

Journey to Holy Mashhad: Representation of Imam Reza's Sacred Shrine and His Pilgrims in Arminius Vambery's Travelogue

Ahmad Gholi¹ 

© The Author(s) 2023

Submitted: 2023.11.21 | Accepted: 2024.02.08



Abstract

The sacred shrine of Imam Reza has been the heart of the Holy Mashhad since his martyrdom. With its spiritual atmosphere, dazzling beauty, and exuberant architectural charms, the shrine has created a passionate desire in travelers from various nations and religious backgrounds in different eras to experience its heavenly world. Arminius Vambery, a Hungarian orientalist, is one of these voyagers, visiting Imam Reza's holy shrine in the nineteenth century. He records his observations in *Arminius Vambery: His Life and Adventure*. Since Vambery has disguised himself as an indigent dervish, he has free access to the shrine in contrast to other Western travelers in the same period. Moreover, his good command of the Persian language and Islamic lore enables him to effectively interact with enthusiastic pilgrims and register their rituals and desires. Hence, his travelogue can be treated as an unofficial historical document providing invaluable information about Imam Reza's shrine, pilgrims, and their devotions. Thus, by adopting the descriptive-analytical approach, the current article seeks to examine Vambery's representation of Imam Reza, his shrine, pilgrims, and their rituals and beliefs. The close analysis of Vambery's travel narrative demonstrates the travel writer's sympathetic attitude toward Imam Reza, his holy shrine, and his pilgrims. For Vambery, the cupola of Imam Reza's shrine is the beacon of peace and security for the approaching pilgrims and travelers. In the eyes of the travel writer, the chief feature of Imam Reza's shrine is its egalitarian space where divine love rules supreme and where there is no place for earthly hierarchies. To Vambery, the gracious hospitality of the shrine immensely is impressive and commendable since it is performed efficiently. From his perspective, the sight of Imam Reza's shrine is a touching moment that elicits sincere gratitude from the travelers and pilgrims. According to Vambery, Imam Reza's martyrdom engages the imagination and sympathy of the pilgrims and travelers resulting in their identification with him as well as the formation of intimate *communitas* among them regardless of their religion and race. One can attribute Vambery's charitable depiction of Imam Reza's divine world to his firsthand experience of the holy shrine and meaningful communication with Imam Reza's pilgrims.

Keywords: Imam Reza, sacred shrine, cupola, egalitarianism, pilgrims, hospitality, rituals, *communitas*

1. Assistant professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Physical Education, Gonbad Kavous University, Gonbad Kavous, Iran. (ahmadgholi@gonbad.ac.ir)

Introduction

Travel writing refers to the first-person narrative in which travel writers share their experiences, observations, and impressions about other people, places, and cultures with their home readers. Since their audience is not familiar with their encountered terrains and cultures, the travel writers seek to acquaint them with the religion, spiritual aspirations, history, and literature of their visited new worlds. In doing so, they ideally hope to promote intercultural understanding and prevent interracial misunderstandings and biased perspectives. One of the most popular destinations for Western travelers in Iran is the sacred shrine of Imam Reza in holy Mashhad. Jill Worrall in her travel book beautifully highlights the spiritual magnetism of holy Mashhad for travelers and pilgrims: "Mashhad has been the beginning and end of thousands of travelers' journeys over many centuries [...]. It is and always will be a spiritual springboard from which into the soul of Iran and its people" (Worrall 2011, 42-43). Thus, it comes as no surprise that Western travelers wish to visit the spiritual essence of Iran in Mashhad. For Western travelers, Imam Reza and his shrine have been an object of desire and curiosity since olden times, generating in them an intense desire to behold and experience the shrine. To give an example, Ella Maillart, a traveler from Switzerland, eagerly anticipates seeing the golden shrine of Imam Reza before her departure to Iran: "We shall see the golden dome of the Imam Reza shrine-smooth, compact, and precious shell aimed at the sky" (Maillart 1947, 2). These travelers are dazzled by the breathtaking beauty, architectural splendor, and ornate decoration of Imam Reza's holy shrine. Take, for instance, its description by Jason Elliot in his *Mirrors of the Unseen: Journeys in Iran*: "Soon we reached a space where the walls and ceilings were made entirely of tiny mirrors, glittering kaleidoscopically, and by now the ordinary world seemed to have faded [in] the interior of a jewel" (Elliot 2007, 404). For Elliot, in the shrine of Imam Reza, one enters the world of astonishing beauty created by its exuberant and impeccable architectural charms. Thanks to this beauty, Elliot imagines that he has set his feet into the world of jewels. Naturally, in the world of this beauty, the ordinary world vanishes and becomes easily forgotten. Besides appreciating its beauty, these travelers witness and marvel over the spirit of love, tolerance, hospitality, kindness, and humanity in Imam Reza's shrine and this adds to its spiritual charms and magnetism. In their travel narratives, the Western travelers also write about Imam Reza's life, his martyrdom, his miracles, his pilgrims and their passionate love toward Imam Reza, their heartfelt supplications as well as their spiritual ecstasy and serenity in the presence of Imam's sacred shrine. Indeed, they confirm the fact that Imam Reza's love spiritually revives his pilgrims.

As mentioned earlier, Imam Reza's holy precinct attracts many Western travelers; for instance, Gonzalez de Clavijo in the 15th century Imam's shrine, John Char-

din in the 18th century, and James Baillie Fraser in 1821-Fraser is one of the rare travelers who gave detailed information about Imam Reza and the world of his shrine-as well as Alexander Burnes and his Indian companion, Mohan Lal, in 1834. In the twentieth century, iconic travel writers such as Robert Byron, Ella Maillart, and V.S. Naipaul visit the holy shrine of Imam Reza. Imam Reza and his shrine complex captivate the imagination of well-known travel writers in the twenty-first century as well; they include Christiane Bird, Jason Elliot, Christian Bird, Briget Blomfield, and Pico Iyer.

The current study deals with Arminius Vambery's travel book entitled: *Arminius Vambery His Life and Adventure*. It relates the journey of a Hungarian orientalist from Hungary to Turkey, Persia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran in the nineteenth century. In his journey, Vambery seeks to find an answer to this question: Is there any meaningful linguistic link between the Hungarian language and that of people of Central Asia? Since it is impossible for him to travel as a European scholar, he disguises himself as a mendicant dervish pretending to visit holy shrines in his Eastern destinations. On his return from Afghanistan, Vambery joins a caravan that departs for holy Mashhad. In the course of his journey in the caravan, he encounters Imam Reza's pilgrims and meaningfully mingles with them. Thanks to enjoying his fellow travelers' company and conversation, Vambery becomes familiar with their beliefs and customs about Imam Reza, giving an ethnographical touch to his travel book. Furthermore, his observation is not limited to his caravan journey. When he reaches his destination, he visits the shrine enabling him to report its vast courts, pilgrims, free services: food and lodging offered to them, inside the shrine, and its spirit of equality. Indeed, his first-hand reportage imbues his narrative with a sociological quality.

Employing the descriptive-analytical approach, the current study securitizes Vambery's travel accounts to shed light on the way he represents Imam Reza's shrine, its spiritual and egalitarian world, its pilgrims, and their pre-entrance rituals, as well as Imam Reza's martyrdom and its psychological impact on his pilgrims. To enrich its discussion, the present will benefit from the viewpoints of other Western travel writers as well.

One of the questions that the readers of this study may ask is: Why is Arminius Vambery chosen rather than other nineteenth-century travel writers? There are four reasons for this question. Firstly, in contrast to many Western travel writers in the nineteenth century, Vambery subjectively engages with the divine world of Imam Reza and his pilgrims, refusing to keep a distance from their pilgrims. Secondly, Vambery is a sharp and observant travel writer, seeking to capture the cultural and religious nuances both during his journey with the pilgrims in the course of his journey as well as during his encounter with the holy precincts of Imam Reza. Thirdly, the travel writer is familiar with Islamic culture and a fluent speaker of Persian, Arabic, and Turkic. As a result, his understanding and description of his

encountered world are deep and reliable, and his narrative is not dissimilar to an important, informal historical document. Finally, his prose style is vivid, lucid, and immediate.

1. The Cupola of Imam Reza's Shrine is the Beacon of Security

The first thing that travelers and pilgrims on their journey to holy Mashhad notice is the golden dome or cupola of Imam Reza's shrine. This first experience for them is memorable and emotionally charged. Western travelers have recorded this emotive moment in their travel accounts. Take, for instance, Annemarie Schwarzenbach in her *All the Roads Are Open* describes her first encounter with the cupola of Imam Reza's shrine in a literary language: "The golden dome of Imam Reza shines like a heavenly body spinning resplendent at noon" (Schwarzenbach 2011, 34). Similar to other Western travelers, Vambéry registers this touching time; however, Vambéry's response is emotionally charged compared with other European travelers. When he approaches the holy Mashhad on his return journey from Herat, the bright and beautiful cupola of Imam Reza's shrine stirs up his emotions, providing him with a sense of peace and security. For Vambéry, the dome of Imam's shrine is the symbol of peace and a safe refuge from all the terrors and perils that one usually encounters in journeys with caravans in the past. The following sentence from his travel book illustrates the point: "Under all these combined impressions the very cupola, under which the mortal remains of Imam Riza repose, blazing with its resplendent light far into the outlying country, seemed to me a beacon which was to guide me to the harbor of safety" (Vambéry 1884, 265). Indeed, Vambéry confirms the fact that to be within sight and the presence of the world of Imam Reza is equal to the disappearance of the darkness of insecurity because Imam Reza is the embodiment of spiritual refuge, security, serenity, and hope. One can similar feeling towards Imam Reza in the travel narrative of Ella Maillart, the travel writer from Switzerland. Ella Maillart attributes her safe journey from Mashhad to Imam Reza: "Imam Reza is the patron saint of travelers and I like to think it was he who helped us the day we left Meshed for the Afghan border" (Maillart 1947, 110).

2. Imam Reza and the Formation of Community

Though not a pilgrim himself, Vambéry is affected and overwhelmed by the passionate and contagious enthusiasm of Imam Reza's pilgrims and his fellow travelers in the caravan and he implicitly partakes in their euphoria, as the following passage reflects:

I even caught the enthusiasm of the thousands of people who were flocking to the tomb of the saint and could almost imagine myself one of the pilgrims who hail

with emotions of unutterable thankfulness and pious joy the sight of the holy place, after having wearily wandered over the immense distances from their several homes, India, Turkestan or Afghanistan. (Vambery 1884, 265)

In the above passage, Vambery affirms that the sincere love for Imam Reza acts like a powerful spiritual glue and facilitates the formation of group identity and community among the pilgrims and travelers of the caravan regardless of their race, tongue, color, ethnicity, and religion. Since Vambery has intermingled with the pilgrims and since he becomes influenced by their keen interest and spiritual enthusiasm, he strongly senses that he belongs to this community of devout pilgrims, not apart from them. Here, Vambery feels that he is a member of the lovers of Imam Reza and forgets his European identity, albeit momentarily. Attesting to Vambery's experience and understanding, Morinis observes that pilgrimage paves the path for the emergence of community (Morinis 1992, 8) characterized by solidarity and unity. Here, Imam Reza's love proves that identity is not fixed and rigid but fluid and flexible, thus the travel writer can leave his Western self and experience Islamic, Shi'i identity as Guattari notes that "I [here travel writer] is other and multiplicity of others" (Guattari 1995, 83). Likewise, Kruczkowska notes that "Moving outside one's own country enables the traveler to assume a new identity, to construct or [re]invent oneself" (Kruczkowska 2023, 109). In the case of Vambery, it is the love of Imam Reza and his fellow travelers that expedites this reinvention and construction of identity.

3. An Ethnographical Look at Pilgrims' Practices, Greetings, and Honoric Title

In his journey, Vambery behaves like an observant ethnographer too. For instance, he records how the pilgrims express their gratitude for being blessed with the sight of the spiritual beauty and marvels of holy Mashhad when they catch the prospect of the dome of Imam Reza's shrine from afar. Vambery reports that the pilgrims convey their gratitude by piling small stones, tying colorful pieces of cloth to trees and bushes, and singing sacred songs:

[Pilgrims] on coming within sight of it, are prompted, by their feelings of devotion and gratitude at having been permitted to behold the glories of the city, of Meshed. [So, they] offer up some tangible tokens of their sentiments by heaping up stones, adorning trees and bushes with rags representing all the colors of the rainbow, and the singing of sacred songs and chanting of hymns. (Vambery 1884, 265)

In the above passage, the travel writer vividly depicts the profound impact that observing the dome of the Imam's sacred shrine from afar leaves on the pilgrims. It

evokes overwhelming joy among them. By the same token, Beatie remarks that “It was customary for the long-distance pilgrim to reach the point at which the object of his journey could first be seen in a state of considerable emotion” (Beatie 1983, 121). This sense of delight and ecstasy can be ascribed to their deeply rooted religious convictions. According to Donaldson, the pilgrims associate the distant view of the Imam's shrine with the uncorrupted state of their souls, thus this is a cause for their spiritual rejoicing (Donaldson 1938, 64). Like Vambéry, Ferrier in her travel book entitled: *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings* visualizes how his fellow pilgrims forget their fatigue, find pure spiritual delight, begin to cry ‘Ya Ali and Ya Imam Reza,’ and perform their prayer as soon as their eyes catch the cupola Imam Reza from afar:

We saw, though eight parasangs distant from us, the great and holy city of Meshed. The cupola and lofty golden minarets, rising from the mosque that covers the tomb of the Imaum Reza, stood out in brilliant relief against the cloudless heavens, lighted up as they were under the dazzling beams of the midday sun [...]. As to our pilgrims, they were in ecstasies, in spite of their great fatigues, and in a delirium of pleasure when they distinctly saw the mosque within whose walls reposed the remains of their venerated Imaum; they ceased not for a long time to cry ‘Yah, Ali! Yah, Imaum Reza!’ and then, after reciting their Namaz. (Ferrier 1857, 113)

In the above passage, the pilgrims feel happy and ecstatic because they undoubtedly consider themselves blessed due to sighting the dome of Imam Reza. This is why they express their gratitude by praying and calling the names of Imam Ali and Imam Reza.

Also, Vambéry in the selected passage from his travel narrative touches on the custom of heaping stones by the pilgrims; nevertheless, he does not decode its symbolic significance. According to Donaldson these heaps of stones are a common sight that one can observe at a distance of twelve or fifteen miles where the pilgrims see the first glimpse of the golden dome of Imam Reza (Donaldson 1938, 151). Donaldson adds that these heaps of stones for the pilgrims symbolize their eternal house or paradise (ibid.). In other words, pilgrims hope that their pilgrimage will win them an everlasting home in paradise. Similarly, Beatie posits that the pilgrims heap the stones so that these stones on the day of judgment will testify that they have truly visited the place because on that day inanimate objects can bear witness as well (Beatie 1983, 113). Like Vambéry, Ferrier in his journey to holy Mashhad draws the attention of his readers to the tradition of collecting stones by the pilgrims: “Close to and around these bushes, hung with these rags [...] were heaps of stones, to which every pilgrim added some from the loose ones. The chief Syud [the descendants of the prophet of Islam] could not give me a reason for this but said that it was customary” (Ferrier 1857, 113).

In the quoted passage, the travel writer alludes to the act of tying cloth on the trees and bushes which interestingly bears resemblance to the longstanding practice of fastening padlocks to the shrine of Imam Reza. In the words of Betteridge, tying cloth and padlock symbolizes “the knotty problem confronting the petitioner” (Betteridge 1992, 204). Gulevich states that the act of tying in the shrines means that the devotees’ request will receive the saint’s attention (Gulevich 2004, 387). Accordingly, by fastening the pieces of cloth, the pilgrims of Imam Reza sincerely hope that Imam Reza will intercede with God on their behalf and resolve their problems and impasse in their lives since Imam Reza is acknowledged and held as the granter of wishes.

The other ethnographical veins of his travel narrative are related to the description of the way pilgrims greet each other in Mashhad as well as to the custom of receiving the honorific title of ‘meshedi’. During his sojourn in Mashhad, he encounters pilgrims from different places and registers their discourse. For example, he notes that pilgrims salute each other with “Ziaret-i Kabul” which means “May thy pilgrimage be accepted” and “Iltimasi dua” meaning “Pray for me” (Vambery 1884, 270). Vambery also notes that the relatives and townsfolk assign the title of ‘meshedi’ to them by which they attain a new social rank. The travel writer adds that ‘meshedi’ as a prefix to the names of the returned pilgrims appears on their signet and tombstone as well:

Like the pilgrim to Mecca, whose visit to this holy place earns him the coveted title of hadji, he may henceforth assume the equally honored surname of Meshedi, and prefix it to his name, with the privilege of having it engraved on his signet, and on his tombstone when he is gathered to his forefathers. (Vambery 1884, 277)

However, he does not mention that the returnee pilgrims are expected to demonstrate good faith and sound character as recommended by Shia moral teachings (Glazebrook & Abbasi-Shavazi 2007, 200).

4. Imam Reza Martyrdom and Pilgrims’ Psychological Identification with Imam Reza

Vambery dwells on Imam Reza’s martyrdom; nevertheless, he makes a mistake when he claims that Mamoon murders him with poisoned wine instead of poisoned grapes: “The Caliph [Ma’mun] had poison administered to him in a cup of wine” (Vambery 1884, 266). From the perspective of the travel writer, by assassinating Imam Reza, Ma’mun does not reach his political goal which is removing a supposedly potential rival, that is, Imam Reza. Contrary to Ma’mun’s expectation, Imam Reza’s death renders him a martyred saint and an object of veneration: “The memory of his name did not die with him; from a beloved leader of a sect, he rose

to be a martyred saint, and the very name of Meshed is synonymous with a place of martyrdom" (ibid.). As a sharp observer, the travel writer finds out why his fellow travelers are psychologically attracted to Imam Reza. Just like Imam Reza, the travelers are far away from their homelands and can imagine and understand the sorrows and sadness of Imam Reza's martyrdom in a strange land (Persia). Their new understanding and imagination give rise to their genuine empathy and sympathy towards him: "His death in exile seems to have especially commended him to the imagination of the traveling public as their patron saint" (ibid.). In other words, these travelers and pilgrims psychologically identify themselves with Imam Reza by imagining his hardship and martyrdom. It is not accidental that they not only honor him with the title of "Sultan al Gureba (Prince of Strangers)" (ibid) but also revere him as their patron Imam.

5. A Sociological Perspective: Spirit of Egalitarianism in Imam Reza's Shrine

Just as a sociologist, Vambery appreciates and acknowledges the egalitarian atmosphere that governs Imam Reza's shrine. For him, it is a sublime and touching spectacle to see the rich and poor being equal in performing their "acts of pious tenderness" in the spirit of "unfeigned humility" (Vambery 1884, 276). As a Hungarian Jew, Vambery has frequently suffered from social and racial discrimination by his Christian countrymen in his hometown (Alder & Dalby: 1979). This explains why he is deeply moved by the direct observation of sociocultural egalitarianism in Imam Reza's shrine where socioeconomic boundaries disappear: "None are too high or too low for the performance of acts of pious tenderness; the sons of Khans, the Mirzas [belong to the upper class] and the poor peasants mingle freely together" (Vambery 1884, 276). Indeed, In Imam Reza's shrine, Vambery witnesses not only the soul of social republicanism and tolerance that is absent in nineteenth-century Europe but also Islamic egalitarianism which places stress on the dignity of human beings regardless of their race, tongue, color, ethnicity, and gender. In the words of Afsaruddin, "Egalitarianism is a high ideal within Islamic thought [...]. The proclamation of the equality of all human beings in the eyes of God is understood to be one of the most distinctive features of Islam" (Afsaruddin 2023, 56). Echoing Vambery's observation, Morinis maintains that pilgrimage functions against anti-social hierarchies and strictures (Morinis 1992, 8). Interestingly, Imam Reza's life offers good examples of his stress on the equality of human beings regardless of their social position. Imam Reza is accustomed to taking his luncheon and supper with his servants and has an intimate relationship with them (Hakimi 2019, 20). This explains why he becomes displeased with the words of one of his fellow travelers who recommends Imam Reza to have his food without his black

servants since he is a dignitary. Reprimanding his arrogance, Imam Reza told him, "Be quiet. We have the same God and parents (Adam and Eve) and God evaluates his bondsmen based on their deeds" (ibid.). Similarly, Christopher Thornton in his travel book: *Descendants of Cyrus: Travels through Every Day Iran* points to Imam Reza's emphasis on egalitarianism by referring to his holy life: "A suggestion that servants and members of the household eat separately was rebuffed [by Imam Reza]" (Thornton 2019, 102).

6. Spiritual Blessings of Visiting Imam Reza's Shrine

Vambéry in his travelogue brings to the fore the spiritual and psychological benefits of paying a visit to Imam Reza's shrine. In his journey, Vambéry realizes that the pilgrims of Imam Reza view his shrine as an "important channel for transmission of divine blessings" (Takim: 2004, 107). Thus, it is no surprise that the pilgrim feels that "his soul is washed clean from the strain of his former sins and [he perceives] the blissful security for the remainder of his mundane existence" (Vambéry 1884, 277). Here the travel writer portrays Imam Reza's sacred shrine as a place of psychological recovery and well-being where the pilgrims feel that they are born anew and they feel blessed. Indeed, the pilgrims believe that the love of Imam Reza cleanses them from their former sins. In doing so, this sincere and unearthly love heals their souls and hearts and delivers them from descending to the world of vileness. In other words, the sacred world of Imam Reza revives and uplifts the souls, filling them with divine love. Vambéry's observation is in sync with Kose's standpoint about the positive impacts of visiting shrines on the pilgrim's psychology: "A feeling of respite and contentment gained [in the pilgrim] by transferring his or her problems [such as sins] to sacred space which in turn provides hope for the future and the ability to endure a situation in the expectation of something better" (Kose 2015, 146). Similarly, Morinis notes that pilgrimage is born of a belief that there is somewhere in which "there exists a power that can make right the difficulties [that] appear to be insoluble and intractable here and now" (Morinis 1992, 1).

Vambéry is not the only Western voyager who accentuates the psychological healing aspect of Imam Reza's shrine. Ella Maillart also in her journey to holy Mashhad brings this issue to the fore as the following extract illustrates:

On the day of the resurrection, four of the earlier holy men, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus; and four of the later ones, Mohammed, Ali, Hassan, and Hussein will be in the highest heaven and will draw a rope across the front of the throne of God. All those who have made the pilgrimage to the tombs of the Imams will sit on the ground at the foot of the throne, but those who have made the pilgrimage to the grave of Imam Reza will sit nearest and the favors shown them will be greater than any other. (Maillart 1947, 103)

In the above passage, Ella Maillart refers to the benefits and blessings of Imam Reza's shrine from a Shi'i perspective. Undoubtedly, the pilgrims of Imam Reza who hold such a belief will be revitalized and restored psychologically after visiting it. Their pilgrimage provides them with a sense of assurance, alleviating their fear of death and the day of Judgement. In other words, the pilgrims firmly believe that their pilgrimage will spiritually elevate them. Thus, the shrine of Imam Reza is a sacred space where pilgrims can renew and refresh their souls. And this is why Ella Maillart is envious of the pilgrims: "As I once more came in sight of the golden dome of Meshed [...]. I envied the state of mind of the faithful [pilgrims]" (Maillart 1947, 102).

7. The Generous Hospitality in Imam Reza's Shrine

In the end, it is worth noting that Vambéry does not confine his travel account to the spiritual world of Imam Reza. He refers to Imam Reza's hospitality and the amenities that his shrine provides for his pilgrims. These welfare facilities include free food and accommodation: "He [Imam Reza] is very hospitable, and every newcomer has the choice of becoming his guest [...] and [pilgrims can] eagerly avail themselves of the privilege of boarding and lodging at his Highness's expense" (Vambéry 1884, 278). Vambéry emphasizes that the administrators and custodians of Imam Reza's shrine strive hard to offer premium services to the pilgrims who are Imam's guests: "The convenience of the guest is cared for on a very large scale" (ibid.). The travel writer also acknowledges that Imam Reza's caravanserais, public baths, boarding houses, and soap-boiling houses provide considerable resources to fulfill the needs of pilgrims (Vambéry 1884, 278). Here, the travel writer attests to the commitment of Imam Reza's shrine to his guests' welfare. This generous hospitality resonates with the Islamic culture since hospitality in Islam is a well-established tradition. Islamic hospitality obliges Muslims to treat guests and strangers with kindness, dignity, and respect (El-Aswad 2016, 462). Mona Siddiqui in her book: *Hospitality and Islam* beautifully encapsulates the divine and spiritual significance of hospitality in Islam:

Hospitality [...] has been a central feature of religious piety from the early stage [...]. It was extolled [...] for feeding those in need, [...] strangers or travelers. In monotheistic religions [including Islam], the food and drink one served to a guest [by extension pilgrims] was [not only] a sign of God's grace, but it was also a sacred duty [...]. Hospitality to others is a sign of love for God as God is always present when the guests are present. (Siddiqui 2015, 82-83)

As the sterling epitome of Islamic culture, Imam Reza's shrine discharges this divine duty with grace and utmost care. In doing so, it reflects the hospitality of God. Moreover, hospitality is a central component of Imam Reza's life and one can find

numerous examples in which Imam Reza espouses this Islamic tradition. To give an example, once Imam Reza hosts a guest, at night, the lantern in Imam Reza's home ceases to function, the guest stands up to repair it, but Imam Reza forbids him from undertaking it and states: "We belong to the family [that is the descendants of the Prophet of Islam] that does not make their guests take on work" (Hakimi 2019, 93-94).

Conclusion

On his journey to the holy Mashhad, Vambéry encounters the community of Imam Reza's devoted pilgrims and meaningfully interacts with them. Thanks to witnessing their reverential devotions and sincere love towards Imam Reza, the travel writer understands the profound cultural and spiritual importance of Imam Reza. Contrary to other Western travelers in the nineteenth century, Vambéry does not detach himself from his travel companions and their cultural and spiritual world. Instead, he meaningfully engages with them. For Vambéry, the sight of the dome of Imam Reza's shrine from afar is the symbol of peace and assurance signaling the end of anxiety over the potential perils of roads. Thus, the moment of seeing it for Vambéry and his fellow pilgrims is an exhilarating experience. Thanks to observing this spiritually touching moment, Vambéry realizes that Imam Reza's love for the pilgrims and travelers acts like a spiritual glue creating a *communitas*, to use Victor Turner's term. Moreover, Vambéry's travelogue pays close attention to the pre-entrance rituals of his fellow pilgrims. They include piling stones, tying colorful pieces of cloth to the shrubs, and singing religious hymns. Additionally, the travel writer points to the pilgrims' discourse and the custom of assigning the title of 'Meshdi' to those visiting Imam Reza's shrine. By writing about rituals and customs, the travel writer bestows ethnographical quality upon his travel book. On account of traveling and mingling with enthusiastic pilgrims and travelers, the travel writer understands the travelers and pilgrims not only identify but also sympathize with Imam Reza who was martyred far from his motherland. Besides ethnographic orientation, Vambéry's travel narrative has a sociological vein too because he dwells on the spirit of Islamic egalitarianism in the shrine of Imam Reza. Indeed, he realizes that the shrine of Imam Reza transcends socio-economic hierarchies since there is no difference between prince and pauper there. The travel writer also attests to the fact that the pilgrims in Imam Reza's shrine go through spiritual catharsis. His pilgrims believe that the pilgrimage will cleanse their former sins and pave the path for their salvation. Finally, Vambéry refers to and praises the generous hospitality in the shrine where the pilgrims feel in a spiritual haven and there is no need for them to preoccupy their minds with mundane things. By a close reading of Vambéry's travel narrative, one concludes that in

Vambéry's estimation, Imam Reza (as a divine light and intercessor) is the essence of true Islam since he is a shining embodiment of Islamic noble ideals such as love, peace, tolerance, healing, hospitality, generosity, and equality.

References

- Afsaruddin, Asma. 2023. "Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought and Praxis." In *Cambridge History of Socialism*, Vol. 1, edited by Marcel Van Der Linden. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alder, Lory, and Richard Dalby. 1979. *The Dervish of Windsor Castle*. London: Bachman & Turner Ltd.
- Beattie, Hugh. 1983. "Tombs and Footprints: Islamic Shrines and Pilgrimages in Modern Iran and Afghanistan." M. Phil Thesis: The University of London: School of Oriental and African Studies. Accessed Feb. 14, 2024. eprints.soas.ac.uk/28784/1/10672952.pdf.
- Betteridge, Ann H. 1992. "Specialists in Miraculous Action: Some Shrine in Shiraz." In *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, edited by Allan Morinis. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Bird, Christiane. 2001. *Neither East nor West*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Donaldson, Bess Allen. 1938. *The Wild Rue: A Study of Muhammadan Magic and Folklore in Iran*. London: Luzac & Co.
- El-Aswas, El-Sayed. 2016. "Hospitality." In *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim world*, edited by Richard C. Martic. San Francisco: Gale Cengage Learning.
- Elliot, Jason. 2007. *Mirrors of the Unseen: Journeys in Iran*. London: Picador.
- Ferrier, J.P. 1857. *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, and Beloochistan*. London: John Murray.
- Glazebrook, Diana, and Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi. 2007. "Being Neighbors to Imam Reza: Pilgrimage Practices and Return Intentions of Hazara Afghans Living in Mashhad, Iran." *Iran Studies* 40 (2).
- Guattari, Felix. 1995. *Chaosmosis, an Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, translated by Paul Brains and Julian Pefanis. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gulevich, Tanya. 2004. *Understanding Islam and Muslim Traditions*. Detroit: Omnigraphics.
- Hakimi, Mohammed. 2019. *Imam Reza and Human Dignity*. Mashhad: Astant-e Ghods-e Razavi [In Persian].
- Koze, Ali. 2015. "Popular Religiosity: A Psycho-Sociological Study of Visiting Shrines in Turkey." In *Psychology of Religion in Turkey*, edited by Zuhâl Ağilkaya-Şahin, Heinz Streib, Ali Ayten and Ralph Hood. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

- Kruczkowska, Joanna. (2023). "Footsteps Travel in Iceland: Armitage, MacNeice, Auden." In *Studies in Travel Writing* 26 (2).
- Maillart, Ella. 1947. *The Cruel Way: From Switzerland to Afghanistan in a Ford, 1939*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Morinis, Alan. 1992. "Introduction: The Territory of Anthropology of Pilgrimage." In *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, edited by Allan Morinis. Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press.
- Schwarzenbach, Annemarie. 2011. *All the Roads Are Open: An Afghan Journey: 1939-1940*, translated by Isabel Fargo Cole. Basel: Seagull Books.
- Siddiqui, Mona. 2015. *Hospitality and Islam: Welcoming in God's Name*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Takim, Liyakat. 2004. "Charismatic Appeal or Communitas? Visitation to the Shrines of the Imams." *Journal of Ritual Studies* 18 (2).
- Thorton, Christopher. 2019. "From the Desk of Christopher Thornton: The Real Iran." Accessed Jan. 13, 2024. <https://unpblog.com/2019/11/12/from-the-desk-of-christopher-thornton-the-real-iran/>.
- Vambéry, Arminius. 1884. *Arminius Vambéry: His Life and Adventure*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Worrall, Jill. 2011. *Two Wings of Nightingale*. Auckland: Exisle Publishing Limited.