

Pilgrimage Theology and Interreligious Dialogue: Exploring Divine Presence in Shi'i Visitation Prayers*

*Syed Amir Hossein Asghari*¹ 

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Abstract

Exploring the foundations for interreligious understanding raises pivotal questions: What underlies creating a common spiritual language among followers of diverse religions? How do rituals like visitation and pilgrimage transcend doctrinal differences to foster a shared experience of the sacred? The exploration of divine presence in Shī'ī Islam, paralleled with Catholic and Jewish narratives, underscores visitation and pilgrimage as pivotal for fostering interreligious dialogue. This study illuminates how these practices serve as a universal spiritual language, transcending theological differences and facilitating a profound connection across diverse faiths. By examining the concept of presence—God's omnipresence, the sacredness derived from divine relationship, and the mediating role of Imams and saints—this research highlights the common spiritual ground found in the ritualistic foundations of Abrahamic traditions. The detailed analysis of Shī'ī visitation prayers reveals an inclusive approach to prophetic history, portraying Islam's essence of universality and promoting a deeper, empathetic dialogue among different religious communities. Through genuine engagement with the concept of presence, this paper advocates for a shared platform of understanding, emphasizing spiritual experiences over doctrinal divergences and enhancing mutual appreciation among varied faiths.

Keywords: presence, Imam, Shī'ī Islam, interfaith dialogue, interreligious understanding, theology of pilgrimage

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1. Postdoctoral Research Associate, Department of Religion, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA (amir_asghari@baylor.edu)

1. Introduction

The study of religion occupies a significant position within contemporary academic discourse. However, the approach adopted in engaging with religious phenomena is paramount. With the evolution of religious studies as a discipline, many methodologies have been proposed, subsequently attracting scholarly critique. Despite these advancements, a prevailing challenge persists: the methods applied in analyzing religious phenomena frequently yield incomplete insights, falling short of a comprehensive understanding.

In his *"History and Presence,"* Robert Orsi presents a narrative of a pivotal debate concerning the Catholic Eucharist during the sixteenth century. (Orsi, 2016) The debate's central question was whether Jesus was present in the host during the sacrament of Eucharist or not. Orsi states that the Catholic position had long been that God is present in the matter and time. *History and Presence* challenge the notion of secularism in the modern understanding of religion, arguing that secularism does not denote the absence of faith but rather sanctions a form of religion that disregards the "real presence." Orsi critiques the modern classification of religions that acknowledge a "real presence" as backward or primitive, a viewpoint that aligns with Frazer's evolutionary schema of human thought transitioning from magic to religion and scientific reasoning. According to Orsi, this perspective relegates devotional religious practices to the realm of the primitive, suggesting a secularized religion that distances itself from the mystical or the magical.

Overlooking the dimension of "real presence" in religion diminishes understanding of the divine-human relationship in daily life, making the academic approach to religion appear shallow, according to Orsi. This oversight leads scholars to evaluate others' experiences from their everyday realities, missing out on the nuanced beliefs and practices centered around the divine's "real presence." Orsi suggests that academic religion studies need reform to acknowledge the empirical reality of divine presence, warning that failure limits comprehension of religion's role in human affairs and the broader scope of human experience. Orsi finishes his *History and Presence* with the following statement:

The unseeing of the gods was an achievement; the challenge is to see them again. If the presence of the gods in the old Catholic sense is an absolute limit that contemporary scholars of religion and history refused to cross, then they will miss the empirical reality of religion in contemporary affairs, and they will fail to understand much of human life. (Orsi 2016, 252)

Orsi expands the concept of "people of presence" beyond Catholics to include individuals from various religious backgrounds who experience a tangible interaction with the supernatural, akin to the Catholic engagement with the Divine since the late sixteenth century. This categorization underlines a shared characteristic among diverse faiths, where the presence of supernatural entities in human life is

acknowledged and valued, highlighting the broad applicability of this concept across religions and the historical and societal contexts that shape its understanding:

Among peoples of presence, I include Catholics, although not all Catholics, and not only Catholics but also people of other religions in which supernatural beings are present to humans in the way that has been associated with Catholics since the late sixteenth century and that Catholics themselves took as their distinctiveness in modernity. (Orsi 2016, 149-50)

This phenomenon reflects a personal engagement with the sacred that continues beyond the initial encounter and extends into the societal realm, underscoring the duality of spiritual experiences as deeply individual yet universally relevant.

Building on the foundational insights of "History and Presence," this paper explores the concept of divine presence in Shi'ī Islam, drawing parallels with the notion of presence in Catholic narratives. It delves into the presence of transcendent and angelic beings, with a particular focus on the metaphysical presence of the Imams in daily life and rituals. Additionally, this research introduces pilgrimage and visitation as a universal language of inter-religious understanding, suggesting that these practices offer a shared framework for comprehending the sacred across different faiths.

2. Presence and Absent of the Divine Reality

Within Shi'ism, the Islamic perspective deeply embeds the belief in God's ubiquitous presence across the universe, mirroring the Jewish concept of *Shekhinah*, which symbolizes the Divine Presence. Contrary to this presence is the notion of absence (*ghayba*), but it is crucial to note that God's omnipresence is all-encompassing and not limited by human perception.

The Quran reinforces the concept of God's omnipresence, affirming in Quran 57:4 that God is with us wherever we are, highlighting His presence in every facet of life. The notion of Divine absence, or *ghayba*, emerges not from the actual absence of God but from human limitations in recognizing His omnipresence. Our immersion in the physical world may hinder our full spiritual awareness of God's presence, indicating that the perceived absence results from human perception rather than a lack of divine presence.

Shi'a theology emphasizes the all-encompassing presence of the Divine, with the Quran elaborating on God's omnipresence by portraying Him as beyond comparison yet manifest in various elements of existence.

There is nothing in wujud [Being] but God. In the same way, if you were to say, "There is nothing in the mirror except the one who is disclosing himself to it," you would be speaking the truth. Nevertheless, you know that there is nothing at all "in the mirror," nor is there anything of the mirror in the viewer. But within the

very form of the mirror, the display of variations and traces is perceived. At the same time, the viewer is as he was, and he displays no traces... There is nothing in wujud, but He, and wujud is acquired only from Him. ... So the mirror is the Presence of Possibility, the Real is the one who looks within it, and the form is you in keeping with the mode of your possibility. (Ibn 'Arabī and Yaḥyá 1972 qtd. Chittick 2015, 15)

The term Sakinah in the Quran signifies God's tranquility and reassurance, closely paralleling the Jewish concept of *Shekhinah*. In both traditions, this divine presence can manifest in tangible forms, sanctified by the Divine or His prophets, thereby imitating the sacred essence of divine presence. This notion of material manifestations of the sacred aligns with the veneration of sacred sites and objects found within Native American religious traditions.

As the essence and origin of all existence, the Divine reality imbues everything with a sacred quality. This essence, as Guénon articulates, permeates tradition, including art, industry, and culture, reflecting as an emanation from a pure intellectual source. The Sacred represents the inner dimension of the external, tangible world, with the inward being invisible and the outward visible. Revelations and holy scriptures serve as conduits, unveiling the signs of this invisible Sacred, emphasizing the interplay between the seen and unseen realms of existence.

3. Shia Imams as the Divine Manifestations

In Shī'ī theology, imams are divinely appointed rather than elected, designated by God through His messenger. They are viewed not just as political figures but as sacred, infallible beings, embodying the perfect manifestation of God's names and attributes. They serve as God's successors on earth and as His proofs, holding metaphysical qualities that confer upon them divine authority. Their spiritual leadership is acknowledged in the Qur'ān, emphasizing their role alongside Allah and His Apostle in guiding the faithful, particularly in practices like prayer and almsgiving (5:55).

The verse presents the continuation of *Walāyah* from God to the prophet and eventually to the faithful, who are *Ahl al-Bayt* in the Shī'ī interpretation. (Asghari 2021) Corbin describes this concept as the heart of *imamology*, which goes hand in hand with prophetology. (Corbin 1986) He points out that the *Wilayah* is a gift of love, the divine love or favor that renders eternally sacred the "Friends of God," it transforms the religion of the Law into the religion of love. In this sense, Schuon describes Sunni-Shī'ī relations in his *Christianity/Islam*. (Schuon 1996)

The ascribed love of the Ahl al-Bayt is the key to understanding an essential factor in Shia Islam. The love and loyalty to the Ahl al-Bayt provide grounds for expanding the Sacred presence among the Shī'ī believers. Love engages with the Omnipresent face of God that, in return, perfect humanity manifests on the earth.

Thus, the faithful should always remain loyal to God. This loyalty continues to the Occluded Imam (al-Mahdī), defined as the continuation of the *Walāyah* of God, but invisible. Invisibility, in this case, does not permit forgetfulness and heedlessness of his presence, for he is the gate of God and mediator of God's mercy upon the earth. To be enlightened, spiritually guided, and to receive the Divine blessing, one must remain in spiritual contact with an imam. As such, the Hidden Imam is physically absent but spiritually present. Followers have to find a connection with his spiritual presence to get the spiritual blessing (*barakah*). That is why Corbin states that the Imam lies hidden from the senses but present in the hearts of those who believe in him. (Corbin 1986, 42) Therefore, the prophetic tradition indicates the vivid functionality of knowing the Imam: Whoever dies without knowing the Imam of his Time dies the death of Ignorance [al-Jāhiliyah]. (Taftāzānī 1950)

In the sermon known as al-Bayān, attributed to Ali and primarily relayed by Ghulāt Shia sources, Ali reveals his profound spiritual essence, identifying himself with divine secrets and guidance, embodying both the beginning and the end, the visible and the invisible. This sermon underscores the Imams as embodiments of the Divine presence:

I am the Secret of secrets, I am the Guide of the Heavens, I am the First and the Last, I am the Apparent and the Hidden, I am the Compassionate, I am the Face of God, I am the Hand of God, I am the Archetype of the Book, I am the Cause of causes.

Shī'ī traditions, particularly in Uṣūl Al-Kāfī, further articulate this concept, portraying Imams as custodians of divine wisdom and interpreters of the Qur'ān, thereby serving as the living embodiment of divine knowledge and secrets and as rightful heirs and interpreters of God's word.

4. Sacred soil and its Curative power

Visiting an Imam's holy site in Shī'ī tradition is believed to bestow Barakah or divine blessing. These shrines are considered sacred spaces where angels are thought to descend, and the Imam's spirit is present, facilitating a connection with the divine. The blessing, originating from God, is mediated by the Imam due to his unique closeness to the Divine. This sacred interaction can yield spiritual and material benefits, including healing properties attributed to the visitation. Robert Meri articulates that the sacredness of objects, people, places, and practices is derived from their service to God. (Meri 1999)

As Orsi explains, Blessing is not limited to spiritual or metaphysical beings. The soil in the Catholic site, he mentions, had curative power. (The same holds for the shrine commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussayn. Moreover, the soil of the shrine for Hussayn has been enrolled in various rituals of the Shī'ī tradition. Chief

among them is keeping a small quantity of the soil and taking it to the grave upon death. In this manner, the blessing and curative power of the soil become a material object. According to Orsi and Meri, similar rites are practiced in Catholicism and Judaism.

Shī'ī beliefs maintain that soil from holy sites, imbued with blessing and healing properties, may lose its efficacy if treated disrespectfully. This suggests that the object's sanctity and healing abilities are not intrinsic but depend on the Sacred's presence. The potency of such an object fades without proper reverence and care, underscoring the importance of respectful interaction with sacred items.

5. Visitation Prayers and Interreligious Connections

Shi'i visitation prayers aim to immerse the devotee in the breadth of prophetic history, emphasizing Islam's essence of inclusivity. By presenting a unified lineage from Adam through Muhammad, these prayers foster a deep connection between the visitor and the lineage of prophets, encouraging reflections on the continuity and unity within Islamic tradition. This process underscores the belief that Prophet Muhammad and his household are the culmination of prophetic legacy, embodying the zenith of human virtues, as highlighted in prayers that honor the Imam as the legitimate successor to all prophets.

Peace be upon you, O inheritor of Adam, the chosen one of Allah.
Peace be upon you, O inheritor of Noah, the prophet of Allah.
Peace be upon you, O inheritor of Abraham, the close friend of Allah.
Peace be upon you, O inheritor of Moses, who conversed with Allah.
Peace be upon you, O inheritor of Jesus, the spirit of Allah.
Peace be upon you, O inheritor of Muhammad, the most beloved to Allah.

In the Shi'i tradition, the *Samāt* prayer, tracing its origins to Israelite prophets and passed down to Shia Imams, embodies a spiritual lineage and connection. This prayer incorporates elements that reflect a profound historical and theological continuity within the Abrahamic traditions, underscoring the interconnectedness of the Islamic faith with its prophetic predecessors. Through its recitation, devotees are reminded of the shared spiritual heritage and the unbroken chain of divine guidance from the earliest prophets to the Shia Imams.

I beseech Thee, O Allah, through Thy Glory, with which Thou addressed Thy slave
and Thy Messenger, Moses, son of 'Imran, peace be on him...

This excerpt and many other comparable examples in which several prophets are addressed reflect an inclusive and interreligious dimension, depicting intricate relationships within the prophetic tradition. It conveys the message that the final prophet possesses all the attributes and characteristics of his predecessors. Nota-

bly, invoking previous prophets in no way diminishes the perception that the last prophet lacks these qualities. On the contrary, it underscores that he is a culmination of the prophetic lineage from Adam to Muhammad.

This perspective aligns with the Quranic definition of Islam as submission to God, emphasizing the universality of the religion and its call for a response from all of humanity. In this light, visitation prayers in the Shia tradition regarded Imams as inheritors of the prophetic legacy, embodying the teachings and wisdom of all the prophets who came before them. Their presence, therefore, is an inclusive one that continues to nurture an understanding that individuals from diverse religious backgrounds can connect with. Such encounters and experiences provide a solid foundation for interreligious understanding. Within this philosophy, one can comprehend why the Prophet of Islam and Shia Imams have frequently asserted that they embody the spiritual lineage of Adam, Noah, Ibrahim, Moses, Jesus, and others. In this context, the Prophet stated, "Whoever desires to witness the wisdom of Adam, the discernment of Noah, the patience of Ibrahim, the asceticism of Yahya ibn Zakariyya, and the strength of Musa ibn 'Imran should contemplate 'Ali ibn Abi Talib."

At its core, a reader of such visitation and pilgrimage prayers can discern that when the concept of presence is earnestly explored, it provides a shared platform for interreligious understanding and meaningful dialogue.

Believers have a reciprocal relationship with the Imam, drawing from his sacred presence and blessings. As embodiments of the sacred, the Imams' shrines become focal points of spiritual grace. Consequently, Shī'ī adherents seek spiritual enrichment and salvation through their devotion to the Walīs. An examination of Shī'ī visitation prayers (*Ziyārah*) offers insights into the devotional aspects of the Imam's cosmological presence. These prayers, rooted in the teachings of Imams and their close associates, form a significant part of Shia devotional literature, allowing visitors to communicate directly with the Imam, who is perceived as an ever-present and attentive entity. This interaction is underpinned by the theological view that the Imam's ability to listen and respond transcends the physical bounds of life and death. A hadith from Imam Mūsā al-Kāzīm underscores the timeless and metaphysical connection followers have with all Imams, asserting the unity and continuity of their spiritual guidance across generations:

He who visits the first among us, also visits the last among us and he who visits the last among us, also visits the first among us. He who expresses love for the first of us has also shown it for the last, and he who loves the last of us also loves the first. (Amir-Moezzi 2011, 391)

The significance of the narration is enhanced when considered alongside another hadith, emphasizing that all members of the Ahl al-Bayt are manifestations of the same divine light, unified in essence and identity with Muhammad. This unity un-

derscores the spiritual presence of the Imam in the lives of the believers, making him a conduit for divine intercession, even in his physical absence. Shī'ite culture's deep connection with the Imams stems from this perpetual spiritual presence, which is believed to actively engage with and guide the followers. The narrative extends to the prophets, illustrating the shared spiritual lineage and the Imam's role as a continuation of this sacred tradition.

The visitation prayers, by invoking each prophet's unique contributions and miracles, set the stage for a personal appeal to the Imam, highlighting his virtues and the sanctity of the shrine. This form of prayer emphasizes the spiritual and metaphysical attributes of the Imam, reinforcing the believer's encounter with the divine presence, blessings, and potential for healing at the shrine.

Peace be upon Adam, the chosen one of Allah from among His creation...Peace be upon Noah (Nūḥ), whose invocation (for punishment) was answered...Peace be upon Abraham (Ibrahim), whom Allah endowed with His friendship.... Peace be upon Moses (Mūsā), the one for whom Allah split the sea with His Power.... Peace be upon John (Yaḥyā), whom Allah drew near (his rank) by his martyrdom. Peace be upon Jesus (Isā), the spirit of Allah and His word. Peace be upon Muhammad, the beloved of Allah and His elite. (Mashhadī and Majd 2004)

The prayer addresses each prophet and mentions their main characteristics or miracles. Following this common opening, the pilgrim addresses the Imam of the particular shrine he or she is visiting, and the prayer then focuses on the Imam's perfections and degrees of faith. As noted, the visitation prayer involves a detailed description of the shrine and its blessed surroundings in which the visitor encounters the presence (ḥuḍūr), blessing (barakah), healing (Shifā), and the like. This visitation prayer continues to enumerate al-Husayn's spiritual and metaphysical characters individually:

Peace be upon al-Husayn, who sacrificed himself up to the last drops of the blood of his heart ...Peace be upon whom Allah placed a cure in the soil of his place (of martyrdom). Peace be upon the one under whose dome answer (to supplications) is guaranteed. (Mashhadī and Majd 2004)

To foster spiritual alignment, visitors aim to purify their hearts, seeking the Imam's attention and grace, viewing this purification as essential for a metaphysical connection with the Sacred. This yearning for purity is articulated in the visitation prayer, which also solicits the Imam's assistance for spiritual cleansing. Visiting encompasses actions and intentions, driven by the belief that the Imam's call necessitates a pure heart for righteous deeds. This spiritual magnetism extends to the shrine's atmosphere, where the sanctity of the Imam imbues everything within the shrine—from objects to roles—with a sacred essence, transforming mundane activities into acts of devotion. The sense of blessedness permeates the entire pil-

grimage experience, compelling the visitor towards sincerity and dedication throughout their journey.

While visitation may appear as an interaction between a living supplicant and a deceased saint, Shī'ī tradition portrays it as a dynamic dialogue with the Imam, transcending physical absence to achieve a spiritually potent connection. This notion is vividly illustrated in a visitation prayer to Ali, the first Shī'ī Imam, where the supplicant's acknowledgment of the Imam's awareness and response to their presence underscores a real, albeit spiritual, interaction.

I bear witness, O my masters! You hear my words; you see my position, you know my place, you answer my call. You are divinely appointed guides and His abundant Bounties. (al-Hadi and Baghi 2013, 119)

Such prayers extend beyond mere commemoration, seeking the Imam's eschatological mediation for the supplicant's salvation and divine favor.

Remember me before your Lord. Admit me to your pond [at paradise]. Offer me to drink from your cup. Admit me to your society. Help me be raised from the dead and join your company. Remove the entanglements from me in this world, and the hereafter, since you are most exalted before God, and your intercession will be accepted by him. I have come to visit you. I salute you, standing in your shrine, requesting you to intercede with God on my behalf. I hope that he may forgive my sins, grant me glory, remove my desperation, render me aid in my weakness, answer my prayers, help me fulfill my wishes, grant me demands, said and unsaid, and what he knows best that He may grant me His Satisfactions and admit me to His Paradise. (al-Hadi and Baghi 2013, 119)

The practice illustrates a complex relational dynamic involving the supplicant, the Imam, and God, with the Imam serving as a pivotal mediator enhancing the divine connection. This personal engagement with the sacred during visitation is further amplified during significant communal observances like 'Āshūrā and Arba'īn, showcasing the blend of individual devotion and collective religious expression in Shī'ī Islam.

Additionally, all followers of religions are called to embark on a journey towards their ultimate dwelling place and communion with their Lord. This spiritual way-faring is an internal pilgrimage that begins within the believer's heart and culminates in union with the Divine. This inner pilgrimage fosters a universal language among those who traversed this path. They find a common language to speak and a shared experience to explore and delve into their collective understanding while using the language of their very innate nature, which the Quran refers to as Fitrah.

6. Conclusion

Pilgrimage and visitation rituals, foundational across all Abrahamic traditions and others, share a core philosophy and evoke similar sentiments among adherents. These practices foster a universal language of spirituality, transcending doctrinal differences and promoting a heartfelt connection that effortlessly bridges the divides between diverse religious communities. This shared ritualistic foundation thus plays a crucial role in enhancing mutual understanding and dialogue among followers of different faiths.

In "History and Presence," Robert Orsi explores the idea of divine presence in Catholicism, critiquing the academic field's oversight of this critical aspect, which he believes limits the understanding of religious experiences. This paper extended this examination to the concept of presence in Shī'ī Islam, comparing it with similar concepts in Catholicism and Judaism. It aimed to bridge gaps in understanding and highlight the profound significance of divine presence across these religious traditions, creating a common language beyond diverse theological interpretations.

In Islamic tradition, the universe is seen as God's presence, and the concept of absence only arises from human limitations. Shī'ī Islam emphasizes the role of Imams and saints in facilitating the human-God relationship, mediating blessings from God. Holiness emanates from God, and the sacredness of anything else is derived from its relationship to Him.

Furthermore, the parallels between Shī'ī Islam, Catholic practices, and the parallel concept of *Shekhinah* in Judaism, that are evidently neglected facet of modern religious studies, can form a basis for a more empathetic interfaith dialogue.

Finally, this study provided that Shi'i visitation prayers have a unique dimension that aims to convey the entire prophetic history to visitors, highlighting the inclusive nature of Islam according to the school of *Ahl al-Bayt*. These prayers depict a continuous line of prophets from Adam to Muhammad, emphasizing the interconnectedness of prophetic traditions. This perspective encourages internal dialogues among visitors, connecting them with saints and prophets and reminding them that Prophet Muhammad and his household represent the culmination of perfect human manifestation. The prayers address Imams as inheritors of the prophetic legacy, underlining their embodiment of the teachings of previous prophets. This inclusivity aligns with the Quranic definition of Islam as universal, promoting interreligious understanding. The exploration of the concept of presence approached with genuine intent, serves as a unifying ground for interfaith discussions, offering a universal vernacular rooted in the heart's expressions that transcend all boundaries and limitations. This foundational understanding facilitates a deeper, more empathetic dialogue across diverse faiths, emphasizing common spiritual experiences over doctrinal differences.

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