so-called “Karbala paradigm” to describe an active and revolutionary mode of political religiosity versus a passive and soteriological mode of apolitical piety. This binary has rightly been criticised because it closely echoes the writings of the ideologues of the “Islamic Revolution.” Consequently, it became somewhat commonplace to comment on the conceptual change in studies on Shi‘i materiality before and after the revolution, yet comparatively little has been said about Shi‘i rituals and practices beyond Muḥarram. While Muḥarram rituals undoubtedly constitute a significant element of Shi‘i materiality, their pre-eminence in scholarly discussion obscures taking into account material forms and social practices that go not only beyond the Karbala paradigm, but also beyond Karbala itself. In effect, Shi‘ism’s materiality is often reduced to a set of mourning rituals and

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